

The Last Picture Show (1971) Peter Bogdanovich

P Michell, 2021

Europe comes to America ...

Synopsis:

The Last Picture Show is one of the key films of the American cinema renaissance of the seventies. Set during the early fifties, in the loneliest Texas nowhere-ville to ever dust up a movie screen, this aching portrait of a dying West, adapted from Larry McMurtry's novel, focuses on the daily shuffles of three futureless teens—the enigmatic Sonny (Timothy Bottoms), the wayward jock Duane (Jeff Bridges), and the desperate-to-be-adored rich girl Jacy (Cybil Shepherd)—and the aging lost souls who bump up against them in the night like drifting tumbleweeds, including Cloris Leachman's lonely housewife and Ben Johnson's grizzled movie-house proprietor. Featuring evocative black-and-white imagery and profoundly felt performances, this hushed depiction of crumbling American values remains the pivotal film in the career of the invaluable director and film historian Peter Bogdanovich.

Whilst set in 1951/2 relevant to Australia in the late 1950s, early 60s.
Some films once seen are never forgotten ... this is one of them ...
All music is what was played on the radio at the time.

Creative Personnel

What a cast!

Peter Bogdanovich – Scriptwriter, Editor, Director

Sal Mineo gave him the book. But Sal felt too old for the film.

An accomplished film historian, he has directed documentaries such as [Directed by John Ford](#) (1971) and [The Great Buster](#) (2018), and published over ten books, some of which include in-depth interviews with friends [Howard Hawks](#) and [Alfred Hitchcock](#).

Following *The Last Picture Show* success, he directed the screwball comedy [What's Up, Doc?](#) (1972), which was a major box office success.

Robert Surtees – Cinematographer (73 credits)

One of the great cinematographers. Surprisingly excelled in both black and white and colour. Learnt his trade under Gregg Toland. Great work in all genres – Musicals, Spectacle, Dramas, Contemporary. Expert in lighting a scene.

Work included *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) (shot in Africa), *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Oklahoma* (1955), *Ben Hur* (1959), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), *Valley of the Kings* (1954), *Raintree County* (1957), *The Graduate* (1967), *The Sting* (1973).

In *Last Picture Show* numerous examples of extreme depth of field – only possible at the time in B&W. [This where the extreme foreground and background are in focus. Real problem to achieve pre-digital.]

Relevant quote re a fight he and Bogdanovich had (see YouTube doco.)

The director runs the show. He makes the picture. You have one allegiance - not to the studio, not to the producer, but to the director, and that's it.

Timothy Bottoms – Sonny (120 credits since)

First role was playing ... the legless, armless WWI survivor in Johnny Got His Gun (1971) written and directed by former banned writer Dalton Trumbo.

Ben Johnson – Sam the Lion (106 credits)

Known for his Westerns both movies and TV.

Was an uncredited stuntman in Red River (1948), which is the last picture show referred to in the title.

Ben Johnson and Cloris Leachman's Oscar winning performances are their only Academy Award nominations.

Ben Johnson is the only person ever to win both an Academy Award and a cowboy World Championship in rodeo.

Ben Johnson was persuaded to accept the role of Sam the Lion by his friend John Ford. The taciturn Johnson had turned the part down three times because, according to Peter Bogdanovich, the part had "too many words", but Ford reportedly persuaded him by asking if he only wanted to be playing John Wayne's sidekick for the rest of his career.

At 9 minutes and 54 seconds, Ben Johnson's performance in this movie is the shortest to ever win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.

Trivia

This film made full-fledged stars of Timothy Bottoms, Jeff Bridges and Cybill Shepherd.

Film debut of Randy Quaid and Sam Bottoms.

According to Cloris Leachman the cause of her dysfunctional marriage was that her husband was gay. She claims a scene between her coach husband and the team's quarterback would have revealed that implicitly, but because of budgetary reasons was never shot.

Bob Rafelson was an uncredited producer on the film as stated by Bogdanovich in the documentary and in the book 'Easy Riders' by Biskind. One of the founders of the 'New Hollywood' Movement as was Bogdanovich's work.

Box office – very, very successful – made for US\$1.3M gross take US & World – near **US\$60M!** By comparison Ben Hur cost US\$15M and took US\$150M.

Must See

The Last Picture Show: A Look Back –

Bogdanovich discusses the movie with main actors memories ...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xf59L7g1ZPY>

Reviews

In with the Old

Graham Fuller, 2010. Criterion Reviews.

Early in Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*, as the wind from the Texas plains whips the small town of Anarene, the high school senior Sonny Crawford (Timothy Bottoms) halts his recalcitrant pickup truck—Hank Williams is warbling “Why Don't You Love Me (Like You Used to Do)?” on the radio—to give a ride to his mute young friend Billy (Sam Bottoms). When Billy sits beside him, Sonny turns his cap backward on his head, a gesture that makes Billy smile and that Sonny will repeat several times, and his buddy Duane Jackson (Jeff Bridges) once, during the course of the movie. Sonny, Duane, and Jacy Farrow (Cybill Shepherd), Duane's girl, later sing their high school's song, partly in affection, partly in mockery, as they drive in Jacy's convertible—the three joyfully united in friendship, no matter that both boys love this vain and luscious heartbreaker. It's 1951, school's nearly done, and anything is possible.

In these moments and others throughout his wistful film, Bogdanovich seems to be making the point that people are often unaware that the times they are living are the best of times, that simple quotidian rituals and shared moments are what make the long journey tolerable. Other rituals he depicts include Sonny's visits to Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman), the neglected wife of the school football coach, for afternoon lovemaking that becomes more satisfying with each renewal, and the long hours spent in the Royal, Anarene's little movie theater, and the other establishments—pool hall, café—run by the grizzled Sam the Lion (Ben Johnson). As time goes by, these validating experiences slip away or terminate abruptly, leaving Sonny high and dry, with nothing but Ruth's anger at his desertion—that and the humbling realization that he has lost what was valuable. Though he hasn't got the wherewithal to leave Anarene, as Duane and Jacy do, the painful rite of passage will serve him well in the future. Maybe. At least, it will give him plenty of bittersweet memories, such as of his last peaceful experience of Sam, his and Billy's surrogate father, who takes the boys fishing at the tank and tenderly reminisces about a love affair. *The Last Picture Show* is like a multilayered poem in the way it indulges Sam's nostalgia—and ours for the veteran western actor Johnson—while feeding Sonny's future reveries about his own past.

The film was revelatory when it opened in October 1971, and it has proved the most assured of Bogdanovich's uneven career. With its eight Oscar nominations and two wins—for supporting actors Johnson and Leachman—it became a flagship of New Hollywood, though not that sprawling movement's most representative work. It was financed by BBS, which, in its earlier incarnation as Raybert Productions, had dreamed up the Monkees and delivered the countercultural shock of *Easy Rider*, and had just presented the existential angst of *Five Easy Pieces*. This was the maverick company, run by Bert Schneider, Bob Rafelson, and Steve Blauner, and abetted by Jack Nicholson, most associated with the seventies revitalization of American cinema, partially through the rejection of classical modes of storytelling. *The Last Picture Show* has a foot in both camps, the old and the new. Slow and mournful, it does not seem to have much in common with the work of other directors who emerged during the decade, especially vivid stylists with urban preoccupations like Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Paul Schrader, and William Friedkin, or a caustic observer of human foibles like Robert Altman. Yet it fully embraces the new era's sense of personal artistic vision. And like the other Raybert/BBS productions, it powerfully depicts loss, loneliness, the failure of family, and the pipe dream of love—themes very much of the time. Sonny is as alienated in his way as Nicholson's characters in Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* and *The King of Marvin Gardens*, and as Tuesday Weld's in Henry Jaglom's *A Safe Place*, which costarred Nicholson and Orson Welles.

Following the decade in which veteran directors like Ford, Hawks, Curtiz, Borzage, Anthony Mann, Capra, Milestone, Stevens, Walsh, Wyler, Siodmak, and Jacques Tourneur made their final features, *The Last Picture Show* bids farewell, with its symbolic shuttering of the Royal, to Old Hollywood. It achieves this through its lovingly realized classical aesthetic and perfect period detail, which owe not only to Bogdanovich but also to the production/costume designer, Polly Platt (whose marriage to the director foundered when he began an on-set relationship with Shepherd). A cineaste influenced by the nouvelle vague, Bogdanovich had programmed films and written intelligently about cinema before making, under a pseudonym, his first feature, *Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women*, followed, more auspiciously, by *Targets* (both 1968). He was a self-described “popularizer” and friend of some of America’s preeminent auteurs, including Hawks and Ford, on both of whom he made documentaries. *The Last Picture Show* would be his Fordian film (as 1972’s *What’s Up, Doc?* would be his Hawksian film), and one that paid homage to Hawks in passing. In looking back to what was timeless in their work, however, Bogdanovich was also addressing what was timeless in his own era of social and sexual upheaval.

Welles, who was staying with Bogdanovich at the time he made *The Last Picture Show*, contributed too. Their talks apparently prompted Bogdanovich’s crucial decision to have Robert Surtees photograph it in black and white, the better to facilitate deep-focus shots and evoke nostalgia for an ebbing culture, in the same way Welles had fondly if ruefully recalled the aristocratic Indiana neighborhood of the early 1900s in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). The dusty aura of *The Last Picture Show* suggests less the pristine *Ambersons*, however, than Hawks’s *Red River* (1948), Ford’s *Wagon Master* (1950), and Nicholas Ray’s *The Lusty Men* (1952). The use of long shots, isolating people in the arid outdoors, depriving them of intimacy, was Fordian—one thinks of Lois Farrow (Ellen Burstyn), Jacy’s mother, taking a lone walk away from Sam’s graveside. “Some of the best scenes that you make are in long shot,” Hawks said. “I learned that from Jack Ford. Peter Bogdanovich has done that very successfully in *The Last Picture Show*, but he sat on my set for two and a half years and on Ford’s for two and a half years, so he learned a few things.” Surtees had assisted Gregg Toland early in his career and would have been familiar with his deep-focus work on Ford’s *The Long Voyage Home* and *The Grapes of Wrath* (both 1940), and, of course, on *Citizen Kane* (1941). According to Peter Biskind’s book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls, The Last Picture Show*’s lack of master shots flummoxed BBS’s Schneider and Blauner, but Rafelson allayed their fears, saying the film would “cut like butter” because Bogdanovich was editing in the camera.

The screenplay was adapted by Larry McMurtry and Bogdanovich from McMurtry’s semiautobiographical 1966 novel, the sexual frankness of which made it a highly appealing property in 1970. McMurtry had been reared in Archer City, in the Panhandle Plains region of Texas. He renamed the town Thalia for the novel, and Bogdanovich, who shot the film in Archer City, changed Thalia to Anarene—to rhyme with the Abilene of *Red River*. In contrast to today’s Archer City, sustained by oil, ranching, and McMurtry’s latest bookstore, Anarene in the movie appears to be dying: a tumbleweed rolls ominously across the street near the end. The opening shot that tracks from the Royal reveals how desolate the town is; the answering shot that closes the film ends on the Royal, which has closed following Sam’s sudden, offscreen death. Sam was Anarene’s bastion of moral authority, as Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) is in Ford’s analogous *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Ben Johnson earned the role with his dignified portrayals of Southern-born U.S. cavalymen in Ford’s *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950), and the protective leader of the Mormon wagon train in *Wagon Master*—serene, canny gentlemen of the frontier.

Bogdanovich makes clear his influences. Early on, we see a *Wagon Master* poster outside the Royal's box office. The last movie shown there is, anachronistically, *Red River*, whereas in the novel it's *The Kid from Texas* (1950), which fails to divert Sonny and Duane from their thoughts about Jacy: "It would have taken *Winchester '73* or *Red River* or some big movie like that to have crowded out the memories the boys kept having," McMurtry writes. Sonny and Duane watch as Wayne and Montgomery Clift start their cattle drive, which will end in rancor with their climactic fistfight. *The Last Picture Show*, too, proceeds to a vicious fight—between Sonny and Duane over Jacy, who soon after weds Sonny, knowing her parents will have the marriage annulled before it is consummated. She does it to succor her wounded vanity on learning that Sonny has been sleeping with Ruth; stripping in front of the Wichita Falls smart set at a pool party is a tougher (if more exciting) trial for Jacy than eloping.

Jacy has been labeled a femme fatale by some critics. She is fickle, but like Sonny, she is also an innocent finding her way, a naïf, for all her manipulativeness, who defines herself in relation to men, including her mom's lover, the opportunistic oil driller Abilene (Clu Gulager)—an Oedipal revenge if ever there was one. Whatever her caprices, in 1971 many young women viewers would have cheered her readiness to experiment sexually with different men; Ruth's affair with Sonny is equally affirming, a better option than permanent lassitude and disappointment, if not exactly a feminist statement. Acting on desire is a salve for several characters' aimlessness, but not its every manifestation is healthy, or sane: Joe Bob Blanton (Barc Doyle), the religious kid, nearly molests a little girl. In the novel, McMurtry matter-of-factly describes the coition of teenage boys with animals; Bogdanovich necessarily drew the line at bestiality (though it is referred to in the film). The critic John Simon cited this omission and that of Lois's having sex with Sonny as examples of the film's romanticization of the world of the novel. But these were discreet choices: Sonny's sleeping with Lois on-screen would have not only diluted the delicacy of his forlorn affair with Ruth but also cost the movie the touching conversation between Lois and Sonny when she recalls the only man who knew her worth. It is through Ruth's and Sam's upbraidings that Sonny learns about emotional responsibility and through Lois's acceptance of her past that he learns about the transience of love.

The Last Picture Show contrives to be both elegiac and brutally realistic. The deaths of Sam and Billy, Jacy's inconstancy (sickening to both Duane and Sonny), and the recognition that Sonny and Ruth will be unable to reignite their affair are as chilling as the northers that sweep through Anarene. All that can be cherished are those fleeting moments of happiness contained in small intimacies. Ruth, newly radiant, wears Sonny's shirt after their second tryst (so much better than their noisy baptism by bedsprings). The kindhearted café waitress Genevieve (Eileen Brennan) serves Sonny a healing cheeseburger. Sam, during the fishing trip, offers Sonny a roll-up as if they were a pair of Hawksian cowboys.

In that same interlude, Sam remembers bringing his girl to the tank more than twenty years before and swimming with her "without no bathin' suits." Memory confers a pleasure as precious in the present as the events being recalled. Dazzling, inventive, and trenchant though much of New Hollywood was—and abrasive and cynical too—nothing else it came up with matches Sam the Lion's faraway look as he dwells on his wild affair with his lost love. Fading out as he is, it's the last picture show in his mind's eye.

Graham Fuller is the editor of Loach on Loach, from which the Ken Loach quotes in this piece are taken. He has written essays for the Criterion releases of A Canterbury Tale, The Man Who Fell to Earth, Walker, The Hit, and The Last Picture Show. His website is inaloneyplace.com.

Cinema Elegy: Peter Bogdanovich and *The Last Picture Show*

[Girish Shambu](#), April 2001, '70s US Cinema, Issue 13.
Senses of Cinema.

“He is as moved as I am, by the ending of things, by the waning of periods, generations, human couples, a town. I might have deduced this from his feeling for Ford or Hawks, the most elegiac of our directors.”

– Larry McMurtry on Peter Bogdanovich (1)

Peter Bogdanovich is one of the few examples of the critic-turned-director in American cinema. In France on the other hand, that strong tradition was ignited by the cadre of writers at *Cahiers du Cinéma* who turned to directing feature films in the late 1950s. Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, Chabrol and Rohmer were cinephiles and critics who steeped themselves in cinema of decades past at the Paris Cinémathèque. After the publication of Truffaut’s seminal salvo for *auteur* cinema in 1954 (2), a sea change began to occur in the way films were viewed, thought about and discussed. Truffaut harshly attacked the “tradition of quality” in French cinema, making specific reference to the assumed importance of screenwriters and novelists in adapting well-known literary works for the screen. This practice, he argued, resulted in stilted, literary, uncinematic films. He defined a film *auteur* as one who brings his or her personal concerns to bear on the film instead of merely transferring literary source material to the screen with tasteful dullness. He hailed Bresson, Renoir, Cocteau, Hitchcock and Hawks, among others, as model *auteurs*.

When the *auteur* theory made its way soon after to America, it was embraced by, among others, Andrew Sarris of *The Village Voice* and Eugene Archer of *The New York Times*. It is under the profound influence of these two critics that Bogdanovich fell when he began to write about film. He then produced a series of book-length monographs on, among others, Howard Hawks (3), to coincide with retrospectives held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The influence of the history of American cinema on Bogdanovich’s early films is overt and substantial. His debut *Targets* (1967) knowingly cast Boris Karloff as an ageing horror-movie star who encounters a killer loose at a drive-in movie theater. The film even includes a clip from Hawks’ *The Criminal Code* (1931), which featured Karloff. The respectful documentary *Directed by John Ford* (1971) was followed by *The Last Picture Show* (1971) – shot in black-and-white and paying homage to Hawks’ *Red River* (1948) by bestowing it with key symbolic significance within the film’s narrative. *What’s Up, Doc?* (1972), a screwball comedy, was explicitly intended as a loose remake of Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). *Paper Moon* (1973), once again shot in black-and-white, evokes John Ford in its landscapes and compositions as much as Hawks in its comedy. His much-maligned *At Long Last Love* (1975) was a send-up of 1930s musicals in its characters, sets and Cole Porter songs. Accused upon its release of wallowing in nostalgia, it now appears, with the distance of time, a modestly pleasing lark. *Nickelodeon* (1976), set in the period 1910-1915, is an enthusiastic homage to the early silent-movie pioneers.

The cinema-going experiences of Bogdanovich’s childhood and youth were formative and indelible, and he thinks his “taste was purest” (4) when he was ten, when he saw Hawks’ *Red*

River five times and Ford's *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (1949) ten. In 1972, when asked for his top ten favorite films of all time for a *Sight & Sound* poll, Bogdanovich included both those films, along with Hawks' *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *Rio Bravo* (1958), and Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) and *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939). In fact, only four directors were present on that top-ten list: Hawks, Ford, Welles and Hitchcock. And, furthermore, all ten films were American. Later, in a chapter published in his book *Pieces Of Time* (5), Bogdanovich issued an embarrassed disclaimer, regretting the many omissions (Renoir, Lubitsch and Lang) that such an assignment invariably entails. Nevertheless, the impact of Hawks and Ford on his films has been clear and strong.

In Bogdanovich's 1999 book *Movie Of The Week: 52 Classic Films For One Full Year* (6), we find that a full 46 of the recommended 52 films were made before 1960. Andrew Yule points out in his book *Picture Shows* (7) that Bogdanovich felt a closer kinship with an older generation of directors (like Hawks and Ford) rather than his peers and contemporaries (like Scorsese, De Palma, Cassavetes or Coppola). He sought out opportunities to meet with these older directors, whom he interviewed extensively and championed tirelessly throughout his writing. However, the mantle of "film critic" did not sit easily with Bogdanovich. He wrote in 1973: "To borrow Shaw's phrase, and without meaning to be pretentious, I was more a popularizer than a critic (.) I've seen about six thousand movies and I have a large fund of happy memories-many of which I like to recapture." (8) His first two films *Targets* and *The Last Picture Show* -arguably his very best work-demonstrate how he draws from this vast "fund" while incorporating something new: a sense of the death of one era, and the uncertain beginning of another. One does not have to look far-in fact, no further than its title-to find this elegiac spirit in *The Last Picture Show*.

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In Laurent Bouzereau's documentary *The Last Picture Show: A Look Back* (1999), included on the Region 1 DVD edition of the film, Bogdanovich recalls first encountering Larry McMurtry's novel in a supermarket checkout line, being arrested by the title (as any red-blooded cinema-lover would), and putting it back swiftly when he realized that it was set in small-town Texas. Having been raised on New York's Upper West Side and never visited Texas, it interested him little as a project. However, the book returned to him when it was recommended by actor-friend Sal Mineo (whom he had met while visiting Ford on the set of *Cheyenne Autumn*[1964]) and his own wife Polly Platt, who was later responsible for the stunning production design of *The Last Picture Show*. McMurtry and Bogdanovich then co-wrote the screenplay, basing it largely (but not completely) on the novel.

The film follows a group of characters in a small town-Anarene, Texas-over a one-year period, 1951-1952, from one high-school football season to the next. Among the characters are: teenagers Sonny (Timothy Bottoms), Duane (Jeff Bridges) and Jacy (Cybill Shepherd); Sam the Lion (Ben Johnson) who owns the local pool hall, café and movie theater; Lois (Ellen Burstyn), Jacy's bitter and bored mother; and Ruth (Cloris Leachman), the neglected wife of Sonny's football coach. Sonny and Duane are close friends, both aimlessly connected to the stable but unpromising existence the town has to offer. Sonny ends his dull and unrewarding relationship with Charlene (Sharon Ullrick) and drifts into an affair with the older Ruth. The selfish and beautiful Jacy agrees to go to bed with her boyfriend Duane only after a society boy she is after refuses to sleep with her because she is a virgin. After Duane leaves town, Jacy hears of Sonny's affair with Ruth and abruptly begins to court him, clearly enjoying the effect her charms have upon him and swiftly ending his affair with Ruth. After they marry, and before they can consummate their relationship, Jacy's father forcibly breaks

up the couple and takes her home. Duane returns and has a violent confrontation with Sonny over their shared unrequited love for Jacy. Sam the Lion dies and leaves Sonny the pool hall in his will. Sam's son, Billy, who is mentally retarded and has looked up to Sonny as his guardian, is accidentally killed by a passing truck. At film's end, Duane has left for Korea after reconciling with Sonny, and the symbol of the renewal of their friendship is a visit to the movie theater for its last picture show before closing down, *Red River*. Sonny returns to Ruth, whom he had abandoned for Jacy. At the end, the wind blows through the empty, forlorn town, which looks a little sadder for the death of its movie theater.

Possessing a talented ensemble cast, *The Last Picture Show* examines the lives of two generations of townspeople, creating both male and female characters with convincing depth. The film deals both with the problems of adolescence and the stultifying boredom of middle age. Both generations share a vague purposelessness and quiet despondency. They seek satisfaction in temporary sexual liaisons, unable and unwilling to convert these encounters into something lasting. A notable exception to the rootlessness of these characters is the presence of Sam. Failing in health and modest in means, he is nevertheless a figure of reassuring strength and quiet ideals. He provides places (the pool hall, café and movie theater) for the town community to gather in, and yet when the film draws to a close, the deadening spell of television combined with his passing has all but destroyed this communal cohesiveness.

Bogdanovich strove to establish a vivid sense of time and place for the film. He and McMurtry drove through scores of towns, scouting locations until they settled on Archer City, Texas – the very town that was the original basis for McMurtry's 'Thalia' in the novel. Bogdanovich changed its name to Anarene for the film, as a nod to Abilene in *Red River*. Because the film was shot in the town McMurtry fictionalized, it was not uncommon for the cast and crew to run into the actual townspeople who were models for various characters in the film. Bogdanovich altered the time scheme of the novel, which was set at a general, unspecified time during the 1950s, restricting the action to one year, and also chose the songs on the soundtrack carefully to reflect this narrow time period. In terms of the visual strategy of the film, Orson Welles advised Bogdanovich that in order to get the kind of deep-focus compositions he wanted for the film, he would have to abandon color and film in black-and-white, which he wisely did.

Bogdanovich employs a powerful conflation in *The Last Picture Show*: the bittersweet nostalgia for the passing of an era is blended with a realism and honesty that views the early 1950s very differently from the way films of that period did. The film is book-ended by two movie screenings at the Royal cinema theater: *Father of the Bride* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951) and *Red River*. The former, starring a glamorous Elizabeth Taylor, perfectly symbolizes the confectionary quality of the studio product of its day, quite out of touch with American realities, the very realities that Bogdanovich set out to capture so mournfully and vividly in his film.

Despite its austere black-and-white texture and its visual spareness, *The Last Picture Show* is clearly a 1970s film about the 1950s. The prosperity and stable social complacencies of 1950s America are nowhere in view. Even the pride of work and professionalism – an integral part of the Hawksian universe – are absent in the film. Sonny and Duane are professionally adrift, the former accidentally falls into inheriting a broken-down pool hall and the latter leaves for Korea with the grim last words "See you in a year or two-if I don't get shot." Genevieve runs the ramshackle café but struggles to pay her husband's medical bills. Though she longs to be free of working at the café, she ruefully admits to Sonny that she will

“probably be making cheeseburgers for your grandchildren”. Lois’ husband is modestly wealthy from the oil business, but their marriage is a complete failure. She fidgets restlessly on the sofa as her husband falls asleep in front of the television, then makes a call to her lover Abilene who is uninterested, and busy with his oil-drilling. Ruth continues to stay with her husband even though it is clear that their marriage is entirely loveless, citing that she “wasn’t brought up to leave her husband”. Documenting the lives of these characters, Bogdanovich demonstrates great generosity toward them. He does not judge his characters’ actions but merely presents them to us, allowing a complex portrait of the community to emerge.

The nostalgic element of the film is incarnated in Sam the Lion, whose retrospective reflection at the tank dam is one of the film’s key sequences. While Sam’s reminiscence has a tinge of the sentimental, Bogdanovich’s direction of the sequence is steely and poignant. The choice of *Red River* as the closing film for the last picture show at the Royal is also meaningful. The scene Bogdanovich references is that of the cattle drive, set in a historical time full of hope, venture and the pioneer spirit. With Sam’s death, the closing of the theater and the careless death of Sam’s son, the contrast between *Red River* and the world outside the Royal could not be sadder. McMurtry originally intended to use an Audie Murphy B-western called *The Kid From Texas* (1950), but by replacing it with the Hawks film, Bogdanovich immeasurably multiplied the power of the film’s ending. Take for example, the character Sam – a man of silent integrity, even if it brought him no great wealth in his life, nevertheless, he is committed to the daily rituals of work (he runs three local establishments), communal activities (he bets on his local high school football team even when they are unlikely to win, and loses money to the dissolute Abilene) and principle (watching over the teenagers who visit his pool hall and expelling them when he finds they have abused his trust and forced his mentally retarded son Billy into losing his virginity with a prostitute). These values are echoed not just in the *Red River* scene that Bogdanovich shows us, but also in Ford’s *Wagon Master* (1950), a poster for which we see at Sam’s movie theater. (Ben Johnson, who plays Sam, also played the lead in that film, enriching the allusion). There is also a steady indication in the film of the rise of television’s influence, and many scenes feature the inane drone of the TV in the background. Thus, the nostalgia for Sam, his era and his principles, is contrasted with the unsavory realities of Anarene. Teenagers stagnate in undemanding jobs upon graduation from high school. Husbands and wives lose interest in each other and get “itchy” for diversion (epitomized by Lois and Ruth). Casual sex is common (for example, Jacy’s liaison with Abilene in the pool hall). Sonny, who has been charged with the responsibility of being Billy’s guardian, cannot prevent the latter’s accidental death under the wheels of a passing truck. Both Sonny and Duane are scarred by their relationships with Jacy, with little hope of quick recovery.

The film even manages to evoke a nostalgia for a time and place that never existed, setting it next to the day-to-day lives of its characters. For example, when Sonny meets his girlfriend Charlene at the movies, they kiss. While this takes place, Sonny’s attention is clearly not on Charlene but on the screen where we see an outsized image of the glamorous Elizabeth Taylor in *Father of the Bride*. A striking contrast exists between the employment of *Red River* and *Father of the Bride* in *The Last Picture Show*. The nostalgia of *Red River* is truer and feels rooted in a bygone historical time and place while the confection of *Father of the Bride* is clearly implied to be manufactured and fake. Nevertheless, the adventure and accomplishment in *Red River* are as distant and unattainable for the characters in *The Last Picture Show* as the glamour of Elizabeth Taylor. The two films referenced in *The Last Picture Show* are polar opposites and yet they jointly deepen the melancholic aura surrounding the characters of the film. At film’s end, Sonny attempts to leave town after

Billy's death but after driving for a few miles is overcome with the paralyzing weight of his dull but stable past in Anarene, turns around and drives right back, unable to sever the connection with his grim reality. These realities of the small-town social milieu are meticulously captured by the film, and are particularly affecting because Hollywood films of the 1950s rarely ever saw the decade and its values and practices as perspicaciously as *The Last Picture Show* does.

It is clear that the casting process for the film deliberately attempted to draw out the above contrasts. Bogdanovich wanted Ben Johnson for the part of Sam, and pursued him vigorously. Johnson demurred, uncomfortable with the quantity of dialogue (he preferred reticent parts), and the number of "dirty words" in his lines. Bogdanovich then used his influence with John Ford, who placed a call to Johnson and persuaded him to take the part. It is meaningful to recall that Johnson played the lead in Ford's majestic *Wagon Master*, which chronicled the pioneering drive of the Mormons westward, analogous to the cattle drive of *Red River*. Jeff Bridges, an eminently likable actor, was cast in the part of Duane, a basically unpleasant, hot-headed and unprincipled character, thus creating a productive tension between player and part. Cybill Shepherd, a young model with no films to her credit, was cast as temperamental and selfish Jacy, whom Bogdanovich pictured "as a butterfly flitting from flower to flower, wilting them all." (9) Bogdanovich admits that once again, the distinction between player and character began to blur, and he found himself involved in an affair with Shepherd during the shoot, not always knowing whether it was Shepherd or Jacy he was attracted to: "It was the way she said things and flirted reflexively, just like Jacy..." (10) This directly led to the break-up of his long-time marriage to Polly Platt. Cinema had bled dangerously into real life.

The blend of nostalgia and realism can also be viewed through the lens of generational differences. The older generation, represented by Lois, Ruth, Genevieve, and Sam, has experienced all manner of failure, personal and professional, but still carries a core of romantic yearning and personal honesty. Lois has a lover on the side but affectingly tells her daughter Jacy, "What I did didn't work out for me, we'll have to think of something else for you". Lois does not want her life's mistakes to go to waste, but instead wishes that they might somehow be used to improve her daughter's choices. Ruth longs for a deep relationship and invests her entire being in her affair with Sonny, changing the décor of her house and giving him thoughtful presents. Genevieve works hard to maintain her family's health, and Sam is the social pillar of the community. In contrast, the younger generation is either aimless (Sonny and Duane) or callow and narcissistic (Jacy or Bobby Sheen). For all the older generation's flaws, the younger characters of the film are weaker, more self-centered and less promising. Jacy is a vivid, if somewhat extreme, example of the young generation. She lies casually to her boyfriend Duane, slips away from him to attend a nude swimming party at a wealthy home, sleeps with Duane in order to expeditiously lose her virginity, and lures Sonny away from Ruth simply because she is beautiful and she relishes the effect she has on men. Jacy is the least attractive character in the film but the film also accords her moments of charm, confusion, helplessness and hurt which serve to humanize her and render her sympathetic.

Part of what remains vibrant about *The Last Picture Show* today is its palpable honesty and bittersweet qualities. These are epitomized in the small details of several scenes, and almost every scene in the film quietly possesses such detail: the deafening, rhythmic creak of bed-springs that drowns out Ruth's tears when she and Sonny make love, awkwardly, for the first time; Sonny and Ruth sharing their first secret kiss as they empty a can of garbage in the

moonlight; Duane trying unsuccessfully to make love to Jacy as she snaps irascibly, “You know I don’t like to be tickled.!”; or the fleeting moment, pregnant with estrangement, of Sonny running into his father at the Christmas party, and both having little to say to each other. The world of *The Last Picture Show* is one in which each generation is a little less purposeful, a little weaker, and a touch more defeated than the generation that came before it. The film captures these accumulating defeats tenderly and forgivingly, and makes each moment feel authentic and real. Without in any way being heavy-handed, the film gently leads us to contrast the lives of the younger characters with what might have been if the communal traditions of the pre-television past had survived.

During Sonny and Jacy’s first sexual encounter, the awkwardness of the moment does not rob it of its emotion and significance. When Sonny and Ruth first kiss, it is not a romantic kiss plucked from the screen of a 1950s film, but a moment that involves the close-up of a filthy garbage can. As Duane and Jacy attempt to sexually consummate their relationship, Jacy is not the understanding and enraptured sweetheart but instead the cold and opportunistic local beauty. Finally, the myth of Eisenhower-era family values do not harmonize with that fleeting moment when Sonny and his father pass each other at the party like strangers, their relationship empty and defunct. These are moments that somehow conjure up a sense of a world larger than the characters, larger than the film, an American world that curiously belongs equally to the past and to the present.

Endnotes

1. Larry McMurtry, in *Film Flam: Essays On Hollywood*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987, p. 121
2. François Truffaut, “Un Certain Tendance du Cinema Français”, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No.31, January 1954, pp. 15-28
3. Peter Bogdanovich, *The Cinema of Howard Hawks*, Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, 1962
4. Teresa Grimes in *World Film Directors: Volume Two 1945-1985*, ed. John Wakeman, H.W. Wilson Company, New York, 1988, p. 133
5. Peter Bogdanovich, *Pieces Of Time*, 1975, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, p. 143
6. Peter Bogdanovich, *Movie of the Week: 52 Classic Films for One Year*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1999
7. Andrew Yule, *Picture Shows*, Limelight Editions, New York, 1992
8. *Pieces of Time*, p. 144
9. Laurent Bouzereau’s documentary *The Last Picture Show: A Look Back* (1999)
10. Ibid.