Today, The Wild Bunch is generally considered to be one of the number of movies in the late 1960s and early 1970s that recon-contextualized the Vietnam conflict. Generally considered “the most graphically violent Western ever made and one of the most violent movies of all time” (Murray, Peckinpah), The Wild Bunch became the subject of heated controversy among its reviewers and the public after its release—its notoriety due to an extraordinarily high body count and sinew-ripping slow motion. As New Yorker critic Pauline Kael has commented about the public outrage elicited by the opening and closing scenes of The Wild Bunch, “All they saw was the violence” (quoted in Murray, Peckinpah). This public reaction roughly divided the movie’s viewers into two camps less than a year after the Tet Offensive, when “the issues of violence in American society and American foreign policy had become central to virtually every national forum of public opinion,” and at a time when the American public “stood at the end of a decade of political assassinations whose magnitude was unprecedented in [its] history, and [was] deeply mired in a genocidal
The Wild Bunch seemed to be an allegory of our involvement in Vietnam, where outlaws, mercenaries, and federal troops fought to produce the largest civilian “body count” since World War II. Others saw the film more generally as a comment on the level and nature of violence in American life. But nearly everyone saw that it bore some relationship to the major social issues of the times, and, depending on how one felt about those issues, one’s reaction to the film was enthusiastically positive or vehemently negative—both mistaken responses to a work whose prevailing tenor is moral ambiguity from start to finish.

Roger Ebert remembers his own response when attending a screening of The Wild Bunch. When a reviewer from Reader’s Digest stood up and asked why this movie was ever made, Ebert also “stood up and called it a masterpiece”; he says, “I felt then, and now, that The Wild Bunch is one of the great defining moments of modern movies.”

Critical reaction to The Wild Bunch (1969) has been just as volatile. Roy Armes’ reaction to the director’s unflinching treatment of the material, for example, is decidedly negative, noting that while The Wild Bunch is about “...a collection of stupid brutish men [for director Sam Peckinpah]....Casting his film in the Western mould...comes automatically to endow them with a spurious glamour....The violence too that Peckinpah intends to be horrifying as well as strangely fascinating becomes infused with a false romanticism in the context of the Western” (106). Michael Sragow, on the other hand, finds The Wild Bunch “irreducible.” It is a movie that “demands that you establish an original relation to it.” “What struck me, and shook me,” Sragow says, “[w]asn’t that specific. It had to do with the size of the characters and the gnarly individualism of the storytelling; the tonal blend of effrontery, tenderness, and Rabelaisian gusto; the unprecedented combination of gusto; the unprecedented combination of virtuosity and heartbreaking passion”; Peckinpah, he claims, gave himself over to “the gamiest possible example of an aesthetically worn out and socially disreputable genre [and...] came up with a piece of art whose power couldn’t be shrugged off or explained away” (Sragow 116). In Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America, Richard Slotkin lauds this film, viewing The Wild Bunch as “the Moby-Dick of Westerns: a sprawling epic whose powerful poetic and ideological resonance derives from its deliberate combination of strong adventure-narrative with compendious reference to history and the traditions of American