

Ride Him, Cowboy

George De Stefano (March 12, 2009)



“Brokeback Mountain” Returns to Italian TV, This Time Uncensored

RAI Due, one of Italy’s state-owned television channels, will broadcast the complete, unexpurgated version of “Brokeback Mountain,” director Ang Lee’s acclaimed 2005 “gay cowboy” drama, on Tuesday, March 17.



The broadcast of the complete film comes three months after RAI Due showed a censored version of the film that eliminated the scenes which established that Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) weren't just herding sheep up on the titular mountain.

That's right – RAI Due decided that the sight of two men kissing and making love, and discreet, and un-explicit love at that -- would be too much for Italian TV viewers.

What RAI didn't count on was an outpouring of outrage from Italy's gay community, and the incredulous, mocking commentary in the foreign press.

"We want to know who decided to show 'Brokeback Mountain' ... with such blatant, 1950s-style cuts," demanded Aurelio Mancuso, president of the Italian gay rights group Arcigay. "Who had the presumption to think an adult public could not handle the sight of kissing and intimacy between two men?"

Good question. Faced with "Brokeback" backlash, RAI Due director Antonio Marano claimed that the broadcast of the expurgated version was just a mistake; the "wrong" cassette had been played. But in saying so, Marano perhaps inadvertently revealed that "at RAI there exist censored copies of films with gay subject matter," as Arcigay's Mancuso observed.



He added, "We hope that Marano throws out all the tapes with cut scenes and that RAI Due can continue to make room for, hopefully even in prime time, stories about gay people."

(The uncensored "Brokeback Mountain" will be shown at 11:40 p.m.)

Arcigay noted that there had been "thousands" of angry phone calls to RAI and letters to Italian newspapers protesting the butchered "Brokeback."

Censorship is unfortunately nothing new at RAI. In 2003, RAI Tre took Sabina Guzzanti's satirical revue "RALot" off the air after one episode because she mocked then-Premier Silvio Berlusconi. Guzzanti used her experience as a point of departure for a broader critique of censorship in her scathing, and often bitterly funny, 2005 documentary film, "Viva Zapatero!"

Compared to what happened to Guzzanti, the "Brokeback" imbroglio might seem minor. But it's not. The censorship of this landmark film is just one manifestation of the current homophobic climate in Italy, a pervasive atmosphere of intolerance fed by politicians, mainly but not solely conservatives, by the Vatican, and the media.

As anyone who's watched Italian TV knows, it's hardly a bastion of prudery. There's an abbondanza of "T&A" on variety and quiz shows and much sexual innuendo. Films with sexual content are not routinely censored -- as long as the sex is of the heterosexual variety, that is.



Some commentators have scratched their heads over RAI Due's "Brokeback" bowdlerization, noting that the film is actually pretty tame in its depiction of same-sex love. As Ryan Gilbey commented in *The Guardian*, "Let's be honest: as accounts of untamed desire go, 'Brokeback Mountain' is a little on the tepid side."

Maybe what unsettled the censors at RAI Due wasn't just the kisses between Ennis and Jack, or their night of mostly-veiled passion in that tent. Maybe what really disturbed them was that the film portrays a love affair, albeit a doomed one, between two regular, masculine guys – maschi. "Brokeback" realistically depicts homosexuality not as the practice of an exotic minority but as an attraction, a bond, between men who in other ways are indistinguishable from their straight brethren.

Italian TV and films just can't seem to come to grips with that fact of life.

Whenever there's a gay rights march in Italy, you can be sure the media coverage will focus on the drag queens and other flamboyant types. (This used to be true of American mainstream media -- decades ago.) They're certainly part of the gay rainbow, but why highlight them to the near-exclusion of the more ordinary men and women who comprise most of the gay population? You do that when you want to convey the message, to the bigoted or the merely uninformed, that "these people" are marginal, freakish, unlike "us" and therefore undeserving of consideration or fair treatment.

Italian cinema isn't much better. Unlike Great Britain, France, or Germany, Italy rarely produces non-stereotypical and credible film portrayals of gay people. The few it does mostly are the works of Ferzan Ozpetek, a Turkish-born, now Rome-based director who is, as far as I know, Italy's only prominent openly gay filmmaker. And he's at best a journeyman artist, not a major talent. He's definitely no Gus Van Zant, or Rainer Fassbinder, or Derek Jarman, or Andre Téchiné.



Speaking of Van Zant, it'll be interesting to see what RAI does with "Milk," the Oscar-winning biopic about American gay rights pioneer Harvey Milk. (The film is now out on pay-per-view TV and DVD.) Will Italian viewers get to see Sean Penn smooching his male co-star, or will they be left wondering whether Milk's homosexuality was just a political position?





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