

'69: Changing times

By Johnny D. Boggs

1969 was a year of change: Richard Nixon's inauguration ... New York City's Stonewall riot ... Vietnam ... desegregation ... Woodstock ... Apollo 11

Movies – *Easy Rider* and *Midnight Cowboy* – also changed in the year many historians argue sent the Western film into a permanent decline. After all, what more could be said about the Old West after *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Wild Bunch* and once John Wayne had finally won an Oscar (for *True Grit*)?

"In many ways these three Westerns seemed like a death rattle to the genre," says Bob Boze Bell, executive editor at *True West* magazine and the artist who did the cover illustration, *Butch and Sundance Ride into Hell*, for this issue.

"It wasn't the end of Westerns, but it certainly put a period at the end of an era."

Unless you count 1974's *Blazing Saddles*, 1969 marked the last time a Western (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*) was the year's top-grossing movie in America.

Just before their 50th anniversaries, *Roundup* examines four monumental Westerns – *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *True Grit*, *The Wild Bunch* and Sergio Leone's Italian-U.S. production *Once Upon a Time in the West*, a "spaghetti Western" partially filmed in Utah-Arizona's Monument Valley, which director John Ford made iconic in Western cinema years earlier.

"By the end of the sixties, America was reeling from ubiquitous violence, growing polarization, and countless assaults on almost every imaginable American institution," Richard Aquila writes in *The Sagebrush Trail: Western Movies and Twentieth-Century America*. "... numerous American westerns were questioning the image of the West as a glamorous land of freedom, opportunity, and redemption."

The Last Word: Pulitzer Prize winner Glenn Frankel examines another 1969 "Western," the X-rated, Oscar-winning *Midnight Cowboy*. **Page 43**

Hybrid Western: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*

By Thomas D. Clagett

In the fall of 1969, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* opened to mixed reviews. *The Hollywood Reporter* declared it "a great film." *Chicago Sun* critic Roger Ebert called it "slow and disappointing," adding that it "never gets up the nerve, by God, to admit it's a Western."

Ignoring the critics, audiences filled theaters where it played. It would be nominated for seven Academy Awards, including best picture and best director.

What made *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* significant to the Western genre and to 1969, (arguably the last milestone year for Western films), was that it was and wasn't a traditional Western. The story of two real-life outlaws, among the last in the Old West, looked and felt like a Western, with bank holdups, train robberies and chases. But the dialogue possessed a modern sensibility. And the musical score was anything but Western; more '60s pop. The picture seemed like a Western hybrid.

Screenwriter William Goldman said he came across the story of Butch and Sundance in the late 1950s. "What moved me ... was that they ran away. I'd never seen that before. They ran away and became legends bigger the second time."

"That's what made the movie, its complete unconventionality," Paul Newman, cast as Butch Cassidy, said. "When you expected something to turn

left, it turned right."

One studio wanted to buy the script, Goldman recalled, but only if he rewrote it and had Butch and Sundance stand and fight the super posse that was chasing them instead of running to South America. "I said, 'But they did run to South America,' and the studio said, 'I don't care. All I know is, John Wayne don't run away.'"

Though Richard D. Zanuck, head of 20th Century-Fox Studios, believed that "the traditional Western was something you didn't play around with," he



The final showdown for Butch (Paul Newman) and Sundance (Robert Redford).



still saw the potential and purchased the screenplay for, at that time, the unheard-of price of \$400,000.

George Roy Hill was hired to direct, though he had never made a Western before. However, that seemed to work in his favor. According to *Silverado* screenwriter/director Lawrence Kasdan, Hill brought “a freshness to the genre. He was not embarrassed to have fun with it, things that would have made a more purist Western director blanch.”

“The picture was designed for a contemporary feel,” Hill said, adding that Goldman’s dialogue, “where it isn’t actually anachronistic, has a very contemporary rhythm and sound to it.”

Even so, Robert Redford, who played the Sundance Kid, said, “There was a fear it was maybe a little too clever.”

Filming began on September 16, 1968. To achieve the washed-out look he wanted, Hill chose Conrad Hall as his cinematographer.

Locations included Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Cuernavaca in Mexico.

As Butch and Sundance, Newman and Redford are two of the most charming and amiable outlaws. They play off each other like an old married couple. “I don’t enjoy jungles and I don’t enjoy swamps,” Butch says. “I don’t like snakes. I don’t much care for night work.” Sundance responds, “Bitch, bitch, bitch.” After Butch explains his idea about going to Bolivia, Sundance says, “You just keep thinking Butch. That’s what you’re good at.” Butch shakes his head and says, “I got vision and the rest of the world wears bifocals.” It’s hard not to like them.

In the scene where Butch and his gang blow up a boxcar while robbing a train, the super posse bursts from a pursuing train and gives chase. Butch asks Sundance how many of the posse are following them. “All of them,” Sundance says. “All of them!” Butch cries, then points at the other members of his gang galloping away in another direction and shouts, “What’s the matter with those guys?” His indignation sells the line.

But Newman was concerned about the comedic aspects of the film. He

knew he wasn’t a comedy actor. Associate producer Robert Crawford Jr. recalled Hill telling Newman, “This isn’t a comedy, it’s an historical Western. The comedy will take care of itself. Just play it real.”

Playing it real also provided an irony for Butch in the film. After arriving in Bolivia, Butch and Sundance give up their outlaw ways, taking jobs as payroll guards. Bandits rob them of the gold they are carrying to the mine they work for now, and Butch and Sundance face them in a bloody gunfight. Looking at the dead bodies of the bandits, Sundance says, “Well, we’ve gone straight. What’ll we try now?” Butch looks stricken. “Killing was something Butch had never had to do as an outlaw,” Hill said.

While many moviegoers enjoyed watching this atypical Western, Burt Bacharach’s bouncy music score, particularly the song, “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,” baffled, and even irritated, some.

Hill said he intended to have a semi-modern score for the film, and Goldman recalled that the director also decided he wanted a musical scene. “I wrote one with Butch and Etta Place, [Sundance’s girlfriend, played by Katharine Ross,] riding a bicycle. Then he wanted a song.”

Hill designed the staging with Butch clowning on a bicycle while Etta watches. It was undeniably something new and unexpected and perhaps intended to show that these “raindrops” were as out of place as Butch and Sundance had become.

“I thought [the film] was doomed because they had a dumb song in the middle of it,” Redford said, and later realized how wrong he was.

A preview was held in San Francisco.

Crawford recalled the audience howled. “Everyone was pleased, except George who said, ‘They laughed at my tragedy; they don’t get the end of my movie.’”

“We went back to the editing room,” Goldman said, “and we set about consciously taking out laughs.”

Shot for an estimated \$6 million, the film earned more than \$102 million. It went on to win Oscars for original screenplay, cinematography, song and music score.

For all its humor, freshness and being a different kind of Western, it presents one of the great Western themes.

About half way through the film, Sheriff Bledsoe (played by Jeff Corey) tells Butch and Sundance, “You’re two-bit outlaws on the dodge. ... Your times is over and you’re going to die bloody.” The grim expressions on their faces say they realize it, and the film ends with those haunting words coming true.

After a shoot-out with local police in a Bolivian village, Butch and Sundance lay wounded and bleeding inside a cantina, but believe that they can still get away. Getting to their feet, the two friends run outside, unaware that over a hundred Bolivian soldiers are waiting on the rooftops with rifles ready. Hill freezes the frame showing these two friends, their guns drawn and firing, while the sound of rifle volleys echo over and over. A melancholy tune plays as the image dissolves into sepia tone, like a fading memory, holding Butch and Sundance frozen in time, punctuating the bittersweet passing of the Old West.

Sources

The Making of “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” Robert Crawford Productions, 1971

All of What Follows is True: The Making of “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” Fox Home Video, 2006

The Writer Speaks: William Goldman. Writers Guild Foundation, 2010

The bicycle scene in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid was filmed outside this house in the ghost town of Grafton, Utah. Wikimedia Commons





'Strange experience' Once Upon a Time in a spaghetti opera

By C. Courtney Joyner

"Well, there were the three of us. Woody Strode, and me, and the third guy who was a very well-known English heavy. He was the guy who cracked his knuckles, and I can't think of his name. And we had many strange experiences shooting the scene, with that guy killing himself and all that stuff."

It was 1979, and Jack Elam had graciously agreed to discuss his career with me when he lobbed that bombshell about the suicide of actor Al Mulock during the filming of the classic opening to Sergio Leone's 1969 *C'era una volta il West* aka *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

At the time we spoke, the death of Mulock or the fact that he was doubled by a crew member for half the scene of the trio waiting for Charles Bronson, wasn't common knowledge, although Elam took it for granted. After spending days in blistering heat, his face covered in watermelon juice to attract flies so he could trap one in his pistol, and the problems the film had up to this point, the tragedy was another "strange experience" in the making of Leone's Western tone-poem, which would even-

tually be hailed as a masterpiece.

Once Upon a Time in the West was reluctantly conceived in a projection booth of a Rome theater during a showing of *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*. Film critics Dario Argento and Bernardo Bertolucci, both of whom would have enormous directing careers, were meeting with Leone to discuss his future projects. Devotees of Westerns, they had hoped Leone would continue in the genre. However, after his triumphs with *The Man with No Name* (played by Clint Eastwood), the filmmaker wanted to move on. But the studios had other ideas.

Years later Leone artfully put it, "There is no forgiveness for success. If you do one thing, and it makes money, then that's what they want you to do forever."

Leone hired Argento and Bertolucci to work out a story as the three immersed themselves in John Ford and Raoul Walsh Westerns. With Leone, Sergio Donati refined the treatment into a script that went immediately to Eastwood, who passed.

Eastwood said: "I felt Sergio was going in a different direction than I

wanted. He was moving into a kind of spectacle thing, and that's understandable after *Good, Bad, and Ugly* did so well, but I thought he'd gotten more concerned with epic scale than anything else."

Leone turned to Charles Bronson, whom he had wanted opposite Eastwood in *For a Few Dollars More*, for "Harmonica," the gunman tracking his father's assassin, played by Henry Fonda. Fonda was Leone's only choice for the killer, but the actor wasn't sure of the project and had to be talked into doing it by his friend Eli Wallach.

Fonda arrived on the Spanish location wearing brown contact lenses and an Edwin Booth moustache, masking his familiar image. Leone nixed all of it. He wanted the classic, heroic, screen-Fonda to contrast with his character's cold manner, a stripe of the actor's own personality that Ford captured in *Fort Apache*, a Leone favorite.

Leone added Jason Robards, Lionel Stander, Woody Strode and Keenan Wynn, replacing Robert Ryan who was called away to do *The Wild Bunch*. Despite all of the men and all of the gunplay, it is actually Claudia Cardinale who is the spiritual heart of *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

Cardinale, as the prostitute who marries a man "because he was kind," but finds herself a widow before the marriage can even begin, shows the most strength of all the characters, doing what she must to survive, then triumph. In glorious irony, the men settle their differences with pistols, while she uses her brains as the new owner of a patch of land worth millions to the incoming railroad.

Leone luxuriates in Cardinale's beauty and grace, her movements the key to some of the film's most amazing visual moments. He follows her, then pulls back, constantly widening his shot, to show Cardinale framed by a new and building West that she will be a part of. We see it, as she sees it, and it's a cinema-miracle for the eyes, as Leone wants it to be.

Since he would not be using synchronized sound, Leone had composer Ennio Morricone record four separate

themes for the characters of Bronson, Fonda, Robards and Cardinale to be played on-set to help the mood, and also get the actors to move in time with the music as they filmed, rather than have the music simply augment the finished visuals.

Despite initial disinterest, clashes with actors and a suicide, Leone

fashioned an astonishing film that swept Europe on its release, but failed in the United States amid a mountain of poor reviews. Desperate to recoup, Paramount sheared the epic to pieces, before dumping it onto double bills and selling it to television.

But *Once Upon a Time in the West* refused to die. Resurrected by film so-

cieties, and critics who reassessed their judgments, it was finally hailed as a true masterpiece and among the finest movies ever made.

Reflecting on the film's immortal status, years after the death of its creator, Cardinale said, "Sergio had a dream of what the Western could be, and that's what cinema is, a dream."

Peckinpah's masterpiece, *The Wild Bunch*, bucked the odds

By W.K. Stratton

In the spring of 1968, director Sam Peckinpah led a company of actors and crew members to Parras de la Fuente in southern Coahuila, Mexico, to begin work on a revisionist Western that would change American movies forever. It was called *The Wild Bunch*. It caused a sensation when it was released in June 1969 and received crucial acclaim and damnation. It made money, finishing the year solidly in the black. In subsequent years, *The Wild Bunch* came to be regarded as a classic, receiving accolades from the American Film Institute and many other organizations. Over time, it came to be ranked as one of the most profitable movies that Warner Bros. ever released.

But it was a miracle that *The Wild Bunch* went into production in the first

place. It was a cowboy picture that came out at a time when Hollywood considered Westerns to be passé. Peckinpah had been blacklisted in the movie industry, not for his politics, but for his alcoholism and his refusal to play corporate games with producers and film executives. The star of *The Wild Bunch*, William Holden, had stopped taking filmmaking seriously and was an alcoholic himself. Just months earlier, he had killed a man in a drunken driving accident. The idea for the picture wasn't derived from a bestselling novel or any factual historic event. It was dreamed up by a stuntman during down time while working on a Yul Brynner bomb of a movie. The screenwriter was not one of Hollywood's gilded scribes, but a guy who had never written a movie script. A number of the crew members had little to no experience working on a big screen

production but had come through the television industry, frowned upon by the movie elite. All things considered, *The Wild Bunch* should have been a disaster.

Roy Sickner had become a top stuntman when he signed on to work on Brynner's *Kings of the Sun*, which was shot in Mazatlán and Yucatán. While in Mexico, Sickner dreamed up what he thought would be a sure-fire hit movie: Some American Old West outlaws stage a robbery in the U.S. and flee to Mexico with an American posse on their heels. Mexican authorities also pick up the chase, and then there is a huge shootout at the end. From early on, the stuntman had a name for his project, *The Wild Bunch*. Sickner could not turn loose of the concept, crude as it was, and when he returned to Los Angeles, he enlisted some old friends, including Lee Marvin, to try to draft



Above, William Holden as Pike Bishop in the final gunfight. Right, portrait of the posse, led by Robert Ryan (standing rear, center), that pursues Pike Bishop's gang.





Director Sam Peckinpah, left, and William Holden talk on the set of *The Wild Bunch*.
Wikimedia Commons

a treatment, but to no avail. He met Walon Green while working on a Marlon Brando flop and eventually hired Green, untested as a writer, to draft a treatment and screenplay.

Sickner couldn't have made a better choice. Green had spent a significant portion of his life in Mexico, attending college there and then working for a Mexican swimming-pool company. His job brought him into contact with a number of survivors of the Mexican Revolution, including a general who became the model for Mapache, the villain of *The Wild Bunch*. Green created the movie's story, and provided names for most of the characters. In essence, he completed the rough carpentry for the picture. Then Green left the project. For the finish carpentry, Sickner turned to his old friend and drinking buddy Peckinpah, who was down on his luck. After a brilliant start to his career as a writer and director, first in television and then with *Ride the High Country*, Peckinpah's career bottomed out. His big-budget epic, *Major Dundee*, turned out to be a disaster, because of the interference of studio executives and mistakes Peckinpah made on his own. He subsequently was fired off *The Cincinnati Kid* and *Villa Rides*. He had some success with a TV adaptation of Katharine Anne Porter's "Noon Wine," but the odds were stacked against him for directing a theatrical release again.

Peckinpah had turned to scriptwriting to pay the bills when Sickner asked him to do rewrites on *The Wild Bunch*. But Peckinpah found that the yarn Green had concocted was full of artistic possibilities. Peckinpah loved Mexico, its history, culture and people. He felt

happiest when he was in Mexico. He enlarged concepts Green had embedded in the script: men caught outside their time, men who fail to recognize certain codes of behavior, men who love each other, men who betray each other, bad men who, in the end, stand up to do the right thing. *The Wild Bunch* script gave Peckinpah the chance to explore themes important to him. One was the dehumanizing effect of technology in the modern world. The other was the horror of violent death, which Peckinpah believed had never been realistically portrayed on film.

As Peckinpah worked on the screenplay, a revolution was occurring in Hollywood. The old studio system collapsed. Most important for Peckinpah, some shady money men who had been keeping Warner Bros. afloat decided it was time to force Jack Warner to sell his controlling interest in the studio he and his brothers had founded long before World War I. The new head of production at Warners had been impressed by Peckinpah's earlier work and enlisted Sam as a director. No one could have been more surprised than Peckinpah. His first project foundered in preproduction. But Peckinpah had *The Wild Bunch* up his sleeve, and, at just the right moment, he pushed a copy of the script into the hands of an important Warners producer, who loved it. In relatively short order, *The Wild Bunch* went into production, with Peckinpah's name on the back of the director's chair.

Peckinpah assembled an extraordinary cast and crew. Stalwarts like Ernest Borgnine, Robert Ryan, Warren Oates, Ben Johnson, Strother Martin, Dub Taylor and L.Q. Jones were well known to fans of American Westerns. As was Holden, who played the picture's lead. Holden had been mailing in performances after *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, yet Peckinpah managed to draw out the best performance of Holden's career. Peckinpah also cast some of the best actors from Mexico, including significant stars like Sonia Amelio, Alfonso Arau and Jorge Russek, many of whom had never acted in American films. Peckinpah broke new ground by casting Mexicans or Mexican-Americans in every Mexican role, except one that was

filled by a Puerto Rico native. Prior to *The Wild Bunch*, it was unheard of for a major American movie to cast Latinos in every Latino part.

Wanting to best director Arthur Penn at his own game, Peckinpah was intent on taking use of slow-motion violence to levels beyond what Penn used in *Bonnie and Clyde*. Peckinpah did just that. Peckinpah also outdid Penn when it came to using stage-blood squibs to portray gunshot wounds realistically. Peckinpah employed the absolute best when it came to his crew, true artists like cinematographer Lucien Ballard and film editors Lou Lombardo and Robert Wolfe. Working with such talent, Peckinpah was able to elevate *The Wild Bunch* beyond the realm of typical Westerns. He created a work of art, worthy of inclusion alongside the best work of masters like Fellini and Kurosawa.

Though Warner Bros.' convoluted bookkeeping made it impossible to accurately judge how much money the film made that year, it was clearly a hit. It is safe to say that while other pictures from that year made more money, none generated more controversy. Critics Rex Reed and Judith Crist hated it because of its portrayal of violence and the lack of an upbeat ending. Others understood it to be a classic from the beginning. Young Roger Ebert declared it to be a masterpiece – and he was right.

The Wild Bunch never went away. It played revival houses in L.A. with, as Strother Martin observed, audiences that seemed to be half university professors and half Hells Angels. Its cult following only grew with the introduction of home video (and the restoration of the release cut of the picture Peckinpah originally OK'd).

Eventually, more than three dozen books would be written about Peckinpah, with his great Mexican Revolution masterpiece at the center of most of them. I first saw *The Wild Bunch* when it was new. I was 13, and I left the theater at once in awe and in trauma. Like many people, I've watched it countless times since, always with a growing sense of appreciation for what Peckinpah accomplished. I find myself thinking about *The Wild Bunch* every day.

True Grit: True triumph for Duke

By Andrew Patrick Nelson

When John Wayne read the galley proofs for Charles Portis's 1968 novel *True Grit* – about an irascible, one-eyed lawman named Rooster Cogburn who helps a precocious young girl track down her father's murderer – he saw not only the makings of a great movie, but a part he was born to play. Fortunately for Duke, producer Hal Wallis, who outbid Wayne's Batjac production company for the rights to the project, agreed.

Filmed mostly on location in the fall of 1968 in picturesque Ouray County, Colorado (standing in, rather implausibly, for Arkansas and Indian Territory), *True Grit* teamed Wayne for the sixth and final time with veteran director Henry Hathaway. Hathaway cut his teeth directing Randolph Scott in a series of Zane Grey adaptations in the 1930s and had helmed a string of popular Westerns in the 1960s, including *Nevada Smith* (1966), three-fifths of *How the West Was Won* (1962) and the Wayne vehicles *North to Alaska* (1960) and *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965). Starring opposite Wayne in *True Grit* was television actress Kim Darby as Mattie Ross and country musician Glen Campbell as the Texas Ranger La Boeuf.

All involved in the production felt that *True Grit* would be a hit. Those premonitions proved correct when the film opened in June 1969 to big box office and rave reviews.

"When the John Wayne retrospectives are in full swing," William Wolf wrote in *Cue*, "this will loom as one of his finest movie triumphs." Even critics who had berated Wayne the year before for his pro-Vietnam War movie *The Green Berets* were won over. "The curious thing about *True Grit*," opined Vincent Canby in the *New York Times*, "is that although he is still playing a variation on the self-assured serviceman he has played so many times in the past, the character that seemed grotesque in Vietnam fits into this frontier landscape, emotionally and perhaps politically too."

True Grit went on to earn \$14.3 million in rentals, making it the eighth-biggest hit of 1969. Talk quickly turned to a possible Academy Award nomination for Wayne, who had been nominated only once for the best-actor prize, for *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949). A win for *True Grit* might make up for what many, including Wayne, saw as a career's worth of slights.

On April 7, 1970, at the 42nd Academy Awards, Wayne finally won his Oscar. Accepting the trophy from presenter Barbara Streisand, he cracked, "Wow, if I'd known that, I'd have put on that patch 35 years earlier."

Greatness and influence are of course much easier to judge in retrospect than forecast in advance, and Oscar wins are seldom an accurate predictor of which movies and performances will stand the test of time and shape the course of film



Publicity still, above, and book covers from *True Grit*.

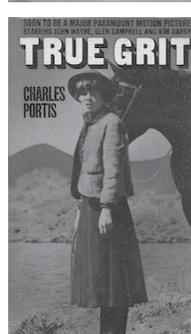
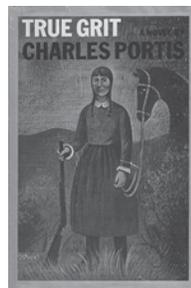
history. Take the Academy's own practice of awarding trophies as recompense for past snubs. Henry Fonda, Al Pacino, Jessica Lang and Denzel Washington all *should* have earned Oscars for earlier, better performances than those they ultimately won for, but, hey, better late than never. That's the perception, at least.

And this perception is particularly strong in the case of Wayne's win for *True Grit*, the understanding being that, arguably, he *should* have won for some earlier movie, like *Red River* (1948) or *The Searchers* (1956).

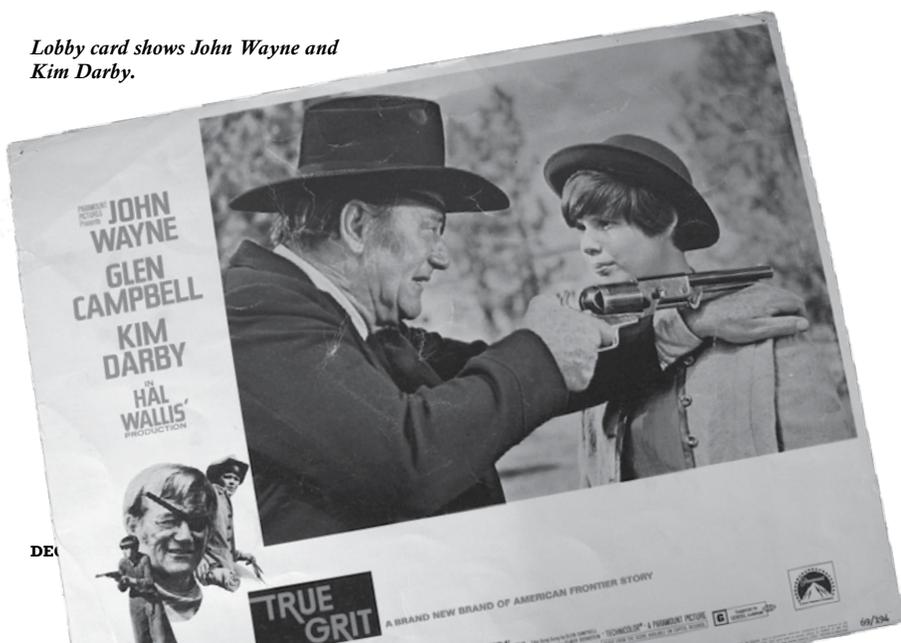
True Grit was released at a turning point in the history of American cinema, when the Hollywood of old, with its integrated studios and content-regulating Production Code, was giving way to a "new" Hollywood of film-school-trained talent and adult-oriented fare. Yet this was also a pivotal moment in the history of film criticism. A new generation of critics, weaned on ideas originally imported from France, championed filmmakers like Howard Hawks and John Ford as "authors" whose films expressed a personal vision of the world. Consequently, many movies regarded in their day as solid or even exemplary genre pictures were being re-evaluated and hailed as masterpieces.

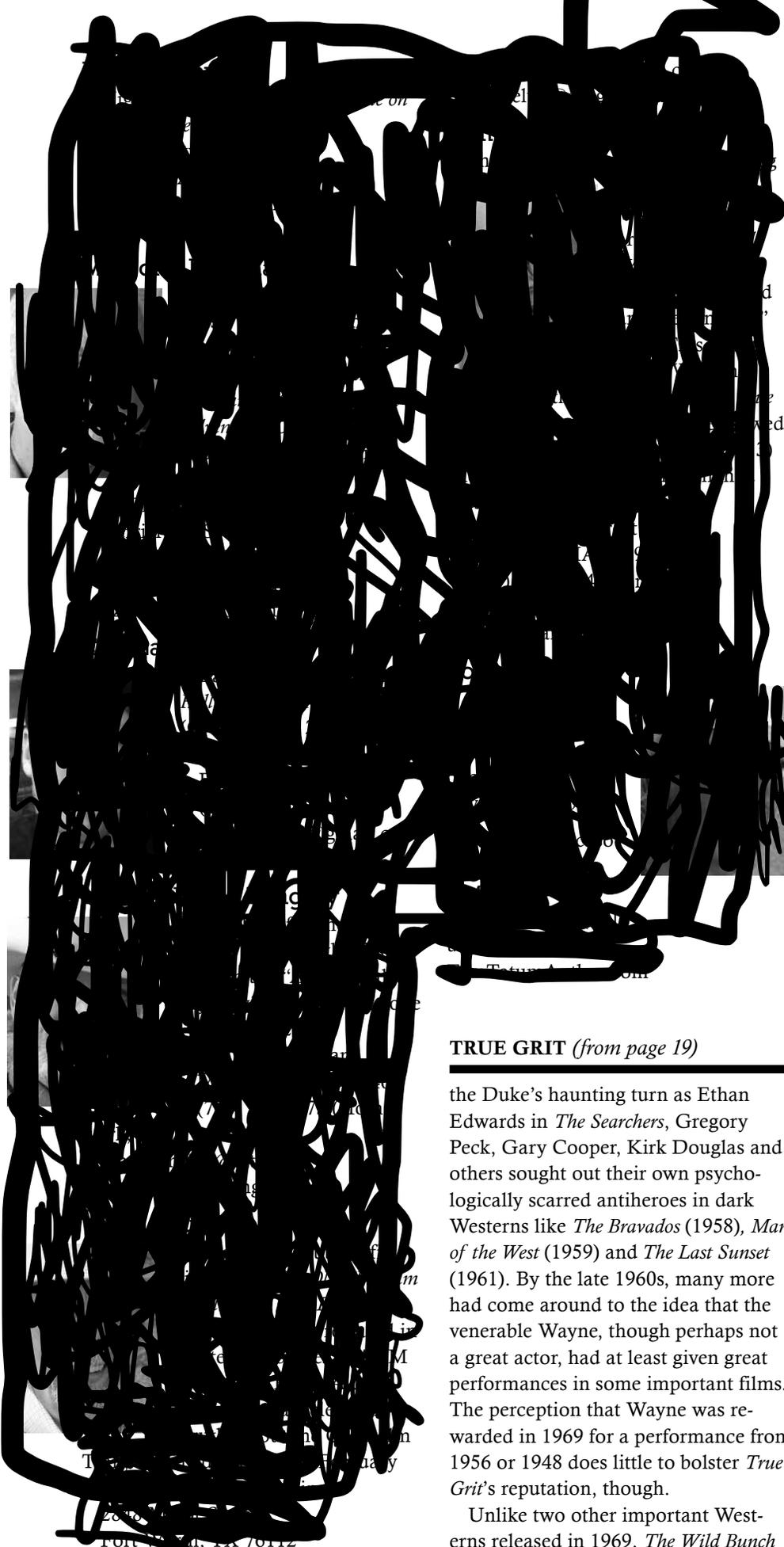
Wayne had long recognized the significance of some of his roles, as had a few of his contemporaries. After

TRUE GRIT (continued on page 39)



Lobby card shows John Wayne and Kim Darby.





and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *True Grit* is not generally regarded as a great film. *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* routinely rank in polls of “best Westerns,” alongside *The Searchers*, *Red River* and *Stagecoach* (1939). *True Grit*, meanwhile, remains “the movie that won Duke the Oscar.”

This reputation is unfortunate for a number of reasons.

True Grit might not be a great film, but it is certainly a very good one, bolstered by Lucien Ballard’s handsome cinematography, gorgeous autumn scenery, witty dialog and an unorthodox revenge plot. Campbell’s acting is, shall we say, amiably amateurish, but Darby is delightful as the headstrong Mattie. Wayne’s turn as Cogburn is not the best of his career. It might not even be the best of his later years. But it is a fine performance nonetheless, where the actor’s now famous bouts of burlesque, like Cogburn falling off his horse, drunk, are balanced by an equal number of subtle, sometimes melancholy moments, like the marshal shamefully admitting to Mattie that he has already spent her \$25 advance.

Relative to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Wild Bunch*, both of which meditate upon “the end of the West,” it’s hard not to see *True Grit* as a throwback to earlier times. But while academic histories of the Western fawn over the “revisions” carried out in the 1960s and ’70s by filmmakers like Sergio Leone, Sam Peckinpah and Robert Altman, the average moviegoer of the time was far more interested in seeing Duke saddle up again. Right up to his death in 1979, Wayne remained one of Hollywood’s most popular stars, and *True Grit* and his subsequent Westerns like *Big Jake* (1971), *The Cowboys* (1972) and *The Shootist* (1976) consistently out-earned those of Peckinpah, Altman and even Clint Eastwood.

In this way, *True Grit* represented not only what the Western had been, but also what it was, and would continue to be over the course of the 1970s, the Western’s last decade as a part of mainstream popular culture. As Cogburn tells Mattie early in the movie, “Baby sister, I was born game, and I intend to go out that way.”

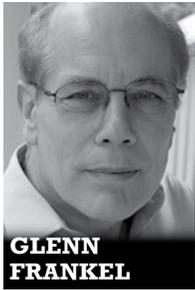
TRUE GRIT (from page 19)

the Duke’s haunting turn as Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, Gregory Peck, Gary Cooper, Kirk Douglas and others sought out their own psychologically scarred antiheroes in dark Westerns like *The Bravados* (1958), *Man of the West* (1959) and *The Last Sunset* (1961). By the late 1960s, many more had come around to the idea that the venerable Wayne, though perhaps not a great actor, had at least given great performances in some important films. The perception that Wayne was rewarded in 1969 for a performance from 1956 or 1948 does little to bolster *True Grit*’s reputation, though.

Unlike two other important Westerns released in 1969, *The Wild Bunch*

That other 1969 Western ... *Midnight Cowboy*

It's the only X-rated film ever to win the Oscar for best picture. It also won best director for John Schlesinger, one of the most underrated filmmakers of the New Hollywood era, and best adapted screenplay for Waldo Salt, a brilliant writer who overcame being



GLENN FRANKEL

blacklisted for his Communist Party membership and a crushing dependency on alcohol to write some of the best scripts of the 1970s. It also features some of the most compelling

performances in movie history, starting with its two male leads, Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman.

OK, great, but who'd be crazy enough to argue that *Midnight Cowboy*, a movie about a male hustler and his tubercular con-man sidekick in Times Square in the raucous, rancid 1960s, is truly a Western?

Me for one. At the least, it's a Western in reverse. Time was when young men went West, as per Horace Greeley's unsolicited advice. But Joe Buck, the tall, handsome young Army veteran from Texas with limited brain power but plenty of ambition, is moving in the opposite direction, hopping a bus from his hometown of Big Spring to New York seeking fortune and fame. The weapon he wields to conquer the Big Apple isn't a six-shooter but his own sexuality. Joe Buck is catnip to lonely, affluent, older women, or at least *he* thinks so. It turns out his business model is fatally flawed – the kind of female clientele he hopes to service doesn't go to Times Square to pick up rough trade. The only customers Joe manages to attract are a few lonely gay men.

Joe knows his cinematic roots and feels a certain kinship. There's a poster of Paul Newman in *Hud* on his motel room wall, and John Wayne's *The*

Alamo is the last film advertised on the rusting marquee of the shuttered Rio movie theater. Early in the film, a housewife asked on the radio who would be her ideal lover answers Gary Cooper, "but he's dead." When Joe's antagonistic new pal Ratso Rizzo derides Joe's cowboy outfit of black hat, suede jacket and cowboy boots as "strictly for fags," Joe invokes the greatest Western hero of all in his own defense: "John Wayne, you wanna tell me he's a fag?"

But it's the underlying themes of *Midnight Cowboy* that are its true links to the Western. The movie is about friendship, loyalty, masculinity, loneliness and seeking to make a fresh start and try to prove yourself as a stranger in a strange land. In the end, Joe Buck establishes his self-worth by trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to save the life of his sick friend. Wyatt Earp did the same for the ailing Doc Holliday.

Novelist James Leo Herlihy told friends he was writing an anti-hero Western. Just as Marshal Will Kane in *High Noon* faces down the bad guys in the noon-day sun, Joe Buck faces his own demons at midnight. "It was the dark side of the American hero," Herlihy's friend Dick Duane told me. "Jamie was fascinated by the dualism."

Even Wayne had to admit that *Midnight Cowboy* was onto something. Wayne beat out both Voight and Hoffman for best male actor at the 1970 Oscars for his performance in *True Grit*. Still, the torch was being passed that evening. Although he hated the gay context of *Midnight Cowboy*, calling it "perverted," Wayne expressed a grudging respect for his two young competitors. "Damn, Hoffman and Voight were good," he reportedly told a group of friends after watching the film. "Both of them. More than good – great. That is acting."

There's a revealing scene toward the middle of the film when Joe Buck, desperate for money, sets out down



Above, Joe (Jon Voight) confronts Ratso (Dustin Hoffman) in *Midnight Cowboy*.

42nd Street searching for customers. He passes a half dozen other young hustlers, each dressed in Western garb, striking poses and waiting. All of them are in hostile territory trying to survive, hoping to save up enough cash to pay the rent and get off the mean streets before winter comes. Then the majestic harmonica player Toots Thielemans launches into the *Midnight Cowboy* theme song, a plaintive instrumental that beautifully captures Joe's longing and loneliness. All that's lacking is a howling coyote and some sagebrush tumbling down the bleak urban canyon known as Times Square.

Hell yes it's a Western.