

Brandon Redding

From Page To Screen: The Last Picture Show

The adaptation between a literary novel to a Hollywood feature film is an artistic feat filled with countless hours of preparation and dedication. Rarely is adapting a novel into film a simple matter, as decisions about every single aspect of the adaptation have to be made, both large and small. Who will portray the lead characters? What aspects of the novel will be removed in order to adhere to a time frame that is conducive to a feature film? Will it be an adaptation in name only, or follow closely to the literary source material? Even the greatest story ever told would require cuts be made in order to hopefully turn a profit, which is the overall hope of any film created. These are but a few of the questions that no doubt came into play with Peter Bogdanovich's 1971 adaptation of acclaimed author Larry McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show*, a well-received novel that was first published in 1966.

Both interpretations of the material feature a coming of age story of teens living within a small Texas town. McMurtry, a native of Wichita Falls, Texas and son of a Texas cattleman seems well poised to tell this coming of age tale, as it certainly mirrored many of the experiences within his own upbringing in Texas. Where as the author of the novel drew from his experiences living in Texas and familiarity with its customs and the overall subject matter involved, director of the film adaptation, Bogdanovich, is a native of Kingston, New York, a far distance from the Texas landscape that McMurtry writes about. As such, it was imperative for the director to accurately portray what life in Texas would be like for teenagers in 1951. He is met with success in his depiction of the small Texas town of Anarene, Texas, changed from the source material of Thalia, Texas, which is a true Texas town near where McMurtry grew up in North Texas. The change was most likely made because of the fact the Bogdanovich would not be as familiar with the specifics of a true town such as this in the way that McMurtry, a native, would be. Despite this, the change is one that does not affect the film version negatively, and unless

one knew the specifics of McMurtry and the town that he originally based the novel on, would not notice a difference.

As the novel begins, it opens with the line “Sometimes Sonny felt like he was the only human creature in the town.” The film does its part in establishing this overall introduction with an establishing pan shot of the film that depicts the seemingly deserted, Anarene. The shot begins at the movie theater down to the Texas Moon Café before focusing on the main thoroughfare which sees a pickup truck come speeding into the frame and introducing us to our main protagonist, Sonny, the driver of that pickup truck that struggles through gear changes down the barren street. As Sonny continues, we are met with a revelation that contrary to the initial image shown, the town is in fact far from completely deserted. A long shot introduces us to Sonny’s friend Billy, who sweeps the city streets, as other characters such as Sam are introduced, showing us that the town the we thought to be a wasteland is actually filled with townspeople, who at the moment are disappointed with the high school football team’s inability to tackle or win a football game. The scene is a direct interpretation of the opening pages of the novel, establishing the fact that the film version will highlight many of the aspects that McMurtry himself incorporated into the novel.

Location is but one of the decisions required to be made by the director of an adaptation when bringing a literary work such as *The Last Picture Show* to the screen. Another is the overall theme of the film as a whole, with sex remaining an important, if not integral, aspect of both the written and visual interpretations of *The Last Picture Show*. Sex is prevalent throughout much of the novel, including the scene in which Jacy attends the nude swimming party, conversations of sexuality amongst the characters, Sonny and Duane departing to Mexico to find prostitutes, and other acts that are detailed within the novel. The film, like the novel, places an emphasis on the sexual relationship between Sonny and Ruth Popper, played by Cloris Leachman in the film. Ruth is portrayed as a depressed housewife of the school coach, with whom an affair begins between Sonny and Ruth, after Sonny is tasked with

driving Ruth to a doctor's appointment. Ruth begins to come alive because of the relationship with Sonny, despite the awkwardness that is their first sexual encounter. McMurtry writes that "They took their undergarments off at the same time, both of them choked with embarrassment. Ruth glanced at Sonny's body, curious and a little frightened. He was two or three steps away from her and for a moment they did not know how to get to one another. Sonny was too self-conscious about his erection to move. Finally, with another wry smile, Ruth sat down on the bed and he sat down with her." The author accurately conveys this sexual naiveté and awkwardness between the two, with Bogdanovich capitalizing on it with his choice of camera shots shown during the scene. As Sonny loses his virginity to Ruth, the camera does much to establish the awkwardness of the moment, featuring a long shot of the two characters as they undress before each make their way to the protection and cover of the bed to engage in an act that forces Ruth to cry before it's over. The scene accurately portrays the awkwardness that the novel describes, continuing with the close-up reaction shot of her as Sonny tries to pull away and she pulls him back to her. Sonny has officially become a man.

While Sonny's affair with Ruth is prominent to the overall story, the novel is able to detail the sexual aspects of the relationship more so than the film, which would find itself subject to the restrictions that any film would be restricted to during the time. While the film depicts the sexual relationship between Sonny and Ruth through an awkward first sexual encounter, it skips over Ruth's sexual relationship with her husband, the school coach, something that the novel does delve into. After Ruth had already begun a relationship with Sonny, and found herself fantasizing about a life with him instead of her husband, she found herself forced to play the role of wife, in order to provide her "wifely service". As the novel elaborates, "In her paralysis Ruth had forgotten to do what she was supposed to do on such occasions: lift her nightgown and spread her legs. Those two actions were all that Herman required of her in the way of sexual cooperation." It goes on to explain that "when he was satisfied that the obstruction had been removed the coach rolled back onto her and after a couple of badly aimed

thrusts, made connection. Once he struck to place he went at it athletically.” The scene within the novel is a small one that in the overall scope of the piece does not play a large role, but it does aid in the fleshing out of the character of Ruth, and perhaps helps explain why she latches onto Sonny so in the way that she does. This is an aspect that is lost in the film, whether due to time or simply not a desire of Bogdanovich to focus on this particular relationship of Ruth’s, but instead to clearly focus on the relationship Ruth has with Sonny.

Missing scenes in the film adaptation of a literary work are typically either a director’s choice or due to budget limitations. Due to the straightforward nature of the novel that does not utilize a grandiose use of special effects, cuts made are most likely not explicitly done so due to budget limitations, but instead in an effort to streamline the story. Many would even perhaps argue that the movie does away with unnecessary plot points that don’t actually advance story, providing a concise narrative that is easily able to be followed through the visual imagery of film. Bogdanovich makes the interesting choice to utilize black and white cinematography for the film that allows the viewer to easily place themselves into the landscape of Texas in the 1950’s. The result is a tone that provides the story a certain backdrop that is perhaps not easily replicated when reading the novel.

The film version of the story would be met with much success, both financially and critically, with the film being nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor for Ben Johnson, who would play the role of Sam and Jeff Bridges who portrayed Duane, as well as Best Supporting Actress nominations for Ellen Burstyn and Cloris Leachman, with Johnson and Leachman both winning. The success of a novel does not always translate to success for the film, with many literary adaptations turning into financial nightmares for their producers. That McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show* was a success in it’s own right did possibly lend a hand in the overall success of the film however, with the New York Times writing about the novel that “McMurtry is an alchemist who converts the basest materials to gold. The sexual encounters are sad, funny, touching,

sometimes horrifying, but always honest, always human.” Such a premise provides an excellent foundation for a film adaptation, and financial success is the best outcome that one can hope for in the adaptation of a novel to film. While *The Last Picture Show* was met with both financial and critical success, its sequel, based on McMurtry’s follow up entitled *Texasville* was by and large a critical and commercial flop. Despite the return of the majority of the cast based on a novel by McMurtry, *Texasville* was a clear indication that the choices that Bogdanovich made in crafting *The Last Picture Show* were not by chance, and could not easily be successfully repeated.

Any film adaptation of a successful literary story leaves open the possibility that the story will be told in a way that alienates fans of the novel, fails to generate interest in the source material or the film, and potentially ends up a commercial disappointment. *The Last Picture Show* is that rare film/novel combo that finds success on both the literary and theatrical front. There will be those who have a preference of one medium over the other, and yet the argument can successfully be made that both are interpretations of a pivotal coming of age story that is told by both writer and director in a manner that successfully offers it to the audience at hand and allows them to digest it in the manner in which they best see fit.