

The Good, the Bad, and the Pup Tent

One of my favorite western movies ever is "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," a sprawling three hour Sergio Leone shoot-'em-up where Clint Eastwood, Lee Van Cleef, and Eli Wallach star as weapons of mass destruction. I like this film because it's easy to understand: Three macho guys are looking for gold and you better not get in their way, pardner.

The old American west was a place where men were men, and women were, well, in short supply. I mean, covering thousands of miles in a dusty covered wagon wasn't exactly an enchanting experience for the ladies. Don't even ask about the plumbing.

But the new American west is a bit different, at least according to the new widely praised film "Brokeback Mountain." I haven't seen the movie because the lead actors play bisexual shepherds and, please forgive me, that isn't on top of my viewing wish list. I understand I'm a barbarian.

According to friends of mine who have seen "Brokeback," the key scene takes place in a pup tent. Apparently, two shepherds "bond" in said tent. If I do see the movie, I know what will run through my mind during that scene: What would Clint and Lee and Eli have done, had they stumbled upon the tent? I believe gunfire might have been involved.

I also believe "Brokeback Mountain" will win the Oscar next month for Best Picture of the Year. I could be wrong, as left-wing bomb thrower George Clooney is very popular in Hollywood, and his movie about Ed Murrow might prevail. But it looks to me like Academy Award voters will throw Clooney the Best Supporting Actor award, opening the tent flap for "Brokeback" to win it all.

These days, Hollywood considers itself not only a place of

entertainment, but also a cultural trendsetter. There is no question that many showbiz types would like to banish any societal stigma associated with homosexuality. Thus, a mainstream movie that portrays gay conduct as nuanced and complicated, as "Brokeback" reportedly does, contributes to a more broadminded approach to homosexuality—a more accepting view.

So that's what's in play this year at the Academy Awards—a social and political statement. And that's why Star Wars and Harry Potter and Narnia, the three largest grossing movies of the year, are not in the best picture running. Spectacular movies often make tons of money, but they do not advance any cause. Gone are the days when "Gone With the Wind"-type entertainment ruled the Hollywood day.

So how should we process the current Hollywood award process? Well, I don't have a problem with it. Certainly, it is wrong that some gay Americans, especially teenagers, are made to suffer because of their predilections. Every American should be able to pursue happiness on an equal basis, including gays.

But I also think the entertainment industry should be up front in explaining what films it values and why it finds them especially worthy. Most Americans are not gonna see "Brokeback Mountain" because they don't relate to the subject, and if Hollywood is now in the "culture-shaping business," it should admit it.

So look for Oscar night to be a huge night for shepherds who roam the range in their own consensual way. Hollywood is making a statement and Americans should be getting the message loud and clear.