

Viewing Notes for *The Last Picture Show* (1971), directed by Peter Bogdanovich

The 1966 Larry McMurtry novel on which the film is based opens with this dedication: “*The Last Picture Show* is lovingly dedicated to my home town.” That seemingly sincere dedication is immediately followed by the book’s opening line of alienation: “Sometimes Sonny felt like he was the only human creature in the whole town.” This contradiction results in an ambivalence throughout the story. Look for the ways in which Sonny is both pulled into scenes of belonging as well as struggling with alienation.

Peter Bogdanovich’s decision to film in black & white came largely from the opening scene of the book and his desire to depict Sonny’s feelings of isolation without the help of an omniscient narrator. Note how the visuals and soundscape of that opening scene do this work. In contrast, note how the director uses traditional “establishing shots” in unpredictable ways within the story, such as the way the landscape is incorporated at the end of the funeral scene instead of at the beginning.

In an essay looking back on the film version years later, McMurtry admitted, “In rereading the book [in order to co-write the screenplay], I had decided that, despite my efforts at savage satire, I had still somehow romanticized the place and the people.” The fact that McMurtry eventually moved back to Archer City, Texas, signals a reconciliation with the place and with small town life.

Critic Greg Giddings, who hails from the same hometown as McMurtry, agrees that there is a “subtle hopefulness” that comes through effectively in the visuals of the film adaptation of the novel, especially in the director’s repeated framings of characters’ hands.

Beyond the opening scene, sense of place is central to the world of the film. Key are the dry and windswept winter landscape and the small town itself, but also consider the symbolic roles of various specific locales in the story: the movie theater (of course), the poolhall, the sanctuary of the café, the escape of the lake, the communal (but night quite inclusive) space of the Christmas dance, and the glittering promise of big city Wichita Falls.

The Last Picture Show was the first film of the 1970s to take on a “nostalgic” recreation of the 1950s, before such films as *American Graffiti* (1973), *Grease* (1978), *Animal House* (1978), or *Hollywood Knights* (1980). Its tone is much different from the others, as well, with a poignancy and a much more complicated treatment of sexuality.

The soundtrack plays a major role within the story, as an almost omnipresent series of honkytonk songs interweaves with popular teen music of the era. The songs tend to mask the bleak soundscape of wind that becomes so apparent when the music is not playing.

Critic James Bell claims that “The film is an elegy at once for a period in history, for a time in one’s life, for small-town America—and for the kind of studio-produced cinema that Bogdanovich loved, but that was ironically being supplanted by the energies of his [New Wave-inspired] peers.” (Think *Easy Rider*.) Clearly there was still a taste for classic filmmaking styles, though, because *Picture Show* went on to be nominated for many awards, as did Bogdanovich’s next black & white film two years later, *Paper Moon* (1973). Consider how the filmmaking style hearkens back and notice what is *not*

included in the filmmaking process—new approaches that Bogdanovich describes “all that jiggling camera, jump cuts, zoom lenses.” Notice the stillness of the scenes and camera work, which allows the actors’ subtle expressions to do much of the work of revealing their silent thoughts and emotions.

More visuals to watch for:

- the ways roads are used within the town and into/out of town, both emphasizing the themes of restlessness and of feeling trapped
- the effects of the dim or harsh indirect lighting in the interior shots, especially in the poolhall, café, and the Poppers’ house
- the films used within the movie house, including *Wagon Master* and *Red River*, which serve as almost ironic backdrop, the epic frontier history contrasting with the limiting lives of the frontier’s heirs in the mid-20th century

The Last Picture Show is enshrined in the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress. Do you think it is an important, representative work in American culture? Why/why not?