

BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID

Directed by George Roy Hill
Produced by John Foreman
Distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox
Released in 1969

There's an overwhelming emptiness to this movie. The humor doesn't mitigate the emptiness, but exposes that human propensity for ignoring death (in order to forestall it). Butch and Sundance know they're doomed, but they can't face it, so they crack jokes to hide the pain. They reveal no affection for each other, nor for Etta (at least, not in words). They can't say anything loving but their actions reveal the truth.

First of all, the fact that these two men could share Etta (Sundance claims her physically, Butch claims her spiritually) without envy or strife is a huge indicator of how tight they really are. Butch is the brains, Sundance is the brawn. Butch is an innovator, Sundance likes a sure thing. Butch reconciles, Sundance confronts; Butch is loquacious, Sundance is taciturn; Butch is kind (but can get rough) and Sundance is cruel (or, at least, acts that way). Together they make a dynamite team. But they're even better as friends.

The long flight from Joe LeFors bears this out. It's the most innovative and evocative part of the movie. Instead of just making a dash for it, the pair make two big stops and several shorter ones. They hide in plain sight. They try to make sense of what's happening, trying to convince each other it's all going to work out. The posse is just a pile of dots in the distance. Butch and Sundance have eather other. There's that strange commingling of fear, excitement, and reassurance that is emotionally gratifying. Their flight from justice just brings them closer. If they're both wanted men, they share the same big problem and should stay tight. To solve it for one is to solve it for both.

They start being chased surrounded by their gang. Then there's just four. Then there's two, with each man a horse. Then they share a horse. Finally, it's just the two of them on the edge of a cliff, with not even their hats to protect them.

They cheat death, but soon discover that LeFors will not stop until they're dead. Sundance agrees with Butch's idea of Bolivia. Etta agrees to come, but flatly informs them that despite their flight, they will not cheat fate; they are doomed to die in a horrific fashion.

The next day they're all packed, dressed respectably, and looking sober. Butch angrily discards his cherished possession with a dismissive, "The future's all yours, you lousy bicycles."

It wasn't just a means of transportation. It held the promise of a new century. We associate it with the happiest time in the movie, Butch and Etta cavorting in the barnyard and the apple orchard. Now Butch angrily rejects it, and the effect is like seeing a master kick his loyal dog. Sure, the bicycle doesn't have feelings, but the image we're left with lets us know there's more going on here. Abandoned to an idyllic stream, its spokes glisten as the wheel slowly comes to a stop, the image going from color to sepia tones.

Butch knows he's going to die, and it won't be very long. And even if that interpretation's going too far, this is the first time Butch is forced to do something he doesn't want to do. Bolivia was a great idea when it meant greener pastures. Now it just means failure, fear, and flight. By rejecting the bicycle, Butch rejects the prospect of happiness and the expectation of a long life. For the first time he realizes he's not in control.

Stubbornly, he decides to continue thieving. He only stops because LeFors has caught his trail in Bolivia. He and Sundance decide to go straight. In a brilliant twist, they get a job as gunslingers to guard mine payrolls. On the first trip, their boss is killed. Butch flings the money up to the bandits, and we think Butch and Sundance are chickening out. But they confront the bandits. Butch implores them to leave the money and go. We see that he wants to fulfill his responsibilities. But to do so, for the first time, Butch must kill.

It turns out that stealing from faceless entities is nothing compared to taking a life—even when it was in self-defense.

Chagrined, Butch rejects farming and ranching as too staid and labor-intensive. He wants ease and freedom. Etta, seeing the writing on the wall, leaves, and the boys return to robbery.

We never hear why Butch and Sundance want to rob. They go to dinner in fine clothes, but they don't go out for ostentatious luxuries. So why take the risk? Is it a compulsion? Is it merely something to pass the time? After all, they accrue so much money it's not like they're just trying to stave off hunger.

Butch doesn't seem to think much of property rights. He's more into hard-core economic efficiency: "If he'd just pay me what he's spending to make me stop robbing him, I'd stop robbing him!"

It's not all economic efficiency for Butch. He seriously thinks that if he and Sundance volunteer as officers for the war with Spain that all their wrongs will be forgotten. He doesn't seem to grasp that the titans of the Union Pacific railroad value money (and their wounded pride) more than patriotism.

Taking these matters into consideration when analyzing the death of the bandits, the movie seems to be an indictment of capitalism. The bandits are not sympathetic. They are dirty, and their leader seems to be cheating one of the men out of his fair share. Regardless, they don't know whether Butch and Sundance are going to gun them down. Maybe they see drawing their weapons as self-defense. And their deaths are agonized over by the camera. It's all very sad. Perhaps the bandits considered the land distribution in Bolivia to be unjust. What if they thought a share of the mine's profits were rightfully theirs? Still, they *did* kill the boss man in cold blood, so if the filmmakers are trying to make hay of capitalism they couldn't find less sympathetic characters to make their points.

But Butch and Sundance are very likeable. They're not giving the money they steal to the poor. They're so quick, resourceful, and sympathetic that we cheer them on for their audacity and joyful recklessness. As with many movies (most notably *Psycho*) the filmmakers establish a morality unique to the movie, defined by the protagonist's actions. We, the audience, are eager to embrace this alternate moral scheme and gratefully forget the world outside the theater for a couple of hours. It's especially easy when, as here, it's a period piece. A contemporary filmic bank robber may raise too many questions. In contrast, the world of

Butch and Sundance is very remote. It's like another world. So let them have their fun robbing trains and banks. They deserve it. They entertain us.

For all the myriad interpretations this film allows (one of its strengths, for sure), it's ultimately a film about friendship. The finale in the village brings us home. This extraordinary sequence is distinguished by a wellspring of counter-balancing humor, and in the freeze-frame/pull-back we have one of the most pioneering, innovative endings to any movie. But the significance of two moments in this sequence are easily missed. They both go to the matter of friendship.

First, Butch decides that he'll go out to retrieve the ammunition. He doesn't want to do it, and Sundance has already volunteered. But Butch reasons that Sundance is the superior shot, so it does no good to have Butch laying down fire. Butch may be thinking about the objective of retrieving the ammunition and returning it to the house. However, he may also be thinking of Sundance's vulnerability. Butch would rather risk sacrificing himself to a hail of bullets than see his friend slaughtered because he couldn't provide cover.

A couple of minutes later, a more substantive example of sacrifice emerges. Where Butch's demonstration of love was a touch ambiguous, Sundance's is anything but. It's the second best shot in the movie. It carries more of a visceral, emotional impact than the bicycle wheel in the stream, but it's not as pretty.

Butch has grabbed the ammo, but in the process of bringing it back to safety he is shot. Sundance, who has barricaded himself behind some crates, now steps out and in front of Butch. Sundance substitutes himself as a target.

All Sundance needs to do is grab the ammo and head in for safety. But he decides to save Butch. A series of quick shots ensues, but the most important one is Sundance turning to his right, the gun in his right hand still perched on his left shoulder; dipping and twisting, he pivots hard and fires the gun in his left hand. Butch is four feet behind him, struggling to get up. The shot lasts a mere ten frames. But it is inspiring for the balletic majesty of Sundance's shooting; for the relentless, dogged grit that Sundance demonstrates; for his ability to deliver under pressure; but most of all for the beauty of his defense of his friend. Sundance gains nothing by abandoning his cover. He is risking his life for his friend.

Sundance doesn't return to the house without Butch. Both men now shot, they fall into the house together.

Just before the two men make one last run for it, Butch asks Sundance if he saw LeFors out there. Sundance answers in the negative. Butch, greatly relieved, sighs, "Oh, good. For a moment there I thought we were in trouble!"

This is about the funniest line in the movie. It's shocking to see such a comedic moment juxtaposed with the stark drama of their consequent death. But more than that, the line is valuable for informing the audience that these guys aren't trying to hide their fears. Yes, they're both shot-up, but they truly think they can handle whatever is out there. They're optimists, and they trust in each other.

It's a great finish to the movie, because we don't have to see these guys lamenting their choices and despairing in the face of death. What a relief it is for the audience; we aren't forced to see our heroes Learn a Lesson. We get to have an exciting, inspiring ride right to the end.

And if we have learned a lesson once the credits roll, we're secretly glad that Butch and Sundance didn't live to be proven wrong. We live in reality. So we have to understand the consequences of wrong-doing. But Butch and Sundance are mythic. It's best that they don't know the hard truths, for them as well as for us. We think too much of them, and we want to remember them for what they were, not for what they should have become.

By freezing the frame, the last moment of their lives is extended, seemingly beyond the movie's end. Thus, those mythic figures, Butch and Sundance, live on.