

Small-Town Depression: Topography of Entrapment in *The Last Picture Show*

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Abstract

本論文はラリー・マクマートリーの *The Last Picture Show* とピーター・ボグダノヴィッチによる映画版を現代合衆国西部の閉じられた空間についての物語として論じるものである。経済学的、心理的、および地形学的な意味での **depression** が支配するこの物語において登場人物たちはテキサスの田舎町に閉じこめられ、抑鬱的な状況から逃れようとするあらゆる試みは失敗し、つねに出発地点に連れ戻される。反復されるこの円環的なパターンは主人公をとくに強く束縛し、物語が一種のビルドゥングスロマンへと発展することを阻止することになる。本稿はさまざまな場所、空間内での移動、ほかの映画作品からの引用などの物語内での機能を分析し、開かれた空間に特徴づけられていた過去の西部をめぐる物語を書き直しながら閉鎖的な空間を描くポスト・ウェスタンとしてマクマートリーとボグダノヴィッチの作品を位置づける。

Key Words: topography, depression, claustrophobia, literature and film, post-Western

You can't go home again even if you stay there, and now
that everyplace is the same, there's no place to run.

—James Crumley, *The Last Good Kiss*

Set in a fictional town in northern Texas of the early 1950s, Larry McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show* (1966) and Peter Bogdanovich's film adaptation (1971) deal with the relationship between the topography of a small town and frustrated desire. Thalia, Texas in the novel and Anarene, Texas in the film are claustrophobic places that entrap the residents, especially the central figure named Sonny Crawford. The characters try to escape from the emptiness of small-town life by various means, but the solace that such attempts provide is only temporary, often strengthening the feelings of boredom and depression. Wherever they go, the town haunts them and will not let them loose. It makes them want to leave but will not allow them to leave, and this paradoxical nature of the small town is most strongly felt by Sonny. McMurtry's

depressive topography is also a textual mapping of Texas that inscribes itself onto earlier narratives of the West. Just as the town is caught between its past and an uncertain future, Sonny remains trapped between adolescence and manhood. The narrative draws circles within a circle to show how the characters are enclosed within them. Deliberately failing to be a *Bildungsroman*, *The Last Picture Show* presents the topography of closed space in the contemporary West.¹

As J. Hillis Miller explains, the word *topography* etymologically “combines the Greek word *topos*, place, with the Greek word *graphein*, to write,” and it has come to refer to the mapping of places with linguistic and graphic signs as well as to what is mapped by such signs (3-4). *The Last Picture Show* is a topographic narrative that maps places, and this becomes apparent first of all from its use of toponyms. The central stage of the narrative is supposed to be modeled on Archer City, Texas, but the novel and the film replace it with Thalia and Anarene. The word *Thalia* has two meanings in Ancient Greek. It is the name of one of the nine Muses, the Muse of comedy; one of the three Graces is also named Thalia, which means the blooming one. This is a highly ironic choice (Crawford 52). The narrative’s bleak tone is far from that of comedy, and Thalia is a withering town, rather than a blooming one. As for the choice of Anarene in the film, according to Girish Shambu, it is intended as Bogdanovich’s allusion to Howard Hawks’s *Red River* (1948), in which Abilene, Kansas figures as the final destination of a cattle drive. In addition to these classical and cinematic allusions, another point about these toponyms is that Thalia and Anarene actually exist in Texas, both of them not so far from Archer City. The transplantation of these toponyms from real places and from other texts suggests that the real and fictional topographies are inextricably mixed in *The Last Picture Show*.²

Thalia and Anarene are characterized first of all by their emptiness. The novel opens and ends with an evocation of a sense of ending. After participating in “his last game of football” as a high school student, Sonny drives through the deserted streets of Thalia, feeling that he is “the only human creature in the town” (1). The fact that he will no longer be a part of the town’s football team marks the beginning of his isolation from the community. The season in which the novel begins, late November, also suggests a time of decline. Sonny’s pickup, “not at its best on cold morning” (1), refuses to function smoothly and can stop at any moment, implying that he will have trouble with mobility (Stout 42). Bogdanovich’s film captures this atmosphere with the opening and final shots of the windswept main street of Anarene without any human figures, the former panning from right to left and the latter moving in reverse from left to right. The paired shots frame and enclose the whole narrative, reinforcing the claustrophobic nature of the place. The film’s penultimate shot of Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman) and Sonny (Timothy Bottoms)—the latter immobile and speechless with a paralyzed look on his face—dissolves and recedes into the background of the last shot, becoming a screen within the screen, framed by the

image of the empty town. The season is again late fall; the narrative has drawn a full circle in time. The framed narrative unmercifully emphasizes the small town's entrapment of Sonny.

The small town afflicts not only Sonny but also other citizens with its emptiness. The town's deserted main street is a sign of the place's economic depression. As Sam the Lion explains in one scene in the novel, there are no bright prospects for the town: "The oil fields are about to dry up and the cattle business looks like it's going to peter out" (62-63). Those who remain in the town are forced to face its downfall, and one of the words most frequently used in the narrative to describe the characters' emotional state is also *depression*. Sigmund Freud suggests that melancholia, which is "characterized by a profoundly painful depression," can be regarded as "a reaction to the loss of a beloved object" (204, 205). Not limited to someone's death, the cause of loss can be "more notional in nature," including "all the situations of insult, slight, setback and disappointment" (205, 211). The sense of ending and loss that pervades the whole story and the characters' desire that is frequently frustrated by the place's emptiness comprise the depressive nature of the small town. In addition to its economic and psychological senses, the term *depression* refers to a landform that is lower than its surrounding area, whose contour line often takes a circular shape. Although the geography of *The Last Picture Show* is, as one character says, generally "flat and empty" (48), the topographical depression serves as a metaphor for the situation of entrapment from which it is difficult to climb out. The empty small town depresses its residents economically, psychologically, and spatially. Sexual adventures, trips to distant places, and films are the three realms of escapism that seem to provide a way out of their depressing life. These methods of flight, however, usually offer only temporary comfort, often depressing them further. McMurtry and Bogdanovich emphasize how the dream of escape is just an illusion.

The novel looks like a catalogue of sexual desires. "In the cloying confines of Thalia," Charles D. Peavy says, "the only outlet for frustrations, loneliness, boredom, even hatred . . . is sex" (181). Rather than leading them to an outlet for frustration, however, sexual desire usually leaves the characters more frustrated than before, for the real objects of their desire always flee from their grasp. After a brief dream of escape, they are often left with vicarious objects, or with nothing. The narrative associates the futility of sexual escapades with its depressive topography of various types of place: lakes, ponds, roads, motels, and other indoor or domestic spaces.

In the flat plain of northern Texas, geological depressions often exist as lakes and ponds. The first example appears near the beginning of the story, when Sonny and his girlfriend drive out to a lake after watching a film at Sam the Lion's movie theater. The young characters' sexual desire is often associated with cinematic imagination. Sonny's girlfriend, Charlene Duggs, is "always getting worked up in picture shows," and she has become excited when she has found a slight resemblance between Sonny and Steve Cochran on the screen (18). Sonny's gaze, in the

meantime, has been fixed on Ginger Rogers. But the romantic world of the movies is far away from their own life. Just as Sonny and Charlene are not Steve Cochran and Ginger Rogers, they are stuck with vicarious lovers in their real life: “What depressed him was that it had just become clear to him that Charlene really wanted to go with Duane, just as he himself really wanted to go with Jacy” (21). While “the choppy lake lay in darkness,” Sonny tries to “shrug off his depression by beginning the little routine they always went through” in the confined space inside his pickup (21). The narrator’s subsequent description of their “little routine,” with its repetitive use of the auxiliary verb *would*, suggests the iterative, ritualistic nature of their flirtation. After allowing Sonny to touch her breasts for a while, Charlene always makes him drive her home: “Sometimes she indulged in an engulfing kiss or two on the doorstep, knowing that she could fling herself inside the house if a perilously high wave of passion threatened to sweep over her” (21). The lake’s water seeps into the narrator’s metaphors here. Charlene’s consistent avoidance of the “high wave of passion” makes Sonny bored with the ritual. They are trapped in a relationship that does not flow anywhere, and their romance stagnates like the water in the lake. Depressed and bored by the gap between fantasy and reality, Sonny suggests that they should break up. The lake functions here as a topographical metaphor for their stagnant relationship.

Another example appears in the scene that describes Sam’s fishing trip with Sonny and Billy to a stock tank near the town. The trip, repeated “year after year to the same tank” (151), is another ritualistic event. This is the only pastoral scene in the whole narrative, but it is also characterized by its depressing effect on Sam. He has lived through various changes in Texas, first as a rancher, then as a man engaged in the oil business and as an automobile agent, and now as the owner of the town’s pool hall, theater, and café. He has lost three sons in the past, who are replaced with his three surrogate sons: Billy, Sonny, and Duane Moore. His career traces the process of gradual confinement; this ex-rancher, who had been a man of open space, first became a provider of the means of movement—gasoline and cars—for others, and now lives in a confined space at the town’s center. The ritualistic trip to the stock pond provides him with an opportunity to reminisce about the past: “I’m just as sentimental as anybody else,” he says, “when it comes to old times” (153). Since Sam used to be the owner of the land where the pond is located, the sunken ground reminds him of his own economic downfall and confined status in the present. The place also functions as a reminder of his confinement in old age, and he talks about the time when he used to come to the place with “a young lady,” who later turns out to be Lois Farrow (153). The memories of his own happy adulterous relationship in the past frustrate him in the present, forcing him to curse, “I don’t want to be old. It don’t fit me!” (153). Unlike the young boys like Sonny and Duane, he does not travel anywhere, and the annual trip to the stock pond is the only opportunity for him to get out of the town. Sam is entrapped in the town as well as in his old age.

This scene is an important one in Bogdanovich's film, too. The film shows Sam (Ben Johnson) sitting on the trunk or limb of a fallen tree and talking to Sonny about the past. As he looks up and says, "You wouldn't believe how this country's changed," the film's cut to a pan shot of the landscape around the pond follows Sam's gaze surveying the place and comparing it with the one in his memory. Although this shot indicates that the pond's water exists in front of Sam, the other shots in the sequence consistently place the water behind Sam's back. This causes a strange effect. While Sam is supposed to be looking at the pond, he seems to have turned his face away from it, looking into a void as he tells the story of the past. It seems as if he was trying to avoid facing the stock tank, which, with its association with his memories, functions as a reminder of his depressed condition in the present. The scene in the film dissolves into a shot of another place associated with water, the swimming pool inside Bobby Sheen's house in Wichita Falls. This pool has already appeared in the film as a stage for the rich city kids' naked swimming party. The dissolve has an ironic effect (Degenfelder 87). The contrast between the outdoor pond and the indoor pool, a part of the world that Lois's daughter yearns to enter, points at the emptiness of the younger generation's sexual relationships. Depressions thus comprise a part of the narrative's psychological topography; the sunken ground drags down the characters' emotional state.

The film's contrast of the outdoor pond and the indoor pool is emblematic in showing the proliferation of closed space in the contemporary West. The scene set by the stock pond is an exception in this narrative, for most of the events take place indoors. One of such indoor spaces is the motel. The motor hotel, associated with the network of highways, is a privileged chronotope for movement, transience, and displacement (Clifford 32-33). But *The Last Picture Show* turns it into another locus of stagnation. One example is a motel on Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco that stages Duane and Jacy Farrow's sexual relationship. For Duane, the motel provides a long-awaited moment for advancing his romantic relationship with his girlfriend. The setting seems "just perfect," and the event appears to be going to happen "the way things were done," as in romantic movies (182). The moment, however, is cut short by his impotence, and Jacy becomes resentful and begins to think about how to cover the fact that their intercourse did not take place. Duane tries it three more times in other motels during their graduation trip and succeeds, but his feeling of success is again cut short by Jacy's indifference. She has found the experience "really painful" and "far from delightful" because, she thinks, "Duane was a roughneck" (186). She suggests that they should break up after the trip is over, which astonishes and depresses Duane. Rather than advancing Duane's sexual relationship with Jacy, the motel marks its deterioration.

Another motel located on a highway near Wichita Falls becomes the stage for Sonny and Lois's relationship. The event happens after Lois and her husband have stopped Jacy and Sonny's elopement and annulled their marriage. Like Sam, her former lover, Lois is frustrated by the gap

between the past and the present. Bored with her married life and with her adulterous relationship with Abilene, she talks to Sonny about the memories of Sam, who she says “was the only man in that whole horny town who knew what sex was worth” (252-53). At the same time, feeling “motherly” or “wifely” (251), she seduces Sonny and takes him to the motel. She apparently sees a shadow of the late Sam in the ex-husband of her own daughter: “I’m rich and mean, all that. . . . Sam . . . the Lion knew I wasn’t any of that, and I want you to know it too” (254; second ellipsis in orig.). Sonny has partially taken over Sam’s job after the latter’s death, and Lois seems to regard Sonny as a substitution for her former lover. Unable to repeat the past, she has to satisfy herself with a vicarious object of desire. Sonny, on the other hand, is forced by the circumstances to sleep not with his ex-bride but with her mother. Before taking Sonny back to Thalia, Lois explains that she used to be a classmate of Sonny’s mother and says, “That’s small town life for you” (255). The event at the motel makes Sonny face the closed nature of small-town life. The motel, supposedly a space of transience, becomes in this narrative a chronotope of stagnation.

Sam’s theater is another important indoor space. The films shown there, which literally come from outside the town, provide an opportunity to glimpse at fictional worlds beyond the spatial and temporal constraint of the depressive present, and they shape the young characters’ romantic desire. Just as the motel is reduced to a space of stagnation, however, the theater also becomes a dark claustrophobic locus of entrapment. This is especially true for the mentally retarded orphan Billy. He is the only person that seems to be free from frustrated desire, and some critics see him as the embodiment of innocence (Morrow 1; Peavy 183). The only act in which he is actively engaged is to sweep the town’s dusty streets with his broom. Patrick D. Morrow interprets this behavior as Billy’s effort to “sweep away the sands of time” (2), and Billy indeed tries to resist the flow of time until the end of his life. Since his biological father raped a “girl in the balcony of the picture show . . . and begat Billy” (McMurtry, *Picture Show* 5), the theater is the place of Billy’s conception. His birth coincides with the mother’s death, leaving him an orphan taken care of by Sam. Whenever a film is being screened, Billy always sits “in the balcony” (6); he does not leave the place where his life began, as if he were still inside the mother’s womb. The closing of Sam’s picture show then signifies the irretrievable loss of Billy’s home: “Of all the people in Thalia,” the narrator says, “Billy missed the picture show most” (273). Billy’s inability to renounce the dark womb-like space inside the theater is a sign of his fixation on the maternal; the theater has provided him with an imaginary reunion with the mother, just as the films shown there have offered romantic dreams of escape to others. Near the novel’s end, Billy is struck dead by a cattle truck passing through the town, while sweeping the empty streets. At the time of his death, “his eyes were completely covered” with eyepatches (275). Considering his attachment to the theater, Billy’s self-imposed blindness can be understood as his attempt to re-create the darkness inside

the theater, which, in turn, has been a substitute for the darkness inside the womb. Then, by dragging Billy “to the curb in front of the picture show” and leaving “the eye patches on” (276), Sonny is taking him back to his lost home. Billy is forever trapped in his childhood and the dark maternal space represented by the theater, and Sonny seems to understand that. The town’s depression, embodied by the closed theater and the empty streets, robs Billy of his home and then of his life. Billy’s short life draws a small circle in darkness.

Billy’s repetitive return to the symbolic womb is also important for understanding Sonny’s relationship to domestic spaces. Aside from his desire for Jacy, this motherless protagonist is drawn toward motherly figures such as Genevieve Morgan, Ruth Popper, and Lois Farrow. Genevieve feeds the town’s boys as a waitress, and the café where she works provides a domestic space of rest and nourishment for those who are without “real homes” (13). Sonny is not the only person that likes her: “His father liked Genevieve and Sonny liked her too” (28). This weak rivalry between the father and the son puts Genevieve into the position of Sonny’s surrogate mother, staging a kind of Freudian triangular relationship. Sonny regards Genevieve as an object of sexual desire, for he has “as many fantasies about Genevieve as he had about Jacy Farrow” (28). The relationship between Sonny and Genevieve does not change throughout the narrative, but his desire, which appears to be filial as well as amatory, is repeated in his relationship with Ruth Popper. The fact that Ruth is the wife of a football coach again places her in the position of Sonny’s surrogate mother, although the characterization of Sonny’s feeble father, who is an ex-teacher, is opposite to that of Herman Popper. The bedroom in the Poppers’ house becomes another domestic space for Sonny. Ruth welcomes Sonny as her young lover at first, but he becomes more important for her when she starts to identify him with her nonexistent child. One night she has a dream in which she gives birth to a baby, who turns out to be Sonny, and on the next day she reaches an orgasm for the first time in her life, while pretending that “she was giving birth,” and almost faints “with the relief of delivery” (129). The coincidence of her “delivery” from monotonous life and the “delivery” of a nonexistent child suggests that Sonny is Ruth’s imaginary means of escape. What has been a place for adultery becomes a nursery, a maternal space not unlike Billy’s balcony seat in the theater. Since what Sonny is consciously seeking at this point is a lover and not a mother, there is a conflict between their desires, and he leaves her when Jacy begins to seduce him. Ruth is forced back to her life with the oppressive husband.

Other minor characters are also trapped in their sexual desires. Herman is a caricature of ostentatious masculinity. Bogdanovich’s film has a scene where the coach (Bill Thurman) forces the boys to run around and around in circles in a small gym, shouting, “Run, you little pissants, run!” His masculine pose and tough-guy language are a cover for his homosexual desire for young boys, a desire that he projects onto those whom he regards as “queer,” including a home

economics teacher named Wean and the English teacher John Cecil (71, 190). Whether conscious of it or not, Herman is trapped between his masculine pose and his real desire. Joe Bob Blanton, the preacher Brother Blanton's son, is another character whose frustrated desire is treated in an episode. The father catches Joe Bob "masturbating by flashlight over a picture of Esther Williams" and punishes the son by whipping him (208). Here again the fantasies provided by films are associated with sexual desire, and Joe Bob is torn between his desire and the religious teachings that the father imposes on him. The internal conflict remains unresolved until he kidnaps a little girl and takes her to "an old lovers' lane, three or four miles south of town" (212). The sheriff arrests him and incarcerates him for rape, which, it turns out, did not happen. His desperate act, like the other characters' sexual escapades, proves to be futile.

Joe Bob's arrested flight and the circular movement of the boys in the gym show in epitome the pattern of motion repeated throughout the narrative. As Janis P. Stout remarks, the characters' "circuitous travels, always ending in Thalia again, are parallel in futility with their ventures into sex" (43). They leave the town to escape from its monotonous life, but reality always destroys the illusion of the distant. Wherever they go, the town haunts them. Examples of such failed flights include Sonny and Duane's two trips to Fort Worth, their long travel to the border town of Matamoros, Mexico, the high school seniors' graduation trip to San Francisco, and Sonny and Jacy's elopement to Oklahoma. Repeating the same circular pattern of departure, disappointment, and return, these episodes show how spatial movement functions in this narrative.

Sonny and Duane's travel to Matamoros, the description of which is the most extensive and detailed among the trips taken in the narrative, serves as a representative example. The trip is their attempt to forget the troubles that they are having in Thalia. Feeling "depressed" after a fight with a bunch of rough boys from Wichita Falls (162), Duane suggests going away to a distant place. They take out a map from Genevieve's car, read it, and decide on Matamoros as their destination. Their consultation of the map indicates that this is their first trip into an unfamiliar region, where they cannot go without guidance. The narrator's description first emphasizes how different everything becomes as they move southward: "It was amazing how different the world was, once the plains were left behind. In the Valley there were even palm trees" (167). The unfamiliar sights and landscapes are proof of the distance they have traveled. After they cross the Rio Grande, a local boy takes over the role of the map, guiding them through the streets of the Mexican border town, which impresses them again with its difference from Thalia: "Mexico was more different from Thalia than either of the boys would have believed" (168). Whereas Thalia has been characterized by its emptiness, Matamoros surprises them with its fullness, its streets crowded and bustling with people. The local boy takes them to a place where they can watch pornographic films, and the place is the house of what seems to be an extended family, where three generations

of people live together. This makes another sharp contrast with Thalia, a town in which only nuclear families seem to exist. Sonny and Duane later move to another place and watch a movie titled "*Man's Best Friend*," which shows them scenes of bestiality between a woman and a dog (170). The film leaves them "surprised" and "spellbound," and they feel that "the trip was worthwhile, if only for the gossip value," for they have never seen such "depravity" in their life (171). Although they do not exactly enjoy watching the film, it becomes the highlight of this trip.

Despite the depravity of the film and the narrator's repeated emphasis on Matamoros's difference from Thalia, however, the Mexican town is characterized by its similarity to the boys' hometown. Matamoros functions as if it were a mirror image of Thalia and becomes another place of depression. What they do in Matamoros is not essentially different from what they have been doing in Thalia: watching films, drinking beers, and sleeping with prostitutes. Most of these events take place indoors, just as they do in Thalia. Sonny feels "strange" in front of the little boys sleeping in the room about to be turned into a temporary theater, since, in Sonny's eyes, they look "helpless" (169); he and Duane cannot "enjoy a dirty movie . . . in sight of the displaced kids" (170). The narrator's use of the word "displaced," an exaggerated expression for describing three kids being taken out of bed, implies that displacement refers to Sonny and Duane's own condition as well as to that of the Mexican kids; the kids' displacement from their bed reminds Sonny of his own displacement from Thalia to a town in another country. For Sonny, the helpless kids function as a mirror that reflects himself and Duane. A similar event happens in the room where they watch the film. The screen onto which the pornographic film is projected is the reverse side of "[a]n old American calendar hung on the door, a picture of a girl . . . on the front of it" (170). The calendar and its picture of a girl, who is probably an American, are what they must have been able to see without leaving their country. Furthermore, the film of bestiality, which astonishes them with its depravity, is only a reflection of what the boys around Thalia do, as has been described in an earlier scene in the novel, where the town's boys copulate with a blind heifer. What happens in the depraved film is only a variation on what they have done in Thalia, and the film's depravity is in fact a reflection of their own depravity. There are a few more details that display the Mexican town's similarity to the town and the country from which they think they have escaped. In a cabaret they find that most of the customers are "boys from Texas A & M" (172). Instead of being an exotic place dissociated from their everyday life, Matamoros is full of tourists from Texas. Even the bright neon lights of the cabarets, "winking red and green against the night" (171), seem to mimic the traffic light that blinks "red and green all to itself" "over the empty street" of Thalia (163, 178). These details make it doubtful whether they have really come to a distant place.

More significantly, Sonny meets two characters in Matamoros who mentally take him back to Thalia. One is a Mexican prostitute named Maria. She takes him to an "extremely tiny" room,

and the look of her breasts suggests that she is “pregnant” (173). The night he spends with Maria in this claustrophobic space has a depressing effect on Sonny. Looking at this Mexican mother, he begins to think about his relationship with Ruth. Even the creaking sound of the bed springs reminds him of the sound that Ruth’s bed makes. Finding himself thinking about Ruth in this distant town, Sonny suddenly realizes how futile this long trip has been: “He had driven five hundred miles to get away from Thalia, and the springs took him right back, made him feel exposed” (174). The feeling of futility renders him impotent, and when he wakes up next morning, he finds himself in a room with “no roof,” which is “just an open crib” (174). The trip reveals him to be a baby trapped in his “crib,” drawing a circle in both time and space. The other character associated with Thalia is an old man whose whiskers are “as white as Sam the Lion’s hair” (175). The old man says “something in a philosophic tone, which Sonny took to mean that life was a matter of ups and downs” (175). Sonny apparently does not speak Spanish, but somehow he understands, or thinks that he understands, the old man’s words. The words are reminiscent of what Sam has told Sonny by the stock pond: “[growing up] ain’t necessarily miserable . . . [a]bout eighty per cent of the time, I guess” (154). Since Sam is already dead at this point in the narrative, it is as if the old man were Sam’s ghost, who appears to offer his final advice. In *Matamoros*, Sonny meets the doubles of his surrogate parents, finding that the town is nothing but a replicated Thalia. What has appeared to be a linear trip to a distant place becomes a circuitous journey to the same old hometown.

On their way back from Mexico, as they approach Thalia, Sonny and Duane feel elated looking at the familiar landscapes around their hometown: “The dark pastures, the farmhouses, the oil derricks and even the jackrabbits . . . all seemed comfortable, familiar, private even, part of what was theirs and no one else’s” (177). The landscapes momentarily stop being an embodiment of emptiness, comforting them by letting them know that there is a place where they can belong. But the pleasant feeling of homecoming is cut short before long by the news of Sam’s death. As their surrogate father and as the owner of the pool hall, café, and picture show, Sam has provided these orphan figures with domestic spaces of comfort. His sudden disappearance increases the emptiness of Thalia, and the moment of homecoming is replaced with the one of displacement. After they hear the news, the narrator says that it becomes “a cool, dewy spring dawn” (178), a time of rebirth that apparently makes a sharp contrast with the desolation of fall described at the novel’s beginning and end. Far from heralding a new beginning for Sonny, however, Sam’s death only deepens his alienation. Thalia has provoked Sonny’s desire to escape from its emptiness and haunted him wherever he goes, but at the same time the town makes it impossible for him to return home. This oppressive, haunting, and alienating nature of the town is important for understanding the sense of total paralysis that Sonny experiences at the end of the narrative.

While the other trips repeat the same circular trajectory of departure, disappointment, and return in the novel, these scenes are omitted in Bogdanovich's film, except the one to Oklahoma. The first trip of Sonny and Duane (Jeff Bridges) to Fort Worth does not occur in the film, and the destination of the second trip, which takes place offscreen, is changed to Wichita Falls. The camera shows the two boys walking out of Sam's picture show, and in the next shot they are already back from the city. The Mexican trip is shortened in the same manner. After the two boys speed off in their vehicle, the film shows the sad-looking face of Sam in close-up, which dissolves into the next shot of Anarene's main street in the daylight. Then the camera is suddenly inside the boys' pickup returning from Mexico. The sequence of the seniors' graduation trip focuses on the scene at Cactus Motel, an indoor space where Duane impotently attempts to have sex with Jacy (Cybill Shepherd). As for Sonny and Jacy's elopement, the scene in the pool hall where Jacy proposes marriage to Sonny is followed by a shot of them driving on the highway in Oklahoma already after their marriage. Shortly they are stopped by a patrolman who asks a question that mentally returns them to Anarene—"What part of Texas y'all from?"—before taking them to a patrol station. These omissions might be a result of the limitations of running time and budget, but their effect is striking in heightening the claustrophobic atmosphere (Degenfelder 89-90). The sequences of the trips to Wichita Falls and Mexico look as if Sonny and Duane had never gone out of the town, while the graduation trip scene only takes the seniors to an indoor space. By refusing to show the outside of Anarene, Bogdanovich turns the medium's temporal constraint into a representation of the small town's spatial constraint, of its claustrophobic topography.

The novel and the film thus emphasize the claustrophobic nature of the town in different ways. No matter how far they go, what the characters try to find remains out of reach, only frustrating their desire further. Especially for Sonny, the trips are frustrating experiences through which he has to realize that the town always drags him back to itself and entraps him wherever he goes. There is no way out of the repetitive circles for him. Each circle encloses and depresses him, as if it were a contour line representing a depression on a topographic map. Every place is the same as far as he is concerned; no place is distant enough to take him away.

Films have already been associated with the young characters' romantic fantasies, Billy's place of conception, and the trip to Matamoros, but the use of cinematic allusions itself deserves attention. Both the novel and the film contain two scenes of screening at Sam's theater. In the novel, the first and last picture shows are *Storm Warning* (1951) and *The Kid from Texas* (1950); the film replaces them with *Father of the Bride* (1950) and *Red River*. These allusions and quotations provide the cultural background of the time in which the narrative is set, since all of the films were made around 1950. At the same time, they are textual layers upon which McMurtry's and Bogdanovich's narratives are constructed. Especially when the alluded film is a Western, *The*

Last Picture Show becomes a post-Western narrative that inscribes itself on its fictional precursors. Therefore, it becomes necessary to consider the function of the two last picture shows.³

The last picture show in the novel is a minor Western titled *The Kid from Texas*. This film brings an anticlimax to the history of Sam's theater, for Sonny and Duane, considering the film to be "a dog" (266), leave the theater without sitting through it. The film is not great enough to make them forget their troubles; the narrator says, "It would have taken *Winchester '73* or *Red River* . . . to have crowded out the memories the boys kept having" (265). *The Kid from Texas* is one of the many films about William Bonney.⁴ It shows the last years of Billy the Kid (Audie Murphy), beginning in the time of the Lincoln County War in New Mexico and ending with his death at the hands of Pat Garrett (Frank Wilcox). At the film's beginning, the narrator says in a voice-over, "Many stories have been told about him that were more fiction than fact. In some instances we've changed the names and slightly altered the chronology, but the facts were as you'll see them." Despite the narrator's claim, the film is just one of the mythicized tales about this legendary figure. Although Billy the Kid's place of origin is not known, the film is titled *The Kid from Texas*, and the only connection that the novel has with the film is the existence of another kid from Texas named Billy in the novel. The two Billys have some similarities. They are orphans, and their surrogate fathers—Roger Jameson (Shepperd Strudwick) in the film and Sam in the novel—die in the middle of these narratives. Both Billys are also killed when they are still young, thereby becoming the embodiment of eternal youth. But the similarities stop here. Instead of getting involved in a series of shootouts, Billy is engaged in the futilely heroic act of sweeping Thalia's dusty streets.⁵ It is ironic that this film that ends with Billy the Kid's burial is the last film shown at the theater and therefore becomes the last film Billy watches during his short life. The death of Billy the Kid prefigures that of the other Billy. By contrasting the two Billys, the novel points at the distance between the romanticized West that many narratives have constructed and the real, contemporary West that it describes. The novel inscribes itself upon *The Kid from Texas*, and the allusion to the film becomes one of the novel's elements that debunk the mythology of the West.

Bogdanovich replaces *The Kid from Texas* with Howard Hawks's *Red River*. Some critics have criticized this choice for going against the novel's bleak, unsentimental mood (Crawford 53n; Willson 168-69), but Bogdanovich's quote works effectively in its own way. The two films share the geographical setting and the use of textual layers. The Chisholm Trail, on which a significant portion of the narrative of *Red River* takes place, runs from the area near the Rio Grande to Abilene, Kansas, and a part of the route lies not so far from Archer County. In McMurtry's novel, the narrator describes how Sam's first son drowned when he and Sam "were trying to drive a herd of yearlings across the Little Wichita River" (4), a river that flows into the Red River; near the novel's end, Lois and Sonny cross the Red River on their way back from

Oklahoma (251). These descriptions resonate with the two crossings of the Red River in Hawks's film. And just as *The Last Picture Show* builds its narrative on the geography of the region and other alluded texts, *Red River*, which itself forms one textual layer in Bogdanovich's film, has its own layers of texts. Not only is the ranch of Thomas Dunson (John Wayne) modeled on the famous ranch founded by Richard King, but the film also inserts the handwritten pages of a book titled *Early Tales of Texas* and pretends to be a visualization of the written narrative. This device has an effect similar to McMurtry's and Bogdanovich's changes of the toponym from Archer City to Thalia and Anarene in mixing history and fiction, the actual and the apocryphal. Instead of guaranteeing historical accuracy and adding authenticity to the narrative, the word *tales* situates the whole story in the realm of folklore, and "[r]espect for the historical facts," as Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues remarks, "is certainly not the film-maker's primary concern" (15). Unlike *The Kid from Texas*, *Red River* is self-consciously aware of its departure from historical events, and this deviation from the line of history is repeated in this film in different forms.

Hawks's film marks a sharp contrast with *The Last Picture Show* at the same time. The quotation from *Red River* emphasizes the distance between the world in which the film's spectators live and the one presented by the quoted film (Degenfelder 84). *Red River* is especially important in its description of linear movements in space and time. In terms of narrative cartography, the film can be summarized as a story of two lines. The first line runs from St. Louis, Missouri, where Dunson and Nadine Groot (Walter Brennan) join a group of wagons going west to California, to a place near the Rio Grande in Texas, where the two men and the young Matthew Garth (Mickey Kuhn) build their ranch. Fourteen or fifteen years later, the second line starts from their ranch, which suffers from the decline of the market for Texas cattle in the South, and ends in Abilene, where the now grownup Matt (Montgomery Clift) successfully sells their cattle at a good price. While the first line brings the three men to a new land of opportunity in the Southwest, the second one takes them out of the stagnation after the Civil War. The two linear movements, which eventually bring about positive consequences, contain most of the events that happen in the film. The linearity of *Red River* is further emphasized by the way Bogdanovich uses it in his film. The scene set inside Sam's theater initially shows the sequence in which Dunson and his cowboys begin their long northward journey, with the close-ups of the cowboys shouting with the excitement of departure. After inserting a shot of Duane and Sonny looking at the screen and then another shot of the beam from the projector shining through the darkness inside the theater, Bogdanovich projects the last shot in *Red River* onto the screen, which is the image of the new brand of Dunson and Matt's ranch drawn on the sand, with the words "The End" superimposed on it. Bogdanovich therefore shows the beginning and end of the second linear movement in *Red River*, invoking the events that happen on the line between these two points in space and time.

The paired quotes from Hawks's film stand in contrast with the beginning and end of Bogdanovich's own film, the paired pan shots that enclose the whole narrative in a circle. While the straight line drawn by the cattle drive provides a way out of economic depression in *Red River*, the endless repetition of circles depresses modern Texans in *The Last Picture Show*.

Red River draws another kind of line absent in Bogdanovich's film: an adoptive genealogy that connects one generation to the next one. The second half of the film focuses on the growing discord between Dunson and Matt until the final scene solves the tension and reconciles them with each other, as is symbolized by the image of the ranch's new brand quoted by Bogdanovich. Liandrat-Guigues claims that "[t]he whole film is about the problem of inscribing the final letter [that is, the capital M] as a mark of filiation" (62). Although the narrative opposes the older man against the young man, one kind of leadership against another, it also develops parallels between the two men. Dunson and Matt rub their noses in similar ways, and each of them leaves a woman behind to accomplish his own job in this dominantly male world. More importantly, both of them deviate from the cartographic lines set by others in the same manner. The film's opening scene shows Dunson leaving the straight line of wagons led by a colonel (Lane Chandler) to head south instead of west; after crossing the Red River for the second time, Matt decides to drive the cattle northward to Abilene, opposing Dunson's plan to go northeast to Sedalia, Missouri. Matt's decision infuriates Dunson and aggravates their rivalry, but the young man is only repeating the older man's own act in the past. These similarities between them prepare the ground for their eventual reconciliation, where the motif of the line of deviation is repeated again. By showing the beginning of the full partnership between Dunson and Matt, the narrative grafts Matt Garth onto the genealogy of the Dunsons, an adoptive genealogy that flows from stepfather to stepson, not from father to son. The successful establishment of this partnership between the two generations marks the distance between *Red River* and *The Last Picture Show*, in the latter of which three fatherless boys are left to wander on their own. Sonny's assumption of Sam's roles after his death, which could be an opportunity to bridge the gap between two generations, is cut short by his inability to take care of Billy, for whose death he is partly responsible. Sonny is not mature enough to take over the surrogate father's role. It is also suggestive that Sam the Lion's last name, unlike Dunson's, is never mentioned; there is no name of the father that Sonny can inherit. The patrilineal genealogy that has been possible in *Red River* is now broken, and the sons in *The Last Picture Show* are left without any model on or against which they can build their own life.

These cinematic allusions, through similarities and contrasts, make up an effective intertextual network that highlights the characteristics of McMurtry's Thalia and Bogdanovich's Anarene. A boy named Billy in contemporary Texas can no longer be the legendary hero of *The Kid from Texas*, and the linear motion in open space depicted in *Red River* is inconceivable for

Sonny, whose old truck, as the narrator of the novel says, just goes “around and around in a completely empty place” (14). Both the novel and the film of *The Last Picture Show* are highly allusive texts that map their topographies of closed space upon these prior cinematic texts.

After the death of Sam and Billy, the departure of Duane and Jacy, and the closing of the picture show, Sonny is left with “the feeling again, the feeling that he was the only person in town” (277). Trying to escape from this feeling of alienation, he makes his final attempt to leave the town, but his movement is arrested just after “he passed the city limits signs”: “The gray pastures and the distant brown ridges looked too empty. He himself felt too empty. As empty as he felt and as empty as the country looked it was too risky going out into it—he might be blown around for days like a broomweed in the wind” (277). After the failure of his repeated escapes from the town, he knows that he cannot really go away from Thalia, that its emptiness will follow him wherever he goes. This is the reason why the country looks as empty as the town itself. Every place is the same in its emptiness, and every road has been blocked for him. Earlier in the story, Sam has said to him, “You’ll never get nowhere, Sonny” (5); as if to confirm these prophetic words, Sonny is indeed not going anywhere. His depression reaches its strongest point in this scene. Paralyzed by fear, he makes a U-turn—the final circular movement in space described in the narrative—and drives his car to Ruth’s house. She lives in a house located between the now empty center of the town and the equally empty country around the town, and this place between the two spaces of emptiness becomes his final refuge.

His return to Ruth, who has accepted him once as a son-lover and whom he has abandoned, is also a return to the maternal, a regression in time that has been prefigured by the trajectory of his movement in space. Ruth flies into a temper because of his cruel treatment of her, but even “the sight of it was very satisfying” to Sonny (278), as if he was enjoying being scolded by the mother. He takes “one of her hands” and remains silent for the rest of the narrative (279), while the novel’s center of consciousness shifts from Sonny to Ruth, who thinks, “After all, he was only a boy” (280). Sonny’s speechlessness is another sign of his regression, and it points at the resemblance between him and the always silent Billy; Sonny seems to have taken over the role not of Sam but of Billy, who has refused to leave the darkness of the mother’s womb until the end of his life. Sonny’s regression into childhood is the last circle in time drawn by the narrative. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva summarizes one model for explaining “the depressive retardation state” as follows: “[W]hen all escape routes are blocked, animals as well as men learn to withdraw rather than flee or fight. The retardation or inactivity, which one might call depressive, would thus constitute a learned defense reaction to a dead-end situation and unavoidable shocks” (34). Sonny’s depression and withdrawal and his resemblance to the mentally retarded boy seem to correspond to Kristeva’s description; the mother’s house becomes the only place for escape left

for him. But at the same time it encloses him inside childhood and makes it impossible for him to grow up into manhood, for “the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous” (Kristeva 27). Although Sonny is still young and Ruth is aware that she will be abandoned again, that she will have to repeat “the process of drying up” once again (McMurtry, *Picture Show* 280), the narrative ends with this scene of arrested motion and stagnation. Thalia and Anarene entrap the protagonist not only within their city limits but also within childhood. *The Last Picture Show* refuses to become a story of initiation, a *Bildungsroman*.

The U.S. West has often been represented both as a space where individuals can experience a spiritual rebirth away from the constraints of society and as a symbolic locus of the nation’s progress, development, and growth. By repeating the circular pattern of entrapment, and by subverting the linear form of the *Bildungsroman* associated with the psychological growth of the young protagonist, *The Last Picture Show* creates a post-Western narrative that rewrites the image of the West. The heroic maverick displaced by a community, whose law and order he himself has established, often appears in Western narratives. Unable to boldly ride out into the sunset, however, Sonny goes back to the bosom of a surrogate mother, trapped between the empty town and the empty country, between childhood and manhood. His inability to escape and to grow up shows the depressive influence that the small town has had on him. There is no more territory to light out for. Drawing various circular patterns within the circle that is the whole story, *The Last Picture Show* presents the claustrophobic topography of a small town. The West in this narrative is no longer associated with open space and freedom. It is a space of entrapment and stagnation.

Notes

- ¹ For readings of *The Last Picture Show* as a story of initiation, see England 40-48 and Peavy 180-88.
- ² In the foreword to *In a Narrow Grave*, McMurtry says, “For myself, the novel is a habitation I can never be quite sure whether home is a place or a form: the novel, or Texas. In daily life . . . it is difficult to say with precision where place stops supporting fiction and fiction starts embodying place” (15).
- ³ The two first picture shows have thematic connections with *The Last Picture Show*, too. While *Storm Warning* is a film noir that describes a situation of entrapment in a claustrophobic small town in the South, *Father of the Bride* is a romantic comedy that employs a circular mode of narration.
- ⁴ For a brief overview of the films about Billy the Kid, see Tuska 155-67.
- ⁵ In this sense, Billy is a pathetic variation on the heroic gunman in formulaic Westerns, who “rides into a troubled town and cleans it up, winning the respect of the townsfolk and the love of the schoolmarm” (Wright 32). No one appreciates Billy’s effort to clean up the town with his broom.

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