

The Wild Bunch

By Michael Wilmington

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Sam Peckinpah’s “The Wild Bunch” opens with perhaps the most startling burst of sustained violence in all of the American cinema: a raging inferno of quick-cut, slow-motion bloodshed, with outlaws and ambushers on the roofs above shooting it out, during a busted railroad office robbery, in five dense minutes of horrific carnage. It is a scene of extraordinary art and impact, exploding off the screen with such force and affecting audiences so viscerally, they sometimes reel back in shock.



The Wild Bunch. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

The movie closes with another burst of slaughter; an insanely blood standoff involving four surviving outlaws of the wild bunch, an entire Mexican army contingent, and a Gatling gun passed from hand to hand. In between, Peckinpah shows his antiheroes trapped between a posse of vicious mercenaries and the immoral Mexican Army that buys their rifles; a three-cornered game of demonic intensity, nightmare nihilism, and outrageous compassion. Peckinpah himself describes it simply and tersely: “It’s what happens when outlaws go to Mexico.”

This is a movie that overwhelms and incites. Though “The Wild Bunch” is set in 1913, at the end of the Western frontier period, it has a more profound sense of the present than all but a handful of movies set in 1969, the year it was released. It is contemporary: it’s about the period in which it was shot, America during the height of the Vietnam War, with all its violence and malaise — and it foreshadows America right now.

The movie throbs with the intensified vision, the paranoia, the cockeye fatalism and courage of men who live near death: soldiers, outlaws, cops. And once Peckinpah—and his brilliant cinematographer, Lucien Ballard, and editor Lou Lombardo — stun you with “The Wild Bunch”’s opening credit sequence (Pike Bishop’s gang masquerading as soldiers as they stroll toward the office they’re going to rob), and sweep you into the five minute cataclysm, the movie never lets you off the hook.

“The Wild Bunch” is an American masterpiece, one of the greatest films ever produced in the Hollywood system. But for years it was also was a mutilated

classic, shorn of crucial scenes in its first release. (The 1995 theatrical run of the original, 144-minute director’s cut, restored was a cause for celebration.) Few that followed it, even among its many imitators, have its sense of tragedy and loss, its depth, melancholy and lyricism, or its savagery and dark wit. Even Peckinpah’s directorial credit is thrilling: a freeze-frame on a macabre close-up of William Holden as outlaw chief Bishop, caught in splotches of color, right after growling to his men: “If they move, kill ‘em,” with an ominous Jerry Fielding musical chord crashing down behind him.

What happens next in the movie — the pursuit of Pike’s gang to Mexico by a posse led by his erstwhile best friend, Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan), their plunge into the Mexican civil war as gun runners and their final fateful battle — is really the classic American story of noble outlaws: the bad men who redeem themselves, a staple of the movie western since the days of William S. Hart and, especially, John Ford.

Yet no noble outlaws or “good bad men” were ever quite this bad before, no posse this depraved. It seems at first a movie without heroes. Peckinpah shoves in our faces their flaws and ugliness, from Old Many Sykes’s rotten teeth to the Gorch boys’ horny sadism. The posse are even worse — and, in fact, the only group that gets any conventional sympathy here are the Mexican villagers with whom the Bunch briefly stay: a dreamlike community whose patriarch has the film’s key speech: “We all dream of being a child again, even the worst of us — perhaps the worst most of all.”

Fittingly, in the whole course of this most violent of westerns, we never see a child killed — even though smiling kids are around from the beginning. In the title sequence, as the Wild Bunch arrives on horseback, children giggling as they torture a scorpion, dropping it into a mass of ants and then setting them all on fire. The bunch themselves are like children: whimsical, violent, quick to play and laugh — but also quick to kill. The six actors who play Pike's gang — Holden as Pike, Jaime Sanchez as Angel, Ernest Borgnine as Pike's right-hand man, Dutch, Edmond O'Brien as Old Man Sykes, and Warren Oates and Ben Johnson as the likably scabrous Gorch brothers, Lyle and Tector — all had close to their finest hour in the making of this movie. So did Strother Martin and L.Q. Jones as Coffey and T.C., vilest of the posse. And so, in a way, did actor-directors Emilio Fernandez and Alfonso Arau as two memorable Alfonso Bedoya-style psychopaths in the Mexican Army.

Holden, whose great days in "Sunset Boulevard" and "Bridge On the River Kwai" seemed past by 1969, replaced Lee Marvin (who would have been the perfect "Wild Bunch" star; in the worst mistake of his career, Marvin — who had collaborate brilliantly with Peckinpah in the picaresque 1963 TV comedy "The Losers" — rejected Pike for "Paint Your Wagon" and a bigger payday, claiming that "Wild Bunch" was too much like "The Professionals." But even though Holden lacks Marvin's grinning menace and joyous hard-guy athleticism, in the end he makes Pike his own anyway: a weaker, wearier, mellow gang boss. By now, one cannot imagine that film without him and more than one can imagine it without Oates, Johnson, O'Brien, or any of the others.

Peckinpah brings out a surface brutishness in Holden and the whole Wild Bunch, but he also reveals a vulnerability beneath. Probably more disturbing to some audiences than the violence itself — which consumes only a fraction of the movie — is our mixed response toward these outlaws. Sometimes odious, they're also capable of a twisted savage bravery and grandeur — one repeated exchange among the gang that becomes their mantra: "Let's Go!" "Why not!" It's an existential adventurer's credo, the movie's main chord. In his role as the reluctant bounty hunter in "Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia," Warren Oates played Peckinpah, and, in "The Wild Bunch," so does Holden. He has Peckinpah's mustache, swagger, and mannerisms. So the "The Wild Bunch" is both self-portrait and ultimate vindication. Throughout the '60s, after the debacle of his firing from the Steve McQueen movie "The Cincinnati Kid," Peckinpah had been something of an exile, a wiry Westerner with a hair-trigger temper, a perfectionist feuding constantly with his bosses. "The Wild Bunch" brought him back.

Peckinpah's models here were the John Ford of "My Darling Clementine," the John Huston of "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre," and, to a greater extent, Akira Kurosawa. Kurosawa had created his legendary action scenes from "Seven Samurai" on, by shooting simultaneously with three cameras. Throughout "The Wild Bunch," Peckinpah doubled his mentor's arsenal, using six cameras, and the effects — especially the famous use of slow motion, that agonizing, ecstatic flail as bodies hurtle endlessly in their death throes — create a frenzied immediacy that summons up both the moment of death and the jaws of hell.

Did "The Wild Bunch" go too far? So thought some outraged critics and moralists of the time. But it should be obvious by now that "The Wild Bunch," of all movies, is no shallow exploitation of violence. By rubbing the audience's nose in horror, Peckinpah (like Arthur Penn in the Kurosawa-influenced "Bonnie and Clyde") re-sensitized viewers. Other late-1960s movies turned violence into glib entertainment. When Peckinpah let the blood flow, he also let life break out.

If he had a genius for screen violence, he had a talent for tenderness too; Jean Renoir once said Peckinpah knew much of "the music of the soul"; we can see that in rare, gentler pieces like the 1966 TV film Katherine Anne Porter's "Noon Wine." And so, in the end, he made these deeply flawed, dangerous, near psychopathic, weirdly attractive outlaws come to life as few movie characters ever have. That's why the Wild Bunch seems so magnificent in their last stroll down the road to apocalypse. The image burns itself into your memory: The morning before the last battle, the last walk, the last "Let's go!" "Why not?" and the Wild Bunch, now beautifully calm, striding warily down the dusty, sunny Agua Verde street: Borgnine's gun slung casually over a shoulder, Holden's in his left hand, Oates's in his right, and Ben Johnson's rifle cradled in his arms like the child that the worst of us longs to be.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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