

Getting Technical with Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

Some spoilers ahead

When recalling classic westerns one likely thinks of glaring brows, the sandy west, orange hues, angry men, and the list goes on. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* effectively calls itself a western, exhibiting these tropes while also subverting the genre. The most effective comparison I could make would be the 2011 animated film *Rango*; but instead of a capricious chameleon we get a quirky buddy comedy.

The film begins with the somewhat tongue-in-cheek phrase appearing on the screen, “most of what follows is true”. This establishes the movie as at least attempting to be historically accurate, while letting the audience know early on what is to come: a comedic, whimsical retelling of a western and the story of two prominent figures of the genre. Very aptly described as a “love note to westerns.”



Likely the second thing anyone would notice a few minutes into the movie would be the everpresent sepia tones, characterized as the chemical process of black and white photographs turning brown, mainly attributed to very old pictures. The warmth of the colors on screen also gives way to making the audience themselves feel the physical temperature of 1899 Wyoming. Heat seems to make all of the action feel more intense (as is also the case in Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing*). Seeing the shine on a character’s forehead from sweat as they anxiously reload their gun to aim at an opponent 50 meters away only serves to add more stress to the situation, enhancing suspense as well as the emotional stakes.



Despite being both fun and whimsical, the film does a great job at building suspense. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* stays true to westerns while simultaneously turning them on their head. In this ideal, the film includes several intense shootout scenes; and they are made as intense as they are by following a ‘high-low-high-low’ pattern. Referring to the energy of the scene, for example, it goes back and forth between a few seconds of very loud gunshots and quick cuts, to a long lull where Butch and Sundance, are reloading or strategizing. This could be what one, Roger Ebert, was referring to when he claimed the film was “slow and boring”, as these scenes do tend to drag on for a long time. However, that is not a bad thing, and it does not work against the film in any way. The long back and forths make their triumph more satisfying (or losses more frustrating). It not only builds and enhances suspense, but it advances the plot. You see Butch and Sundance grow increasingly more frustrated when they can’t lose the group who’s following them no matter what they try, which eventually compels them to move South America. Despite these things, the same lengthy scenes also add to the noticeable overall theme of the film not taking itself too seriously, allowing the audience to laugh along with the characters, or chuckle at a line most likely not intended to be humorous through the character’s eyes, but funny nonetheless. This is also why Roger Ebert must have said that the script was “too cute” to be called a western. But just because a film isn’t another tired old remake doesn’t mean it’s not part of a genre.

Going along with this idea, the film manages to include these incredibly suspenseful shootouts, as well as Butch, Sundance, and Etta comedically robbing a bank or riding a bike without making the entire movie seem disjointed. The slight juxtaposition of them even works in the movie's favor. This could be partly attributed to the fact that the characters themselves are very well-established. You get to see the full spectrum of their personality, for the good and the bad. For example, Sundance's serious facade as he skillfully rides a horse or aims his gun seems to melt away for the audience when he reveals that he doesn't know how to swim. The revelation is surprising, both for the viewer as well as Butch. And after you watch Sundance desperately cling to Butch while being thrown through a rapid you're able to laugh with or *at* the characters, but also see that they're scared. They're not two-dimensional. From this point on when Sundance kicks the ground in frustration it doesn't appear out of character or strange.

Speaking of the characters, Butch and Sundance are the dynamic duo, the stars. This dynamic is also established early on, as you see that Sundance is 'the skill' and Butch Cassidy is 'the brain'. It's a classic trope, and in westerns there is a 'black hat vs. white hat' cliché, normally depicting a visual dichotomy between the hero and villain. In *Butch Cassidy* it furthers the pair's on-screen relationship. Butch dons a white hat, while Sundance is seen in a black cowboy hat, as well as another piece of black clothing. An effective buddy comedy's purpose is that the main characters bounce off one another. One is hot, the other is cool; or, they're both hot, and they increasingly make each other more frustrated, with a comedic back and forth until it culminates to a resolution. Even if one is hot and the other is cool, or they're both hot, they still have their set dynamic, set personalities that work certain ways in different situations. One is the skill, one is the brain, black, white, serious, eccentric; there is still a visual dichotomy present in the film, just not one that represents good and evil. The colors are a pair, you can't have one without the other, or two of one and none of the other. Any solution that is reached you know it's going to be reached together, any problem solved, problem gotten into, etc.

All of these things and more solidify *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as not only an original western, but a great movie overall. It provides a fun experience not just through wisecracking dialogue, but through intentional choices made to boost the audience's viewing experience.