



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

## **Cutter's Way**

The mysteries were always there. From the first trance gestures of the opening credits of Ivan Passer's *Cutter's Way*, it was clear something special and hypnotic was happening: the slo-mo dance of the Fiesta Peque parade and its flower-festooned Las Señoritas coming directly at us in the hazy Santa Barbara sunshine, the monochromatic image slowly acquiring colour like a blush, the unforgettable Jack Nitzsche score – a ghostly serenade for bells, xylophone and handsaw – strumming up out of the aural ether with a tentativeness suggesting a sense of unease and lostness that would not, in fact, relent in your mind even after the film was through.

Of course, this séance glow has become clear only in rich retrospect, because at first *Cutter's Way* was a film no one seemed to get. As with so many films *maudits*, the tribulations of its bad fortune and misrelease seem to reflect its own story arc, as if the movie itself had tried to deliver a secret truth and been suppressed. However, Passer's atmospheric daydream has a history of being continually rediscovered.

*Cutter's Way* is adapted from Newton Thornburg's 1976 novel *Cutter and Bone*, in which a man drunkenly witnesses a body being dumped, only to find his best friend – Vietnam veteran Cutter – dragging him into a desperate quest to expose the killer. Jockeyed around between studios and victimised by executive turnover – taken up and then dropped by Dustin Hoffman and director Robert Mulligan – the project was eventually shepherded to United Artists by nascent producer Paul R. Gurian, and entrusted to Ivan Passer, the émigré Czech director who had directed *Intimate Lighting* (1965) and written scripts for Miloš Forman before leaving Prague for Hollywood in the wake of the 1968 Soviet invasion. The studio wanted Bridges as the womanising commitment-phobe Bone, Passer wanted John Heard as the one-eyed, one-legged alcoholic Cutter and Lisa Eichhorn as his soul-wasted wife Mo, and at some point fate smiled and UA suit David Field flipped the green light.

But this was 1980, and apparently no one told anyone involved that the 1970s had ended. With its laser focus on character, evocative capture of grungily specific Americana, implicit sense of class warfare, despairing post-'Nam context and fascinating employment of narrative and visual ellipses, *Cutter and Bone* (as it was originally titled) was a 70s film from the ground up. Little did we know, one year into the Reagan administration how endangered the sincere, thorny, sometimes haywire but most often scorchingly rigorous movies of the yet-to-be-recognised American New Wave were – or how thoroughly we would come to mourn their dirty cocktail of social protest, youth-culture empowerment, international cinephilia and prole restlessness.

The best of the films from that period still date less than most subsequent Oscar winners, and watching Passer's film – trailing innocently, almost idealistically, in the wake of the 'movement' – can today be akin to watching the great silents of the years 1927 to 1929, which attained transcendence even as talkies prepared to lay waste the medium's expressiveness. What fascinating, gritty, resonant mysterious concoctions might we have seen in the 1980s, had Spielberg and Lucas not turned the newly matured Hollywood sensibility into an adolescent carnival ride?

Naturally, the ambivalence and grown-up tenor of *Cutter and Bone* baffled the UA bigwigs, who gave it a modest US release in a few cities; the savaging it received from (among a few other near-sighted critics) *The New York Times'* shrugging dope Vincent Canby encouraged the studio to pull it after a single week. A week later, other critics delivered hosannas in the national weeklies, and with that encouragement the film was shuttled over to the company's 'arthouse' wing, United Artist Classics, for a second chance, receiving a title change and exposure in stateside festivals.

Critics can rescue films occasionally, just as they can condemn them to the abyss, and the unmarketable nature of *Cutter's Way* was as vulnerable as an orchid. Re-released in the summer of 1981, in the lingering dog days of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Escape from New York* and *Arthur*, it vanished again, only to reappear like so many blockbuster-steamrollered small films in the low-grade perpetuity of home video. Its reputation as a new American classic has been slowly escalating ever since.

The American New Wave connection is important, not merely because of the film's style and pedigree, but because the American 70s were as much about the legacy of *noir* as they were a gestalt of Euro New Wavism, Cassavetes realism, film-school freedom and Direct Cinema documentary. In the Nixon/'Nam years, realism and salience translated roughly into a new look at *noir's* expressive capacity for individual doom, self-destruction and surrender to the road, all the chillier for usually being shot in convincing, unrelenting (if overcast) noonlight. *Cutter's Way* grabbed this notion by its threadbare lapels – it's nothing if not a pungent reinvention of *noir's* fatalism in the hothouse suburban fringes, dazed by the horrifying damage of a new and sickening war.

Poisoned by booze and Lost Generation self-indulgence, the film's characters are simultaneously iconic and squalidly real, forming a tense sexual triangle of self-destructing tragedy. Without needing to be told, we know these are the end times for this little corner of California. Heard's Cutter is the troublesome vertex, a raging, childish extrovert on a suicidal tear, almost Wildean in his ornate, allusion-packed speech, but decidedly antisocial – even criminal – in his self-definition. He is the film's emasculated war ghost, a self-dramatising pest unwanted and ricocheting around in the machinery of the New America like so many antiheroes from 70's films. It's part of the story's brilliance that

he tries, rather pathetically, to fill the hole Vietnam has left in him – and in middle America – with an attempt to solve a murder mystery, and an absurd stab at unlikely justice.

Bone, meanwhile, is the America that skated ever the thin ice of the war, clinging to the coattails of the moneyed class and getting by on his charm and cocksmanship, but terrified of commitment to anything; a relationship, a home, a career, a story, a cause. (Bridges's natural grace and sangfroid ignite a role that could have been dull – just watch him saunter through the ritzy hotel lobby, or wander through other people's rooms with his belt buckle hanging open.) Bone's bond with Cutter goes deep enough to be beyond question (we never discover how they met), but now – like the Santa Barbara suburbs we see, houses and cars and neighbourhoods all ageing out and going into disrepair – he faces obsolescence. And so, though he resists the obvious with every fibre of his being, Bone attaches himself to Cutter precisely because of his friend's reckless sense of all or nothing.

*Cutter's Way* may be the best film made about the ripple effect of the Vietnam War on home front doorsteps, and it achieves this largely by way of characters who don't represent 'us', but are fiercely and unquestionably themselves. They are a gift from Thornburg's book, but as much as Passer's movie feels novelistic in its weft of themes, it's also an achievement of textures. Thornburg's novel may have offered up some of this steak thick dialogue, filthy with unspoken things and half references, but it didn't have this light and shadow (cinematography by the redoubtable Jordan Cronenweth), this palpable aura of rueful helplessness – and it didn't have these people, who linger in four dimensions like neighbours we've had, with problems we couldn't help solve.

'You can assassinate movies as you can assassinate people. I think UA murdered the film,' Passer told Richard T. Jameson in that same *Film Comment* piece. 'Or at least they tried to murder it.' Tried but failed: Cutter, Bone and Mo would not be forgotten, and *Cutter's Way* is still emerging as its decade's *The Sun Also Rises*, alive and lovely and sorrowful.

**Michael Atkinson, *Sight & Sound*, July 2011**

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## CUTTER'S WAY

*Director:* Ivan Passer  
*©/Production Companies:* United Artists, Gurian Entertainment  
*Producer:* Paul R. Gurian  
*Associate Producers:* Barrie Osborne, Larry Franco  
*Unit Production Manager:* Barrie Osborne  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Elise Rohden  
*Production Accountant:* Kurt Woolner  
*Location Manager:* Mark A. Radcliffe  
*First Assistant Directors:* Larry Franco, Jeffrey Chernov  
*Script Supervisor:* Joanie Blum  
*Casting:* Susan Shaw  
*Screenplay:* Jeffrey Alan Fiskin  
*Based on the Novel by:* Newton Thornburg  
*Director of Photography:* Jordan Cronenweth  
*Camera Operator:* Donald Thorin  
*First Assistant Camera:* Johnny Jensen  
*Gaffer:* Richard Hart  
*Key Grip:* Cary Griffith  
*Editor:* Caroline Ferriol  
*Assistant Film Editors:* Paul Dixon, Mark Winitzky  
*Negative Cutter:* Donah Bassett  
*Art Director:* Josan F. Russo  
*Set Decorator:* Thomas L. Roysden  
*Property Master:* John Zemansky  
*Construction Co-ordinator:* Robert E. Scaife  
*Key Costumers:* Jane Ruhm, John Dundii Huhn, Christine Goulding  
*Make-up:* Ben Nye Jr  
*Hair Stylist:* Lola 'Skip' McNalley  
*Title Design:* Dan Perri  
*Opticals:* Movie Magic  
*Music:* Jack Nitzsche  
*Performed by:* The Toronto Symphony Orchestra,  
Armin Electric Strings  
*Music Editors:* Curt Sobel, La Da Productions  
*Music Recording:* David Hassinger  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Petur Hliddal  
*Boom Operator:* Hudson Marquez  
*Sound Re-recording:* William McCaughey,  
Robert L. Harman, Howard Wollman  
*Supervising Sound Editors:* Ron Horwitz, Gregg Barbanell  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Bill Burton  
*Head Wrangler:* Jim Medearis

## Cast

Jeff Bridges (*Richard Bone*)  
John Heard (*Alex Cutter*)  
Lisa Eichhorn (*Maureen 'Mo' Cutter*)  
Ann Dusenberry (*Valerie Duran*)  
Stephen Elliott (*J.J. Cord*)  
Arthur Rosenberg (*George Swanson*)  
Nina Van Pallandt (*woman in hotel*)  
Patricia Donahue (*Mrs Cord*)  
Geraldine Baron (*Susie Swanson*)  
Katherine Pass (*Toyota woman*)  
Frank McCarthy (*Toyota man*)  
George Planco (*Toyota cop*)  
Jay Fletcher (*Cord security guard*)  
George Dickerson (*mortician*)  
Jack Murdock (*concession owner*)  
Essex Smith (*1st black*)  
Rod Gist (*2nd black*)  
Leonard Lightfoot (*3rd black*)  
Julia Duffy (*young girl*)  
Randy Shepard (*young man*)  
Roy Hollis (*working stiff*)  
Billy Drago (*garbage man*)  
Caesar Cordova (*garbage truck driver*)  
Jon Terry (*police captain*)  
William Pelt (*1st detective*)  
Ron Marcroft (*2nd detective*)  
Ted White, Tony Epper, Andy Epper,  
Chris Howell, H.P. Evetts, Ron Burke (*guards*)

USA 1981

108 mins

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### Thelma and Louise

Sun 1 Aug 18:00; Sat 14 Aug 20:35; Sat 28 Aug 20:20

### Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice

Mon 2 Aug 20:40; Fri 13 Aug 20:45; Wed 18 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Julie Lobalzo Wright, University of Warwick); Mon 23 Aug 14:30

### Bright Star

Tue 3 Aug 20:30; Fri 27 Aug 17:50; Mon 30 Aug 18:10

### Boyz N the Hood

Wed 4 Aug 17:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Leila Latif);  
Mon 9 Aug 20:50

### Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)

Thu 5 Aug 17:50; Thu 26 Aug 17:40

### The Big Lebowski

Fri 6 Aug 20:45; Mon 16 Aug 20:50; Wed 25 Aug 14:15

### Only Angels Have Wings

Sat 7 Aug 12:00; Tue 24 Aug 14:15; Tue 31 Aug 20:30

### A Farewell to Arms

Sun 8 Aug 12:20; Fri 20 Aug 14:30; Wed 25 Aug 18:00  
(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large)

### Matewan

Tue 10 Aug 14:15; Sun 15 Aug 18:20; Sat 21 Aug 12:20

### Cutter's Way

Wed 11 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large); Tue 17 Aug 14:30; Fri 20 Aug 20:50; Fri 27 Aug 20:50

### The New World

Thu 12 Aug 14:30; Sun 22 Aug 12:00

### Big Wednesday

Thu 19 Aug 17:50; Sun 29 Aug 18:10

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