

Ride the High Country

By Stephen Prince

“Ride the High Country” is the eye of the hurricane, the stillness at the center of the storm of transgression that Sam Peckinpah brought to American film in the late 1960s. That it hails from the onset of that decade and of Peckinpah’s career as a feature film director accounts for its singular grace and affability. The serenity of its outlook and the surety of its convictions about the nature of right and wrong place it far outside the tortured worlds inscribed by his subsequent films. At the same time, it shows clearly the thematic obsessions and stylistic hallmarks that he would make his own when American society began to come apart in ways that enabled him to become the great poet of late sixties apocalypse.

Its purity of heart is clean and strong and makes it a film that is easy to love, in a way that “The Wild Bunch” and “Straw Dogs” made defiantly difficult for viewers. Indeed, its unabashed celebration of straight-forward heroism strikes notes that Peckinpah never again sounded in his work. This makes it at once an outlier among his films and a touchstone of virtues that his subsequent protagonists strive to find and to hold and never quite succeed in doing. The ‘high country’ of its title points to a realm of pristine, unspoiled natural beauty, found in the Sierra Nevada mountains, and to a basis of proper living and conduct that is grounded in an ethic of reaching toward the heavens. It is a singular, magnificent statement from an artist who never again stated things so directly, preferring instead to conceal his feelings and impulses behind the masks of irony.

He was a young director still finding his way in the business and not yet a cult figure when a producer at MGM invited him to sign on to a script and a cast already packaged for production. Peckinpah was a veteran writer and director for television, and he had made a previous feature film, “The Deadly Companions.” He promptly set about rewriting the script, taking it in very personal directions. The actors signed to the film – Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott – were veteran stars of Western movies. With them, Peckinpah felt he had something special that enabled him to comment on the traditions of the movie Western that he had inherited and that he would go



Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott as aging hired guns. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

on to break with.

The script’s original title was “Guns in the Afternoon,” and the film carried this title in overseas release. It aptly conveys the elegiac tone that Peckinpah brought out so strongly using McCrea and Scott as aging Westerners who had become anachronisms in a country now largely settled and on the cusp of modernity. Peckinpah continued to focus on this theme of men who have outlived their time in “The Wild Bunch,” “Junior Bonner,” and “Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid.” It is announced immediately in the first scene as the hero, Steve Judd (McCrea), rides into a town whose main street has gas lamps, automobiles and a uniformed policeman. When Steve steps off into the street, he’s nearly run over by a car, and the cop lectures him about being more careful and calls him an old-timer. When Judd doesn’t move quickly enough, the cop berates him --“Get out of the street. You’re in the way. Can’t you see you’re in the way?”

Steve moves slowly; his joints ache; his eyesight is failing, his shirt cuffs are fraying. He’s past his prime, and as his skills fade and his body fails, he aims to hold true to his personal code of honor and integrity. Steve agrees to escort a gold shipment from the mining camp of Coarsegold, high in the Sierra Nevada, to the bank in town that has hired him. It will be a perilous trek because other guards have been killed in the attempt. Steve teams with his old friend, Gil Westrum (Randolph Scott), whom he finds in town

working in a Wild West sideshow costumed outlandishly as the fictitious Oregon Kid. The reality of the frontier is falling into cheap legend and hucksterism. Gil, too, has landed on hard times, but unlike Steve, he seeks survival, not honor. Gil partners with his friend because he intends to steal the gold and believes that he can talk Steve into joining his plan.

The relationship between Gil and Steve is the first instance of an enduring pattern in Peckinpah's work, a focus on paired characters, former friends on opposite sides of the law, one of whom aims to betray the other. Steve and Gil are succeeded by Pike Bishop and Deke Thornton in "The Wild Bunch" and by "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid." "Ride the High Country," though, differs from the later films by allowing both characters to achieve personal and moral redemption. Steve keeps his honor, and Gil abandons his plan to steal the gold, returning, instead, to rescue Steve and their companions from attack by a family of "redneck, peckerwood trash" that wants the gold.

Peckinpah changed the script's ending so that Steve, not Gil, becomes the character whose death concludes the film. When asked what he wants in life, Steve told Gil, "All I want is to enter my house justified." The power of the film's ending lies in Steve's ability to achieve his goal and in Peckinpah's visual statement about this. Dying, in the film's final shot, Steve turns and looks back at the mountains of the high country, which have embodied his moral aspirations, and he sinks slowly out of the frame. Steve is gone; the mountains remain. His example has swayed Gil, who tells the dying Steve that he'll take the money to the bank just like Steve would have done. To this news his old friend offers Gil a note of grace. "Hell, I know that. I always did. You just forgot it for a while." Steve's forgiveness brings Gil nearly to tears.

The film was shot in less than a month and on a relatively low budget, but Peckinpah had the great good fortune to partner with cinematographer Lucien Ballard, who went on to shoot three more features

for Peckinpah (and had worked briefly with him on television). Ballard's anamorphic widescreen compositions showcase magnificent landscapes on location in Inyo National Forest, where the majestic peaks of the Sierra Nevada and the vibrant, autumnal colors of the forest elegantly visualize the film's themes about aging and redemption.

Peckinpah shows his innovative approach to film violence in a magnificently filmed gunfight at the climax, reflecting the kind of ambivalence to violence that would become his trademark. In one scene, he uses an aggressive zoom-in to reveal a bloody bullet hole in the forehead of a corpse. As the Hammonds beat a drunken judge, Peckinpah shows a pair of prostitutes watching the beating. One turns away in horror, as the other gazes in fascination while eating a chicken drumstick. The director would continue to employ such juxtapositions of violence and indifference in his later films.

But he is not there yet in "Ride the High Country." Steve Judd is modeled on Peckinpah's father, and the film's emotional and moral beauty is connected to the affirmation that Peckinpah wished to make about his father. Riding the high country enables Steve to enter his house justified. Peckinpah never again offered such an elegiac vision of old-fashioned heroism, making the film a singular treasure among his works.

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

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