

The Magnificent Seven

By Stephen Prince

“The Magnificent Seven” did not set the domestic box-office on fire when it was released in 1960, which is hard to believe now because it went to become one of the most enduringly popular Westerns ever made. Its box-office performance was mediocre, and studio executives considered it a flop. But then a strange thing happened. In a period when movies had little aftermarket value beyond their theatrical release, this film refused to go away. It was revived, re-released, paired with other films on double-bills, and gradually built an audience. It attracted huge numbers of viewers overseas and steadily grew a following. When television picked it up, new fans arrived.

Today it is easy to see why “The Magnificent Seven” continues to draw viewers. It sports a great cast, a terrific story, a brilliant music score, and it is packed throughout with memorable dialogue. “We deal in lead, friend.” “Sorry, I’m not in the blessing business.” “He’s a good gun, and we aren’t going to a church social.” “I never rode shotgun on a hearse before.” “Nobody throws me my own guns and says ‘run.’ Nobody.”

This catchy wordplay is noteworthy because the movie originated from a foreign-language film classic. It is a skillful adaptation of Akira Kurosawa’s “Seven Samurai” (1954), an epic adventure film set in 16th century Japan during a time of civil war. Villagers hire samurai to protect them from the bandits who’ve been preying on neighboring farmers. While the samurai are successful in defending the village, their victory is ironic. At film’s end, the surviving samurai stand beneath the graves of their fallen comrades and reflect that the farmers are the winners because they are tied to the land. The samurai class, on the other hand, will become obsolete and vanish in history.

Kurosawa’s battle epic lent itself to the Western, and Kurosawa himself was a fan of Westerns. Samurai in Japanese movies, if not in historical fact, were analogous figures of legend and romance like movie gunfighters in the American West. The samurai in Kurosawa’s film were *ronin*, rootless, drifting warriors, like movie gunfighters, who carried their weapon on their

This two-page ad appeared in the Oct. 3, 1960 edition of Film Bulletin, a publication for exhibitors. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#)

hip. Considerable mystique surrounded the samurai’s sword as it did the gunfighter’s pistol. There had been relatively few Hollywood movies focused on professional gunfighters before “The Magnificent Seven,” which helped to establish the gunfighter template in American cinema. It also popularized the ‘professional’ plot, stories focused on tough men, skilled in the arts of war, engaging in a hazardous mission. It blazed the trail for such later Westerns as “The Professionals” and “The Wild Bunch.”

Mythic abstraction replaces Kurosawa’s detailed historical focus. Few of the characters have a backstory; we know little about Chris (Yul Brynner), the leader of the seven, or about the others. When Chris is asked where he comes from, he points silently in one direction, and when he’s asked where he’s going, he points in the opposite direction. His response is the essence of cool; nothing is disclosed, nothing is revealed beyond what matters. The seven gunmen are defined by what they do and by the personas of the actors who play them.

The movie exudes cool as a style and attitude in a period when those things were hip in jazz but not in the Western. The casting of Yul Brynner as Chris is startling because he’d never been in a Western. He’d attained great success as the King of Siam in the stage show and film, “The King and I.” And he was bald, having shaved his head for that role. But his presence, dressed all in black, is stylish and chic in ways that were innovative in the Western. The film’s villain, the lively, affable bandit chief Calvera (Eli Wallach), wears a brightly colored costume.

Chris and Calvera's demeanor and costumes slyly upend the black hat-white hat moral coding of conventional Westerns. (Wallach's endearing performance as Calvera so intrigued director Sergio Leone that he gave the actor a role that became one of Wallach's best known characters, Tuco in "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.")

James Coburn's lanky, laconic gunman, Britt, is a hipster in Western drag. He says little and is so good with gun or knife he doesn't have to prove it. When a blustery cowpoke tries to match his draw against Britt's knife, Britt tells him with quiet arrogance, "You lost" and then proceeds to demonstrate this in lethal fashion. And when he makes a spectacular shot, dropping a man riding at full gallop from a great distance using only a pistol, his awestruck companion, Chico (Horst Bucholz), proclaims it the greatest shot he's ever seen. "The worst," Britt replies. "I was aiming at the horse."

Like Coburn, Steve McQueen was another cool cat on the verge of stardom, and the story goes that he was reluctant to take the role of Vin, the film's second lead, because he didn't have much dialogue. Director John Sturges, who had worked with McQueen before on "Never So Few," promised he'd give McQueen the camera. And, indeed, in numerous scenes where Vin is not a key character, we see McQueen catching the camera's gaze with flashy bits of business – shaking shotgun shells next to his ear, taking his hat off, twirling it around, putting it back on his head. All of this reportedly irritated the film's star, Yul Brynner, who felt that McQueen was stealing too many scenes.

The other great up-and-comer in the cast is Charles Bronson who would, like McQueen and Coburn, be a major star, and much of the film's pleasure lies in watching these actors, who were on the cusp of huge careers, playing characters that conform to the cool, deadly personas they would develop and showcase in films over the next decades.

Director John Sturges had a sure hand with Westerns. His resume included "Escape from Fort Bravo," "Gunfight at the OK Corral," "The Law and Jake Wade," and "Last Train from Gun Hill." He was one

of the era's most skillful filmmakers at staging action for the anamorphic widescreen frame, and his film, "Bad Day at Black Rock," was widely admired for its state-of-the-art widescreen compositions. Not a surprise, then, that "The Magnificent Seven" looks gorgeous in widescreen, as Sturges and cinematographer Charles Lang adroitly use the full dimensions of the Panavision frame and compose action for the large screen by using close-ups sparingly.

Sturges' preference for lengthy shots instead of fast cutting influenced composer Elmer Bernstein's decision to write a musical score that was faster in its pacing than the film itself was. Drawing from the influence of Aaron Copland and American folk traditions, Bernstein produced a definitive Western movie soundtrack and one of the best-known in the entire genre. It became a cowboy trademark when the Marlboro cigarette company used it as theme music for its television commercials. Bernstein's quintessential score stands with Ennio Morricone's music for Sergio Leone's Italian Westerns as work that defined a genre, and it has been widely quoted and recycled in other contexts.

In its day, the film's story about American mercenaries fighting in a foreign land seemed to exemplify aspects of America's Cold War foreign policy. Viewed in these terms, the film can be interpreted as an allegory about U.S. involvement in regional conflicts throughout the world. But the movie's enduring influence has outlasted this topical salience, and the pleasures it affords viewers have much more to do with its style and tone. It's one of the coolest Westerns ever made.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Stephen Prince is a professor at Virginia Tech and the author of numerous books which include The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa and Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies.