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The Last Picture Show: a study in desolation

By Lee Gipson

The Last Picture Show takes us back to an atmosphere of the early sixties and chronicles their defeats and rare victories. The film takes into its story, picking up the thread of the characters’ lives in the middle, introducing them to one of the many off-handed mannerisms so that the effect is given the same aura that is much that has gone on before he comes to the situation. It is set as a very black scene, with Sonny (Timothy Bottoms) and Duane (Jeff Bridges), two high school seniors who serve as the focal points of the study of small-town life, going through the wind-blown town to the pool hall run by the Leo (Burt Johnson). It is from Sam’s pool hall that the film views the town; returning at critical moments to retain its continuity. From this beginning, we are quickly plunged into the daily life of the two boys: their dates that night at the local picture show...

The plot continues in a rather epic, egotistical manner. Sonny, whose girlfriend has broken up with him in the first scene to form a line with his ex-wife Ruth (Cheris Leachman) after he is asked by the coach to drive her to the local clinic. Jacy (Cybill Shepherd) leaves her boyfriend, Duane, who then, in a fit of anger, joins with a group of friends to take the town’s idol boy to the local where Jacy begins to associate with a racy group of young people from a nearby town, and when she is turned down by its “leader” because she is a virgin, she turns to Duane, who is unable to have intercourse with her.

Jacy eventually dies, but only after a brief interlude in which he revives his memories of television, room decorations, dances, rock and roll, and commercial at the set of the picture show. The acting is generally well done, as is the photography. The setting, at least to one who has very little familiarity with the fifties, seems very real. In fact, it is rather reminiscent of my earliest memories of television.

In spite of its personally disjointed plot, The Last Picture Show forcefully presents a carefully cultivated image to the viewer. Bogdanovich has let nothing interfere with his effort to represent a picture of the dull, desperate, denoue life led by townpeople in isolated villages throughout the “heartlands” of America. These people were dull, and they had dull lives, gleaning what glamour they could from the picture shows. Bogdanovich chose black and white specifically to fend off the cheeriness that color would have introduced. He has scrupulously adhered to the times, using only period rock-and-roll in his soundtrack, and, with a religious sense of realism, he has allowed the music to enter only when his characters are actually listening to a radio or juke box. The actors are all plain; even Jacy, who is meant to be a local beauty, is good-looking without being truly beautiful. And Ruth, who is perhaps the most desperate of all the characters, is remarkably plain. By avoiding anything that might distract the viewer from his central image, Bogdanovich is able to lend real power to a movie that might otherwise be a rather tedious account of the life in a lonely, lost, and dying town.

He has succeeded in documenting and dissecting what may well be an important phenomenon in the development of modern America: the death of the small town.