

Blu-ray Review: Flawed ‘Blackthorn’ Bolstered By Superb Visuals, Extras

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on January 3, 2012 - 11:33am

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CHICAGO – I frankly can’t imagine how any moviegoer could favor Mateo Gil’s somber, low-key genre exercise, “Blackthorn,” over George Roy Hill’s marvelously entertaining 1969 classic, “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” Sure, Western buffs have often criticized Hill’s film for romanticizing its subject matter, yet there was a dark edge and tragic poignance in William Goldman’s script that earned the film its shattering ending.

Moviegoers seeking similar thrills from “Blackthorn” will be sorely disappointed. The picture is a wholly unremarkable rethinking of the Butch Cassidy legend that fails in its aspirations to leave an equally iconic imprint on the oft-mythologized tale. Miguel Barros’ script bases its premise off the conceit that Butch and Sundance’s death in the 1908 Bolivian standoff was based on unsubstantiated evidence. It’s an intriguing premise, but Barros just uses it as an excuse to concoct a less whimsical retread of Goldman’s formula.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

The film opens 19 years after the standoff, as the exiled Cassidy (Sam Shepard) whiles away his days in seclusion. Living under the alias of James Blackthorn, Cassidy romances his Bolivian housekeeper and composes letters to the son he’s never seen, and perhaps never will. Flashbacks to the immortal escapades of Butch and Sundance fall short of capturing the chemistry and brotherhood that made these men such larger-than-life figures. Though morality tales have long been the specialty of Gil, who has forged several triumphant collaborations with Alejandro Amenábar (“Abre los ojos,” “The Sea Inside,” “Agora”), he seems oddly out of his element in the Western genre. Despite the arresting shots of painterly expanses lensed by veteran cinematographer Juan Ruiz Anchia (“House of Games”), there’s little sense of a lived-in atmosphere. Everything looks too polished and picturesque, while the characters fit snugly into familiar archetypes. It’s nearly impossible to generate suspense over whether Cassidy will take the moral high ground during a conflict, since Shepard plays him as a man of straightforward decency.

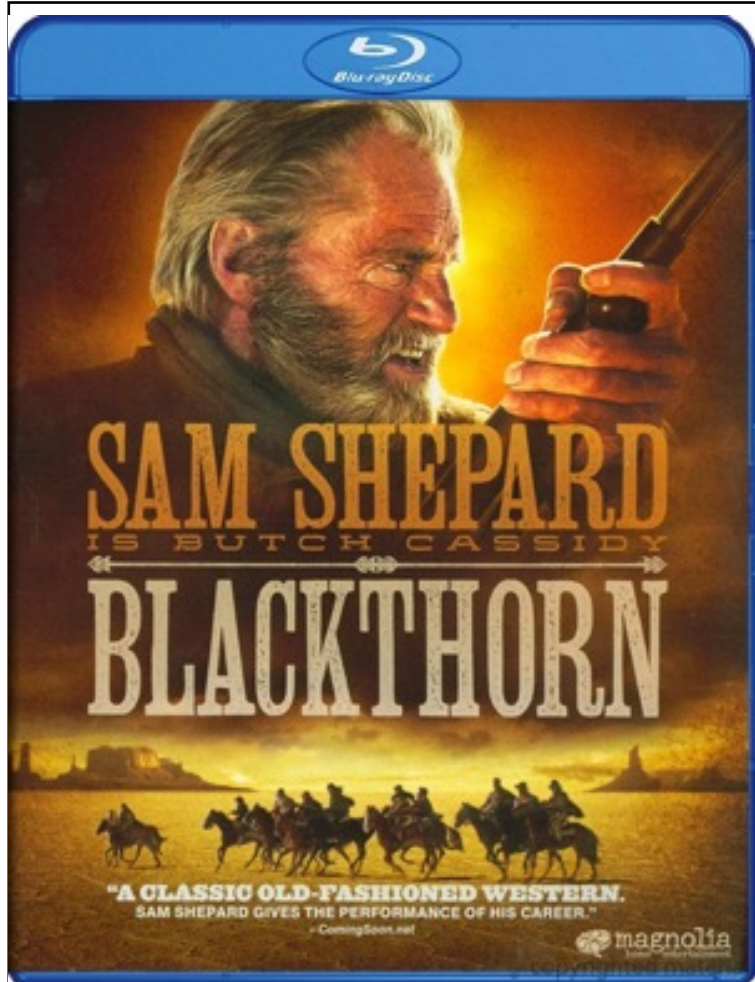


Sam Shepard stars in Mateo Gil’s Blackthorn.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

When Cassidy decides to make his long-delayed return to America, it’s not long before his plans are derailed by a scrappy young outlaw,

Eduardo (well played by Eduardo Noriega). Cassidy allows him to tag along, and together they evade Eduardo's mysterious foes, who travel on horseback and leave a sinister dust cloud in their wake (one can almost hear Paul Newman asking, "Who are those guys?"). Only in the final act does the film build some sizable dramatic momentum, as Gil allows the moral certitude of a key decision to clash with its emotional repercussions. The glimmers of newfound adrenaline that grace Shepard's weathered features are a joy to behold, and the picture springs to life whenever Cassidy croons melancholy tunes that echo through the canyons. Yet the most artful and gripping sequence in the picture achieves a grandeur all its own. It occurs after Cassidy and Eduardo decide to split off in the blinding sands of a salt desert as their enemies grow closer. Each rider is reduced to an indistinguishable spec on the horizon, much like Omar Sharif in "Lawrence of Arabia," as the menacing silence proves to be as excruciating as the extreme heat.



Blackthorn was released on Blu-ray and DVD on Dec. 20, 2011.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

"Blackthorn" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio) that brings breathtaking clarity to Anchia's meticulously detailed imagery. This is easily one of the best-looking Blu-rays in recent memory, and is worth a rental simply for the visuals alone. Yet this release is also bolstered by a series of superb extras, including 22 minutes of deleted footage highlighted by a vastly superior alternate ending. There's also a touching moment where Blackthorn reflects on the age of a deceased adversary in the salt desert, as well as expanded dialogue scenes between Shepard and Rea. In a 10-minute featurette, Gil says that he wanted to "avoid the trappings of folklore," while providing a "much more pleasant autumnal story" for the elderly Cassidy. He equates the legendary gunslinger's economically motivated crimes with those committed by Robin Hood. In an all-too-brief featurette, Shepard praises the script for evoking an idea of manhood that has become lost overtime.

One of my favorite special features on any disc has routinely been a sampling of the filmmakers previous work, and "Blackthorn" includes two excellent Spanish-language short subjects that effectively illustrate Mateo Gil's versatility as both a writer and director. 1998's "Breaking and Entering" stars Noriega as a smooth-talking scam artist attempting to cheat a woman (Petra Martínez) out of her money. The banter between salesman and customer takes on a morbid fascination, particularly when Noriega and his amused henchman (Pepón Nieto) threaten to break character. Their suppressed ugliness is heard only during the end credits, which further showcases Noriega's gift for appearing simultaneously innocent and sinister. The other film, 2008's would-be romance, "Say Me," finds even more uniques ways to make a dialogue-heavy, two-character scene thrillingly cinematic. "Blackthorn" is Gil's first feature-length effort since 1999's "Nobody Knows Anybody" (also starring Noriega), and on the basis of these shorts, one hopes that the director will make another film soon (preferably a film that isn't called "Blackthorn: Vol. 2").

'Blackthorn' is released by Magnolia Home Entertainment and stars Sam Shepard, Eduardo Noriega, Stephen Rea, Magaly Solier, Dominique McElligott, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau and Padraic Delaney. It was written by Miguel Barros and directed by Mateo Gil. It was released on Dec. 20, 2011. It is rated R.



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