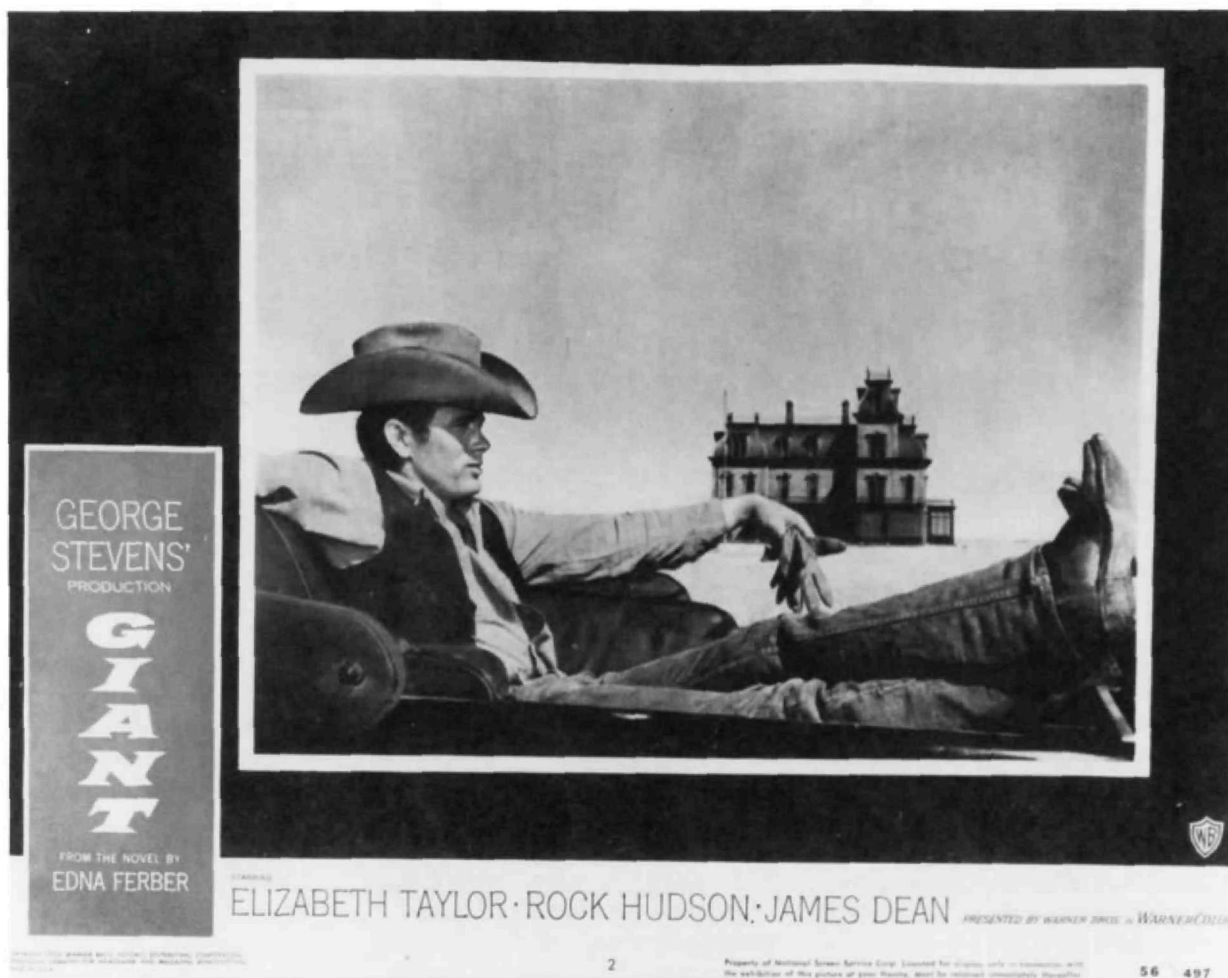

A Few Words About

TEXAS MOVIE LANDSCAPES

Jon Schwartz

Brewster McCloud**, 1970.**

"Each landscape is formed by the point of view of the spectator; it is a spiritual experience, the reflection of a culture."

Magnum Landscape, *1996*

Now a century old, movies are the backward-glancing time machines of our collective and ever-changing landscapes. At best, they give us something memorable to dream and think and expand upon: in *Giant*, James Dean paces off his inheritance, a parched and seemingly worthless strip of land that will soon be wet with oil. At worst, they mix the reel with the real so as to obscure and confuse: in *JFK*, Oliver Stone edits staged Dallas grassy-knoll footage with 22 seconds of Zapruder documentary — 28 years later. Let the viewer beware! These Texas landscapes aren't always what they seem to be. But sometimes they're a lot more.

While post–World War II movies set in New York City or London or Paris were satisfied to capture a local ambiance, Texas-based movies required mythic landscapes to complement their more-often-than-not mythic narratives. Chronologically, these evolved as historical myth, stories set in the 19th century that pitted man against a hostile landscape; family saga myth, stories set in the 20th century wherein the landscape has been harnessed, freeing the generations to clash among themselves; and cartoon myth, a last-gasp lampooning of our Texas myths.

Red River (1948) is Howard Hawks's mythic retelling of the first cattle drive to Abilene. In the film's early scenes, an extended montage chronicles John Wayne's trek across Texas: crossing the Red River south through the Panhandle and past the Pecos, finally finding good cattle range near the Rio Grande. It matters not that none of these "Texas" landscapes are actually Texas. The logistical problem of moving 1,500 head of cattle from location to location forced Hawks to shoot the entire film in Arizona. And though the Arizona mountains seem too big, at least Hawks give us lots of Texas-like big skies and wide-open spaces.

John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) begins with "Texas, 1868" superimposed on a black screen. A cabin door opens revealing a color landscape that looks nothing like Texas and in fact is unmistakably Monument Valley, director Ford's favorite location. Ford poetically places John Wayne's stoic searcher of the title amid the majestic rock formations of Monument Valley in an epic quest to find his niece, taken captive by Comanches. Would this film have been as visually mythic had Ford filmed in Texas? Probably not. In short, it's not very good Texas — but it's great John Ford.

John Wayne's *The Alamo* (1960) mixes authenticity with Hollywood artistic license. Reproduced to scale, the Alamo mission displayed the humped gable and upper two windows not present at the time of the 1836 battle. The film's secondary set, San Antonio, 1836, was strictly a Hollywood concoction. As Frank Thompson writes in *Alamo Movies*, "San Antonio looks very little like a Mexican town of the period, which were constructed around a series of plazas; *The Alamo*'s San Antonio looks like a conventional western town."[1] Perhaps this was a concession to James "Happy" Shahan, owner of the 22,000-acre Brackettville ranch where *The Alamo* was filmed, who — when Wayne's financing dried up — found monies to complete what became known as Alamo Village. In the long run, this generic Western set turned out to be of more value than a period Mexican town; Shahan has since brought over 30 productions and thousands of tourists to Brackettville.

Filmed in Marfa, George Stevens's *Giant* (1956) is an epic for its 201-minute running time alone. Bringing his Virginia bride home to Reata, a sprawling cattle ranch, Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor ride for miles in a convertible over a roadless desert. At first a speck on the horizon, a three-story, seven-gabled house comes into view. Out of place in the desert, this Gothic edifice provides a unique setting for this saga that covers 25 years of changing traditions and shifting social orders.

In 1963, Martin Ritt brought Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By* to the screen as *Hud*. Ruthless son Paul Newman and principled patriarch Melvyn Douglas clash over turning their cattle range into oil leases. Douglas: "What can I do with a bunch of rotten oil wells? . . . I can't breed 'em or tend 'em or rope 'em." Newman: "There's money in it." A 19th-century cattleman to the end, Douglas says, "You can get the oil after I'm under there with it." A 20th-century man without tradition, Newman rides not a horse but a pink Caddy through the film's black-and-white Panhandle landscape. Of this landscape, McMurtry has written: "The camera was completely faithful to the beauty and pitilessness of the Panhandle. It showed what is there, a land so powerful that it is all but impossible to live on it pleasantly."[2]

If *Brewster McCloud* (1970) is any indication, Robert Altman wasn't enamored of the Texas landscape — nor did he buy the Astrodome's Eighth-Wonder-of-the-World hype. An image of Houston's smoggy downtown skyline gives way to bird crap splattering on a *Houston Chronicle* front page lining a bird cage, and this is just the opening credits. One scene has bird-woman Sally Kellerman bathing nude in the Mecom Fountain— no longer a mere fountain but revisualized as a Texas-size birdbath. In the film's main plot (such as it is), title character Bud Cort wants to fly in the Astrodome. Like Icarus, who flies too close to the sun and falls to earth, so too Brewster flies too high in the Dome and falls to his death. Altman's message is clear: The Astrodome can be hazardous to your health.

Steven Spielberg's *The Sugarland Express* (1974) is a live-action cartoon, with Goldie Hawn as the Road Runner mom wanting to retrieve the baby taken from her, and Ben Johnson as the Wile E. Coyote highway patrolman who unwittingly leads a procession of more than 200 cars — police, media, curiosity seekers — in hot pursuit. Spielberg's landscape is one of cars and roads: stolen cars, highway patrol cars, cars with gun racks, used-car lots, car wrecking yards, highway road markers, gas stations, police roadblocks, and lots of car crashes. Obviously, this was before "Drive Friendly" signs dotted the Texas landscape.

Once a genre has been lampooned, can the revisionists be far behind? The quintessential small-town Texas movie is Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971), which co-screenwriter Larry McMurtry calls "a kind of anti-*Giant*."[3] "Anarene, Texas, 1951. Nothing much has changed," reads the film's poster. The film ends as it begins, with a slow pan of the town's main street. It all looks the same, except now the picture show has played its last movie (appropriately *Red River*). Ironically, nothing much has changed — and yet everything has changed. Small-town America has died.

And so it is with these landscapes. Nothing has changed, and everything has changed. Frame by frame, *Giant* is the same movie in 1997 that it was in 1956. In 1956, scenes of cattle grazing amid oil derricks might have seemed ironic, whereas in 1997 they are, as McMurtry has suggested, "an elegy not merely for the cattlemen but for the wildcatters too."[4] In 1974, The *Sugarland Express* procession might have seemed Capraesque. Today, in light of O.J., the same landscape seems definitely more somber.

It's a short 23 years from the montage of cowboys yahooing the cattle in *Red River* to Chill Wills yahooing the guests down the corridor of the Shamrock-like hotel in *Giant*, and back full circle to the scene of cowboys yahooing the cattle in *Red River* that flickers the Royal Theater to a close in *The Last Picture Show*. In 1997, as I gaze at the landscape with the shuttered movie theater that fills Bogdanovich's last frames, I'm suddenly aware that something else besides small-town America has died. Perhaps movies as an art form have also died. Little did I realize in 1971 that the poetry of post–World War II cinema would soon give way to the cacophony of theme-park-ride cinema. I wonder what I'll see in this landscape when I rescreen *The Last Picture Show* in another quarter century. ■

1. Frank Thompson, *Alamo Movies* (East Berlin, Pa: Old Mill Books, 1991), p. 73.

2. Larry McMurtry, "Here's HUD in Your Eye," *In a Narrow Grave* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), p. 17.

3. Larry McMurtry, "Men Swaggered, Women Warred, Oil Flowed," *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 1996, p. H15.

4. Ibid.

A TEXAS MOVIE LANDSCAPE THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

If *The Last Picture Show* is the quintessential small-town Texas movie, what then would be its urban equivalent? Unfortunately, there is none. But had Billy Lee Brammer's *The Gay Place* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1978) ever been filmed, things might have been different.

Set in an unnamed place resembling Austin, Brammer's book is comprised of three novellas linked together by a common landscape presided over by a Lyndon Johnsonesque governor named Fenstemaker. Upon its 1961 publication, *The Gay Place* (its title taken from an obscure F. Scott Fitzgerald poem) found few readers in spite of considerable critical acclaim: Brammer was likened to Fitzgerald, and his novel was hailed by the likes of Gore Vidal and David Halberstam as being the best ever written about American politics.

It didn't take long for Hollywood liberals Paul Newman and director Martin Ritt to become interested. The husband-and-wife writing team of Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr. was hired to pen the script. With a talent for writing colloquial dialogue, they had previously adapted two Faulkner titles (*The Long Hot Summer* and *The Sound and the Fury*) as well as Texas writer William Humphrey's *Home From the Hill*. Ritt, Newman, and Ravetch/Frank later collaborated on *Hud*.

However, the movie was never made. In a letter to the author, Larry McMurtry recalled: "I remember being in Austin when Martin Ritt tried to make *The Gay Place* from a script by the Ravetches. That was in 1962. Rumor has it Lyndon Johnson had it squelched with a few calls."

It's our loss that a great, visionary filmaker never made the film: Orson Welles, who had tangled with William Randolph Hearst over *Citizen Kane*, might not have been so easily intimidated by LBJ. Or, given the novel's multi-character narratives, Robert Altman might have made a companion film to stand alongside *Nashville*.

"Billy Lee Brammer's death at 48 in 1978," writes William Broyles in his forward to *The Gay Place*, "extinguished a sensibility and talent that could have just possibly made Texas a universal landscape as the London of Dickens or the Spain of Hemingway." As readers, we can be grateful for the one landscape he did write, complete with State Capitol, Governor's Mansion, college tower, caucus rooms, beer gardens, and even a desert film shoot (Brammer had visited Marfa during the filming of *Giant*).

And perhaps a Welles or an Altman might have been equally inspired, giving us memorable movie landscapes to rival the Gothic house in *Giant* or Anarene's Main Street in *The Last Picture Show*. Will a good movie ever be made from *The Gay Place*? Probably not. Unless of course Harrison Ford can be cast as Fenstemaker. *J.S.*