



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

# The Wild Bunch

### The Wild Bunch

*Directed by:* Sam Peckinpah  
*©:* Warner Bros.-Seven Arts  
*Presents/Distributed by:* Warner Bros.-Seven Arts  
*Produced by:* Phil Feldman  
*Associate Producer:* Roy N. Sickner  
*Production Manager:* William Faralla  
*Second Unit Director:* Buzz Henry  
*Assistant Directors:* Cliff Coleman, Fred Gammon  
*Script Supervisor:* Crayton Smith  
*Screenplay by:* Walon Green, Sam Peckinpah  
*Story by:* Walon Green, Roy N. Sickner  
*Director of Photography:* Lucien Ballard  
*Key Grip:* Bud Gaunt  
*Special Effects:* Bud Hulburd  
*Editor:* Louis Lombardo  
*Associate Film Editor:* Robert L. Wolfe  
*Art Director:* Edward Carrere  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Gordon Dawson  
*Makeup:* Al Greenway  
*Filmed in:* Panavision  
*Colour by:* Technicolor  
*Music by:* Jerry Fielding  
*Music Supervised by:* Sonny Burke  
*Sound:* Robert J. Miller  
*We wish to express our appreciation to:*  
General de Bgda. E.E. Procopio

#### uncredited

*Properties:* Phil Ankrum  
*Supervising Recording Mixer:* Gordon Davis  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Edwin Scheid  
*Sound Editors:* William Mauch, William Rivol,  
Joe Kavigan, John Young, Stan Martin  
*Supervising Dialogue Editor:* Harold Fisher  
*Dialogue Editors:* Al Cavigga, Robert Barrett  
*Studios:* Estudios Churubusco

#### Cast:

William Holden (*Pike Bishop*)  
Ernest Borgnine (*Dutch Engstrom*)  
Robert Ryan (*Deke Thornton*)  
Edmond O'Brien (*Freddie Sykes*)  
Warren Oates (*Lyle Gorch*)  
Jaime Sanchez (*Angel*)  
Ben Johnson (*Tector Gorch*)  
Emilio Fernández (*Mapache*)  
Strother Martin (*Coffer*)  
L.Q. Jones (*T.C.*)  
Albert Dekker (*Pat Harrigan*)  
Bo Hopkins (*Crazy Lee*)  
Dub Taylor (*Mayor Wainscoat*)  
Jorge Russek (*Lieutenant Zamorra*)  
Alfonso Arau (*Herrera*)  
Chano Urueta (*Don José*)  
Sonia Amelio (*Teresa*)  
Aurora Clavel (*Aurora*)  
Elsa Cardenas (*Elsa*)  
Paul Harper (*Ross*)  
Bill Hart (*Jess*)  
Rayford Barnes (*Buck*)  
Steve Ferry (*Sergeant McHale*)  
Enrique Lucero (*Ignacio*)  
Elizabeth Dupeyron (*Rocio*)  
Yolanda Ponce (*Yolis*)  
José Chávez (*Juan José*)  
René Dupeyron (*Juan*)  
Pedro Galvan (*Benson*)  
Graciela Doring (*Emma*)  
Major Perez (*Perez*)  
Fernando Wagner  
(*Mohr, German army officer*)  
Jorge Rado (*Ernst*)  
Ivan Scott (*paymaster*)  
Sra. Madero (*Margaret*)

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Pushing the auteur theory into realms of fantasy, it is tempting to take the image of the scorpion in a nest of killer ants which appears like inverted commas round the fantastic opening holocaust of *The Wild Bunch* as Sam Peckinpah's personal visiting card, left on Hollywood's doorstep. Perhaps more than any other contemporary director, he has suffered the stings of the Hollywood machine, and even *The Wild Bunch* reveals the hand of the butcher in several minor cuts and in the speeding-up by a queasy censor of some slow-motion violence. Not, happily, that it is particularly damaging this time, since the film drives to its foregone conclusion with the sureness of an arrow.

Violence has not hitherto been one of Peckinpah's particular distinguishing marks, but it is in a way the logical outcome of the preoccupations of his earlier films with the passing of the old West, and the strain put on old loyalties by new moralities. In *The Wild Bunch* the year is 1914. Civilisation has made an anachronism of the outlaw, and he is being driven ever southwards in search of new pastures by ruthless, scavenging bounty-hunters, paid by the railroad and banking interests to do their dirty work for them. A whole way of life is being relentlessly stamped out, and to describe it, Peckinpah has equally relentlessly cleared the decks.

Gone are the proud, romantic images of horsemen sweeping across the horizon in the manner of John Ford, or the gentler, wearier ones of ageing gunmen pausing by the trailside to bathe their aching feet. Gone, too, the taste for the bizarre which only survives, muted and undemonstrative, in the temperance procession which marches, like Tennyson's six hundred, right into the valley of death, or the moment of strangely disquieting cataclysm when the wild bunch and their horses founder in a sand dune and their leader seems shorn like Samson of his strength. Instead the film is built up step by step with an almost clinical control to illustrate the process of rigor mortis. For Pike Bishop (William Holden), like the gunman hero of Melville's *Le Samourai* who arranges the ceremonial of his own death, is a dead man from the outset; and the film details the way he is pushed into facing this inescapable fact.

At the beginning, Bishop and his men ride into a small Texan town to rob a bank. A posse lies in wait on the rooftops overlooking the main street, fingers itching on the trigger. The temperance procession of stately matrons, tambourines and mocking children has just reached the bank when spontaneous combustion occurs and incredible carnage begins. For perhaps five minutes bullets explode like star-shells through flimsy shirts, blood spurts, bodies topple from the rooftops or are slammed across the street, horses rear and writhe, superbly controlled snatches of slow motion seize and prolong, yet somehow pity, the agony of death and mutilation, and time is suspended for a moment as Bishop turns to stare down the barrel of a rifle aimed but not fired by a former colleague, Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan). As the surviving members of the gang make their escape, the dust settles on a scene worthy of Goya's 'Disasters' as the bounty-hunters move in, squabbling and looting.

Thornton is sickened by the massacre of the townsfolk and by the indifference of his railroad employers. Bishop, exulting in a job cunningly pulled out of the fire, never even thinks about it. Not that there is any marked difference in moral sensibility between the two men; it is simply that a changing world has placed them on tangential rather than parallel lines. In the old days, the job well done, the unquestioned loyalties, the simple law of the gun, were everything: 'When you side with a man you stay with him, and if you can't do that you're like

Margarito Luna (*Luna*)  
Chalo González (*Gonzalez*)  
Lilia Castillo (*Lilia*)  
Elizabeth Unda (*Carmen*)  
Julio Corona (*Julio*)  
USA 1969©  
145 mins

## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### L'Argent (Money)

Mon 1 May 13:30; Sat 6 May 15:40;  
Sat 27 May 20:40; Tue 30 May 18:10

### The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)

Tue 2 May 20:40; Sat 6 May 12:30;  
Mon 22 May 20:45; Thu 25 May 14:30

### The Magnificent Ambersons

Wed 3 May 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,  
Programmer-at-Large); Mon 15 May 20:40

### The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

(*Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie*)

Thu 4 May 20:55; Tue 16 May 20:40;  
Wed 31 May 18:10 (+ intro)

### The River

Fri 5 May 20:45; Mon 8 May 13:20;  
Sat 13 May 18:10

### The Wild Bunch

Sat 6 May 20:10; Sun 14 May 18:00;  
Mon 29 May 18:00

### Greed

Sun 7 May 12:50; Sun 14 May 15:00

### Le Jour se lève (Daybreak)

Tue 9 May 20:50; Thu 11 May 18:30;  
Sat 13 May 20:30; Wed 24 May 18:15 (+ intro)

### Persepolis

Wed 10 May 18:15 (+ intro); Tue 23 May 18:20;  
Sat 27 May 18:10

### The Big City (Mahanagar)

Fri 12 May 20:30; Sat 20 May 15:00;  
Sun 28 May 12:50

### Still Walking (Arutemo Arutemo)

Mon 15 May 14:00 (+ intro); Thu 18 May 18:10;  
Sun 21 May 15:40; Fri 26 May 20:30

### Dance, Girl, Dance

Tue 16 May 18:20; Sat 27 May 16:00

### Scarface

Wed 17 May 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,  
Programmer-at-Large); Fri 19 May 20:30;  
Mon 29 May 13:40

### The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp

Sat 20 May 19:50; Mon 29 May 13:00

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

## SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25\*

\* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: [sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk](http://sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk)

**SIGHT  
AND  
SOUND**

some animal.' The code was harsh, unsentimental, and yet in its own way as innocent as the children who gather round laughing while the ants and scorpions blindly destroy each other. As the wild bunch move ever southwards in retreat from the tide which threatens to engulf them, the edges begin to fray, they snarl and quarrel and settle their disputes at gunpoint. Only in the beat of action do they recover the harmony which enables them to function together like a well-oiled machine.

The paradox – or if you like, the tragedy – of the film is that Bishop and Thornton, ranged by circumstances on opposite sides, each begins to move too late towards the other. Bishop, discovering that he has been tricked into stealing metal washers instead of gold because the bank was way ahead of him in planning, realises what Thornton realised some time previously, 'We got to start thinkin' beyond our guns. Those days are closin' fast.' He also realises (the flashback to Thornton's arrest) that it was his failure to think which caused Thornton to secede from the gang. Nevertheless, he again decides to rob a bank, knowing that 'they' will be waiting for him; and his dry comment, 'I wouldn't have it any other way,' acknowledges that this is the end of the line.

All the conventional signs and symbols of sentiment are ruthlessly beheaded in the film. After the massacre, among the first signs of life in the streets are the children, happily playing cops-and-robbers among the corpses; when one of his men is too seriously wounded to ride on, Bishop simply shoots him; a Mexican girl singing in heroic posture on a troop train with bandolier slung across her shoulders turns out to be not a revolutionary but an oppressor; and of course the wild bunch, arriving in Mexico just as Pancho Villa is taking up arms against oppression, throw in their lot with government gold rather than revolutionary right. So when Thornton edges away from his position on the side of the law, following Bishop as closely as an angel of death but refusing to pull the trigger, it is not simply because he is disgusted by the squalor, cupidity and inefficiency of the men who are now his comrades, but because he has lost something more precious than moral rightness.

What the film is all about is contained, essentially, in two brief scenes. At the fiesta in the Mexican village, home of one of the gang, the world is forgotten in the joy of celebration, and even the wild, irreconcilable Gorch brothers are seen happily playing cat's cradle with their girls or courting under the trees with the gauche courtesy of schoolboys. 'We all dream of being a child again,' murmurs the village ancient, 'even the worst of us ... perhaps the worst most of all.' It isn't possible, of course, and all one can do is draw a line, as Dutch (Ernest Borgnine) does when told that Mapache, the cold, callous bandit general they are doing business with, is, like them, a thief: 'We ain't nothing like him. We don't hang nobody.'

It is this fine distinction which provokes the second, equally terrifying, holocaust of the end. When the Mexican member of the gang is seized by Mapache for personal reasons, the rest accept it as one of the rules of the game; but when they see him being tortured, humiliated, dragged through the mud, and finally having his throat cut to satisfy a whim, everything comes to a point. Trapped between the scavengers and the degenerates, they stage – for the last time and for their own benefit – a clean death to herald the end of an era. When the smoke clears, the bounty-hunters move in, the refugees move out, and a new age begins as the last survivor of the wild bunch appears at the head of a group of peasant revolutionaries to ask Thornton to join them: 'It ain't like it used to be, but it'll do.' And both laugh, not with the hollow mockery of the end of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, but with the pleasure of innocence regained.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1969

---

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged | Browse online at [thebfi.org.uk/programme-notes](http://thebfi.org.uk/programme-notes)

Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)