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**AFTER THE GREAT FLATTENING:
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY SASKATCHEWAN
FEATURE FILM**

Martin Ondryáš

Abstract

Canadian prairies have been for long in the shadow of the dominant Central Canadian provinces that were considered crucial for the definition of Canadian identity since the late 19th century. This can especially be illustrated in a look at the province of Saskatchewan and its film industry. The history of Saskatchewan feature film started in 1987 with *Wheat Soup*, the first feature film created by local filmmakers. There were several feature films that were released in the years after *Wheat Soup*, but none of them received similar recognition. In an attempt to support the film industry in the province, the local government introduced a tax incentive that was in effect between 1998 and 2012. During this era many international producers created their films in the province. After the termination of the program the international producers left the province and since 2012 there have only been a handful of films created in Saskatchewan. The most successful films of the post-tax credit era were *WolfCop* (2014), *Another WolfCop* (2017), *Corner Gas: The Movie* (2014), and *The Sabbatical* (2015). The focus of this analysis is on recurring themes that can be seen as characteristic of the Saskatchewan feature film. These recurring themes, namely the role of landscape, the importance of place for the identity of the main characters, and the relationship between Saskatchewan and Central Canada, are then discussed as a possible reflection of the relationship between Canada and the United States.

Keywords

Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan cinema, feature film, identity, *Wheat Soup*, *WolfCop*, *Another WolfCop*, *Corner Gas*, *The Sabbatical*

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PROBABLY one of the most famous Saskatchewan exports is a joke about a dog that ran away from its owner. Because of the flatness and monotony of the landscape, the owner could see the dog running away for three days. This joke, made internationally famous by the *Corner Gas* series in its theme song, is only one of many that ridicule Saskatchewan and demote the entire Canadian province into a

punch line. Some of these, usually those created and used by people outside of the province, are concerned with social and cultural aspects of the province. For example, when a skeleton of *Tyrannosaurus Rex* was discovered in Eastend, Saskatchewan in 1994, a “front-page article in the [national newspapers] *Globe and Mail* about the find suggested that the dinosaur had died of boredom” (Calder 2001, 97). This approach of (mainly) Central Canada denotes Saskatchewan into the position of hinterland that requires the attention of bigger and culturally dominant provinces, and it is one of the reasons why Saskatchewan tends to be forgotten when it comes to defining the Canadian identity. This paper analyses the role of landscape and the importance of place connected with the identity in selected films created in Saskatchewan by local filmmakers, *Wheat Soup* (1987), *WolfCop* (2014), *Another WolfCop* (2017), *Corner Gas: The Movie* (2014), and *The Sabbatical* (2015).

The search for Canadian identity is not a straightforward task with a simple solution. One of the most visible issues of the alleged unique Canadian identity is the proximity of the powerful and culturally expansive southern neighbor that can be seen throughout the discourse of Canadian culture. Accordingly, the question of differentiating Canada from the United States is among the most discussed features of the national identity. Due to the borders being open for both people and cultural artefacts in both directions, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two cultural identities. However, the situation is different in the case of Canadian national cinema, especially because of the lack of Canadian films that would “address the Canadian realities and problems from the vantage point of their own experience” (Pospíšil 2009, 210). Instead, it is the American production that not only dominates Canadian theatres and supplies Canadian media with the representation of Canadians, but also provides the Canadians with “their self-image” created from the outside perspective (Saul 2005). The very few domestic films that are being produced constitute less than five per cent of the market share (“Canadian films’ share of the box office revenues” 2016), and even if a Canadian film dealing with Canadian experience is created, properly advertised, and makes it to the big screen, its running time rarely exceeds one week (Haupt 2014).

The films that are recognized as Canadian often reflect the unsuccessful attempt to provide a national self-representation and the United States play an important role of “[the other] that serves as a vantage point for one’s – positive or negative – self-definition” (Pospíšil 2009, 243). In this regard, the United States approach to Canada is the same as that of Central Canada towards Saskatchewan. Although Saskatchewan producers tend to refuse the ideas associated with the province produced in other parts of Canada, in the majority of the contemporary Saskatchewan feature films these connotations appear as recurring themes and symbols. Therefore, similarly to the Central Canadian production that is profoundly entangled with the American film realities, Saskatchewan films are connected with

the Central Canadian perspective. It is not without interest that the history of Saskatchewan cinema to a large extent reflects the history Canadian federal tax shelter introduced in 1975 and cancelled in 1982.

1. The Great Flattening: *Wheat Soup* (1987)

Saskatchewan has a rich tradition of short and documentary films, represented by the Saskatchewan-based Yorkton Film Festival, the longest running film festival in North America. However, feature films created in the province are often underappreciated, if not completely ignored. To discuss and analyse the contemporary Saskatchewan feature film, it is necessary to address the very first feature film created in the province that set the course for all locally produced feature films. The producers of *Wheat Soup* (1987), Gerald Saul and Brian Stockton, at that time students at the University of Regina, formed their film around the images of Saskatchewan that were popularised by Central Canadian films depicting the province from the outside perspective.

Wheat Soup is divided into six parts and follows two protagonists. In the first part, named “The Agoraphobic”, the protagonist is a young artist that is unable to leave the basement of his house due to fear of open places. After he finally manages to overcome the phobia and leaves the house, he is killed by a falling anvil. The rest of the film is set in a post-nuclear future and follows the story of Sam, a young farmer that refuses the traditional way of life. The event of the nuclear catastrophe itself is referred to as the Great Flattening and in several scenes the characters of the film discuss the difference between the world before and after the Great Flattening. On his journey from the wheat farm, Sam meets people who do not live in the region of wheat fields and he differentiates himself from the foreigners using place as the key element of his identity.

Saul and Stockton’s approach towards the plot of the film mocks the obsession of the foreign filmmakers with the two-dimensional image of Saskatchewan and its portrayal as a completely flat, hostile landscape, which is, most importantly, filled only with wheat and emptiness. These motifs, highlighted by the sarcasm of *Wheat Soup*, can be traced throughout the earlier foreign cinema, such as in *Drylanders* (1963), *Why Shoot the Teacher?*, or *Who Has Seen the Wind* (both 1977), but also in the post-2012 Saskatchewan cinema. The motifs of hostile landscape and place as the key aspect of identity are some of the defining elements of contemporary feature films set and created in the province.

2. Without the Tax Incentive: *WolfCop* (2014) and *Another WolfCop* (2017)

There was only a handful of feature films created in Saskatchewan after *Wheat Soup*, but none of them made it out of the shadow of the province’s first feature film. In

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order to support the film industry and compete with the National Film Board studios in Manitoba and Alberta, the Saskatchewan government introduced a tax incentive that to a large degree resembled the federal tax shelter from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Saskatchewan Film Employment Tax Credit was active from 1998 to 2012 and promised tax deductions to any film productions that would create film in the province. During this period, over sixty feature films by foreign productions were created in the province (Lampard 2013), which makes it the most prosperous time in the history of Saskatchewan film industry. Nevertheless, the international and often economically successful films were created at the expense of the regionally produced films. The Saskatchewan cinema lacked its own filmmakers that would create regional films that would receive national or even international recognition.

Despite the tax incentive being considered as beneficial for the province's economy, the provincial government ended the program in 2012. The termination of the tax credit caused a major exodus of people employed in the film industry to other provinces and there has not been a single international production in Saskatchewan since. The end of the tax credit can be considered a restart of the Saskatchewan cinema, with void left by international productions to be filled by local filmmakers.

WolfCop (2014) represents a transition in Saskatchewan cinema between films created under the Saskatchewan Film Employment Tax Credit and films created without the tax incentive: although the filming of *WolfCop* started only after the termination of the tax credit, it was created under the tax program due to a loophole discovered by the films production ("Film Makers Snag Tax Credit Money to Make 'WolfCop' Flick" 2013). Despite the film being recognized as Saskatchewan, with the director, lead actors, and technical crew being from Saskatchewan, its funding came from a Vancouver-based CineCoup production company. This creates a rather ironic situation where "an example of a Saskatchewan film industry success story" is funded from outside of the province ("WolfCop 2 to start filming in Saskatchewan" 2015).

The protagonist of *WolfCop* is a constantly drunk cop Lou Garou who works in a small town of Woodhaven. Lou works in the shadow of his police partner, Tina, and he does not show any interest in police work and prefers to spend time in a bar. This all changes when he is ambushed in the woods outside of the city and wakes up the following morning with a pentagram carved into his chest. As he later finds out, the pentagram was a part of a turning ritual that infected him with lycanthropy. His senses sharpen, Lou turns into a vigilante and, accompanied by his side-kick Willie Higgins, he fights crime in the Woodhaven area. His fight against crime meets with resistance from shapeshifters that have been running Woodhaven for decades and impersonating influential characters, such as the mayor or the chief of the police. As the plot unfolds, Lou gets kidnapped by the shapeshifters who attempt to sacrifice

him and drain his blood to strengthen their powers. In the finale of the film, however, Lou and Tina defeat the shapeshifters and end their rule over Woodhaven.

The first film offers several themes that are typical for Saskatchewan productions, especially the important role of landscape. In *WolfCop*, the scenes that are crucial to the development of the main character and the film plot are set outside of the city in a woodland area. First, Lou is captured in the woods and turned into a werewolf, and he investigates his first crime after the ritual at the same location the following day. After realizing that his senses have been strengthened, Lou becomes a responsible police officer and for the first time in the film he properly investigates a crime scene. Finally, it is also the place where the film climaxes in a huge battle against the shapeshifters. The small woodland area outside of the city thus acquires the status of a key motif of the film and supports the idea that landscape is a key element in creating the Saskatchewan identity.

The success of the first film prompted the director Lowell Dean to create *Another WolfCop* in 2017. The sequel offers the same set of main characters as the first film. Set one year after the plot of *WolfCop*, Lou shares his secret with Tina who was promoted to the role of the police chief and the two work on cases together, either as a human duo or a human-werewolf team. The film works with the return of shapeshifters to Woodhaven, this time led by a rich businessman Sydney Swallows who comes to the city to open a brewery. As the story unfolds, Swallows executes his plan to impregnate humans with shapeshifter embryos through the consumption of beer and breed new shapeshifters. In a climax in a hockey rink, Lou defeats Swallows' hockey team and Swallows escapes.

The setting of the first film is a rather controversial as the entire town of Woodhaven is portrayed as a generic American town with American flags on displays, pins of American flags on the collars of police officers, and commendation bars with the American flag on their shirts and jackets – in fact, the only thing that hints at the film being made in Saskatchewan are the province number plates on Lou's car. The forced American setting is the result of CineCoup pushing for the plot to be set in the United States rather than Saskatchewan in order to achieve bigger audience (Hignite 2018). This approach is an example of the foreign film companies that created films under the province's tax credit without necessarily acknowledging the film's origin. In the sequel, the generic American town was exchanged for a generic Canadian town with as many Canadian symbols as included. This, however, is at the expense of acknowledging the Saskatchewan origin of the film; apart from the fake welcome sign of Regina with a quote by the fictional character Deadpool from the film of the same name – “The city that rhymes with fun” – and a few Saskatchewan flags on display in the hockey arena, there is nothing that

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would promote the film as a significantly Saskatchewan feature. This exchange of the generic American setting for a generic Canadian setting illustrates the similarity between the struggle for the image of Canada against the American representation and the Saskatchewan struggle against that of Central Canada.

The question of identity is present in both *WolfCop* films, but whereas in the first film Lou deals with his position of an outcast from society that later turns out to be consisting solely of shapeshifters, the sequel offers a full-fledged differentiation of the main characters against the Other based on place. The central point of reference as the Other against the Saskatchewan is the character of Sydney Swallows, a billionaire who opens a brewery in Woodhaven, sponsors the local hockey team, and who in the end turns out to be the leader of the shapeshifters from first *WolfCop*. As a rich businessman coming from outside of the province, Swallows positions himself above the local citizens. In the opening scene of the film, Swallows shoots a commercial where he addresses locals as “losers” and that is to be aired in Woodhaven: “You’re a loser. It’s just a fact. But what if I told you that I could help you change all of that. I’m a winner, but then you probably already know that. I’m also a connoisseur and a curator of the best life has to offer. Everything that you’ll never get to experience, until now” (*Another WolfCop* 00:00:16–00:00:41). Swallow’s openly colonial attitude to Woodhaven introduces new approach towards the question of identity and the sequel thus, to a limited amount, explores social divisions in the city that are based on the sense of place; the long-time citizens of Woodhaven stand against an outsider magnate from the culturally and economically dominant parts of the country. This approach is further strengthened in a television interview where Swallows attempts to seduce a local news reporter and his first question is where she is from. He is rather unhappy to learn that she is from Woodhaven as he considers place to be the most important element of one’s identity. While in most situations it is the newcomer to the community that is assigned lower social status, in *Another WolfCop* it is vice versa. Although this could be ascribed to his economic status, Lou and Tina dislike Swallows from the beginning despite his investments in local brewery and ice-hockey team. This suggests that the character is not perceived mainly as a magnate, but as an outsider to the community.

Dean’s films reflect the defining influence of the Central Canadian film production. The settings of the films play a crucial role in this duality. Whereas in *WolfCop* Woodhaven is an American city with Saskatchewan identity, in *Another WolfCop* Woodhaven becomes a city in Saskatchewan portrayed as a generic Canadian town. As a result, the Saskatchewan-Central Canadian relationship reflects that of Canada and the United States.

3. The Province's Main Cultural Export: *Corner Gas: The Movie* (2014)

The 2014 film *Corner Gas: The Movie* is the most prominent film that has been created in the province since the termination of the Saskatchewan tax incentive both budget and audience-wise. The film is based on the television series *Corner Gas* that was running on the CTV Television Network from 2004 to 2009. The series was popular not only during television premiere of each new episode, but also during numerous reruns on the state CTV TN. Brad Wall, the Saskatchewan premier (2007–2018), considered the series to be “one of the most successful TV series ever produced in Canada” and proclaimed 13 April, when the finale of the series aired in 2009, to be the official Corner Gas Day in Saskatchewan (Hopper 2014). Since the main theme of this subchapter is *Corner Gas: The Movie*, the essay will refer to the film in short as *Corner Gas* and to the series as “series.”

The screening of the *Corner Gas* was successful all-around Canada. The original plan was to have the film screened in selected theatres over five days (Harris 2014), but due to large demand, additional three days were added (Sirotich 2014) before the film aired on television. It is important to note that while the time it spent in the cinemas is disproportionately short in comparison to Hollywood productions, for a Canadian and especially Saskatchewan production it was a great success.

The story is set in Dog River, a fictional city in Saskatchewan, and revolves around the relationships of its citizens. The main character of the series, Brent Leroy, is the owner of the gas station called Corner Gas that serves as a social centre of the community. The other two places that act as the centres of social centres are Ruby Café, run by a Toronto expatriate Lacey Burrows, and a bar situated in a local hotel. As the film builds on the series, the film does not introduce the characters and instead picks up where the series left off. The mayor of the city lost all the town's money in gambling and Dog River is cut off electricity and there are no available funds to repair a broken water pump. Lacey suggests that Dog River participates in the competition for the quaintest town in Canada, but her idea is left without response from the citizens. It is only after a big doughnut corporation Coff-Nuts plans to first open a bistro in the town and later to completely take over the city to build a Western Canadian depot in its place that the people of Dog River unite to fight against the corporation and cooperate in the contest. Nonetheless, in spite of their best efforts, they fail miserably, Brent is sued by a Coff-Nuts representative, and the town has to be saved by a reporter of the national newspaper that came to Dog River as a judge of the contest.

During the opening scene of the film, there is a situation at Corner Gas that serves as a commentary on the state of Saskatchewan cinema after the end of the tax credit.

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Hank, one of the central characters, asks how long it has been since anything exciting has happened in Dog River. Few moments later, an armed man enters Corner Gas and in a quick turn of events he turns into a werewolf. To confirm this scene as a reproduction of *WolfCop* that screened only months before the shooting of *Corner Gas*, the werewolf is played by Leo Fafard, the actor who played Lou in both *WolfCop* films. Similarly to Lowell Dean's films, *Corner Gas* was also created outside of the regular scheme that was suggested for the local filmmakers by the Saskatchewan government, which would provide maximum of \$250,000 for a feature film. The absence of any form of tax incentive in Saskatchewan was a huge problem for the producers who even considered shooting the film in the neighbouring province under the still active Manitoba tax credit. However, with the threat of shooting *Corner Gas*, a film-sequel of the series that were deeply rooted in public awareness as the most successful Saskatchewan artistic export, outside of the province, the government chose to avoid a political threat to its voting base and voted to support the production with special grants. From the film's total budget of \$8.5 million, Creative Saskatchewan contributed with \$500,000, double the usual limit, and the Saskatchewan government released another \$1.5 million from other organisations run by the government, such as Tourism Saskatchewan (Hopper 2014).

A part of the agreement between the Saskatchewan government and the film production for the exceptional grant, consisting of terms listed by the government, became known as the "sunset clause." In this agreement, the *Corner Gas* producers agreed "to consider storyline that will allow for opportunities to include positive visual aspects that promote Saskatchewan as a tourism destination, e.g. sunrises/sunsets, unique vistas or locations, etc." (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Tourism 13, 2014). Consequently, the film features several shots of landscape, wheat, sunflowers, sunrises and sunsets that are not connected to the film plot. For the understanding of the role of these images that are classified within the sunset clause it is important to note that none of these shots nor any similar visual portrayal of the landscape were included in the original series (unless they were a direct part of a punchline). Moreover, the artificiality of the implementation of the visual representation of the landscape is further emphasized by the fact that the entire introduction of the film consisting of aerial shots of crops and the landscape. Although the series was recognizable by its opening theme, the film producers did not employ the original theme and instead opted for these random sceneries. This imagery is present also during the film, although in limited numbers. The landscape aerial shot of landscape is again used after the film credit, which is incoherent with the original series that focused solely on the building of Corner Gas and the city of Dog River without acknowledging the landscape in any way. Therefore, it can be

concluded that the shots of sunsets at random places in Saskatchewan that are not connected to the plot of the film or the series are artificially added to the film because of the sunset clause.

Because most of the characters have been dealing with identity issues during the series, identity is not explored on a personal level. Instead, the film explores the identity of the people of Dog River juxtaposed against Jerome, the representative of the Central Canadian corporation Coff-Nuts, who in the film acquires the role of the Other. Thus, similarly to *Another WolfCop*, the key attribute in defining identity is the place. Nevertheless, Jerome, unlike Swallows, is not depicted as hostile towards the people of Dog River, as his motivation for the lawsuit against Brent is not the destruction of the city but a personal revenge. Although Jerome argues that he does not plan to destroy Dog River and that he in fact supports them in their attempt to save the town, it does not affect the locals' resentment. Moreover, as the story unfolds, Jerome tries to flirt with Lacey and recognizes her origin outside of the province as one of her key traits: "What is a girl from Toronto doing in a small town like this? You're smart. You're pretty. You deserve better than this" (*Corner Gas* 01:05:47–01:05:58). Jerome, an outsider who is only temporarily visiting the community, tries to impress Lacey by acknowledging that she is not from Dog River and suggesting that she has a potential to be successful in Central Canada.

The sense of place is further emphasised by the fact that the lawsuit of the Coff-Nuts corporation cannot be repulsed by anyone from the town or the province, but only by another person of similarly placed identity as Jerome. In this case, it is the news reporter who judges the contest for the quaintest town in Canada that saves the day as she supports the people of Dog River by publishing an article about the situation in national newspapers.

In accordance with the previous films, the representation of landscape appears in *Corner Gas*; however, unlike in *Wheat Soup* and *WolfCop* films, the landscape in *Corner Gas* acquires the form of illustrations rather than important factors relevant to the story. The implementation of the visual aspects of the environment was demanded by the government of Saskatchewan in the sunset clause, suggesting that the role of landscape has been accepted as the defining element of Saskatchewan cinema. Notwithstanding the government's intervention in the question of landscape, the issue of place and identity is still relevant in the film.

4. The Saskatchewan New Independent Wave: The Sabbatical (2015)

Brian Stockton, the co-director of *Wheat Soup*, director of *The Sabbatical*, and a renowned author of short films about Saskatchewan, believes that the regional cinema is

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undergoing a form of a revival: “I think things are starting to look up for the film industry in Saskatchewan [...] We are seeing more productions picking up. I think we are in a rebuilding phase and I see this as an opportunity to build from here” (Stockton as cited in Maragos 2015). From this point of view, the void left by the international companies is open to, and slowly filled by, local independent filmmakers.

One of the typical features of the new wave of independent films is the low budget that limits the setting of the film. *The Sabbatical* is an example of such film. This can be illustrated by the fact that to minimize the expenses for scenery, parts of the film were filmed at the University of Regina campus, in the town of Regina, or at Stockton’s house (Whyte 2015). Moreover, since the limited budget did not allow for a professional crew to be invited to the province, the film was created with the help of many of Stockton’s students or graduates who were shooting in their free time for more than a year (Maragos 2015). The film thus became a virtue of necessity as it allowed many young filmmakers to get involved in creating a feature film in their home province.

The main character of the film, a university professor of photography James Pittman, is leaving for his long-awaited sabbatical. However, before he takes the sabbatical, he is told that he either returns with a new book or else he will lose his position at the university in the next budget cuts. James struggles with his motivation and although he forces himself to start with the project, he is not satisfied with any of his photographs. Meanwhile, James’s wife Jillian is in the middle of a successful science project and all of her free time is devoted to her work and she also insists on James undergoing vasectomy. The combination of these elements triggers James’s midlife crisis. Having his driver’s license revoked, James asks a young university student Lucy to drive him around the town. The two soon become friends and their relationship helps James handle the crisis, but eventually the platonic relationship comes to an end when Lucy and her boyfriend move outside of the province.

Even though the film is set in Regina, the second biggest city in the province, landscape plays an important role in the film. James considers himself a street photographer; however, whereas James’s first book named *Street* consists of black and white photographs of architecture and street life in the urban sense of the word, he places his new project in the city parks rather than on the streets. Similarly as in *WolfCop*, also in *The Sabbatical* most of the key and character-changing situations take place in non-urban locations, even though the essential setting is the town; where the landscape in *WolfCop* is represented by a nearby woodland area, in *The Sabbatical* it is either parks or the vistas along the river.

The first situation crucial to the development of the film plot that is set in the park is James’s encounter with Lucy. He meets her during one of his first attempts to take pictures for his book, while she is rather unsuccessfully busking in a park. Another scene that is important for the development of James’s character is the fireworks

battle with Lucy and her friends in a forest. Full of bright colors and loud music, the scene represents the point in his midlife crisis where James feels young and full of life energy. The role of the landscape is further emphasized after an argument with Lucy, after which James returns to his initial plan to create material for his new book in the parks. Finally, the climax of James's crisis is depicted by his attempt to take a picture of a sunset with his black and white camera as he talks to himself: "Sunset shots in black and white, James, really?" (*The Sabbatical* 01:02:59–01:03:03). The act of taking sunset pictures as a last resort to gather material for the book could be considered not only a clever reference to Stockton's feature film debut *Wheat Soup*, which was shot in black and white and featured a scene of sunset that was over ten minutes long, but it also relates to the sunset clause of *Corner Gas*. In this understanding, the sunset photo is a desperate attempt to portray Saskatchewan after all other attempts to find representations of the province had failed. The frustration of unsuccessful attempts to depict the province's specifics results in the sunset being considered the only thing that the province has to offer.

Consistent with Stockton's focus on the people, the topic of identity is explored through various aspects that were not present in the previously discussed films, especially gender and age. Nevertheless, as James undergoes and overcomes the midlife crisis, the place, typically for Saskatchewan film, remains the only omnipresent aspect of identity. This can be seen when Lucy calls James and asks him to give her a ride. It is then that Lucy suggests they all go to Calgary, where she and her boyfriend plan to start new lives: "Do you know when you just get like tired of a place and you gotta get out of it?" (*The Sabbatical* 01:15:59–01:16:06). James refuses to leave Saskatchewan and agrees to take Lucy and her boyfriend only to the nearest highway. Lucy's departure has a special meaning for James as she was the inspiration for his book. However, James dedicates his newest piece to his wife rather than to Lucy. The dedication illustrates that by her departure from the province, she is no longer relevant for him, even though pictures of her appear on several pages in the book. This highlights the importance of place as one of the defining elements of not only James's new book, but also of Saskatchewan film in general.

Representative of the new wave of independent films in Saskatchewan, Stockton's film adheres to the attributes typical for bigger budget films of the post-tax credit era, namely the crucial role of the landscape for character development and the role of place in forming one's identity. The landscape in *The Sabbatical* has similar features as in *WolfCop*, but its representation is more subtle and figurative than in either *WolfCop* or *Corner Gas*. Unlike the other films, *The Sabbatical* implements several aspects of identity that trigger James's midlife crisis, but nevertheless place retains its status as the most important one.

5. Conclusion

The history of Saskatchewan feature film started in 1987 with *Wheat Soup*, the first feature film created by local filmmakers. Although the film was praised for its artistic and cultural qualities, it has never received proper distribution comparable to the American films and its audiences were limited. There have been several features that were released in the years after *Wheat Soup*, but none of them received similar recognition. The period of the tax credit between 1998 and 2012 was the most successful and prosperous in the history of the province and helped the development of the film infrastructure. Nonetheless, after the termination of the program the international productions left the province and since 2012 there have been only a handful of films created in Saskatchewan.

The main problem of the contemporary film industry is the lack of available financing. The most successful films, such as *WolfCop*, *Another WolfCop*, or *Corner Gas: The Movie*, have been funded outside of the regular schemes for financing regional films, either with the support of private organizations outside of the province, or exceptional grants provided by governmental agencies. In addition to these films, there is a new wave of independent films represented by Stockton's *The Sabbatical*. These films are typical for their local settings and are works of local filmmakers that believe in the revival of the provincial cinema.

There are two recurring themes characteristic for the contemporary Saskatchewan cinema: the role landscape that is crucial for the development of the film characters, and the specific aspect of place in defining the Saskatchewan identity. These features were present in *Wheat Soup* as the province's first feature film and they can be found in all the discussed feature films created in Saskatchewan. The issue of identity is connected to the original argument that the relationship between Central Canada and Saskatchewan reflects the role of the United States as the other in films produced in Central Canada. In addition to the role of place as a tool for self-representation, place and landscape are also the only recurring themes that can be tracked in all of the analysed contemporary Saskatchewan feature films.

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After the Great Flattening

During his studies at the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University, Martin Ondryáš spent one semester as an exchange student at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada, where he became interested in the social and cultural aspects of the province, its peoples, and especially its film industry. After his return to the Czech Republic, Martin successfully defended his thesis titled *Saskatchewan (and) Film: Place-image and Identity in Saskatchewan Feature Film*, of which this article is an abbreviated version. Martin has decided to pursue the career of an English teacher and started his second master's degree studies at the Faculty of Education. Currently he is learning about Indigenous peoples in New Zealand on another student exchange.



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