

The Magnificent Seven: Hollywood remakes and the problem of diminishing returns

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Directed by Antoine Fuqua, screenplay by Richard Wenk and Nic Pizzolatto, based on the film by Akira Kurosawa

The Magnificent Seven, directed by Antoine Fuqua (*Training Day*, *Olympus Has Fallen*), is the latest property to receive the Hollywood “remake” treatment. Based on the John Sturges’ 1960 Western of the same title (itself inspired by Akira Kurosawa’s 1954 film *Seven Samurai*), the film tells the story of a band of hired guns who join together to defend a small town from marauders.

Generally, when one hears about the latest remake to issue from the Hollywood studio apparatus, it is not a cause for genuine excitement. Instead, “lack of originality,” “poverty of imagination,” “creative and intellectual exhaustion,” “run out of steam” and other similar phrases are more likely to come to mind. While certain retellings have managed to invest new creative energy into old stories, or have successfully refashioned a story for a new audience (which was arguably true about the 1960 version of *The Magnificent Seven*), the vast majority of Hollywood remakes today are little more than cynical exercises in brand extension.

Virtually every successful or marginally successful film (or popular television series) from the past half-century has been considered for either a remake, a “reboot,” or a sequel, as studio executives rummage through their companies’ intellectual property catalogs for films with enough name recognition to justify a multimillion dollar investment.

In 2016 alone we have seen remakes of or sequels to *The Jungle Book*, *Ghostbusters*, *Ben-Hur*, *Blair Witch*, *Independence Day*, *The Bourne Identity*, *Star Trek*, *X-Men*, *Tarzan* and others. Still to come are new versions of *Beauty and the Beast*, *King Kong*, *Power Rangers*, *Jumanji*, *Blade Runner*, *The Mummy* and more. There

is a bizarre amount of self-cannibalism going on in major Hollywood studios today.

The new iteration of *The Magnificent Seven* centers around the small town of Rose Creek (apparently in California), where industrialist Bartholomew Bogue (Peter Sarsgaard) has been driving poor farmers off their land and slaughtering those who oppose him. Emma Cullen (Haley Bennett), the wife of a murdered local, leaves town in search of gunfighters to help defend the residents. She encounters Sam Chisolm (Denzel Washington), a warrant officer and expert gunslinger. Chisolm holds a grudge against Bogue for personal reasons, and he agrees to recruit a team to fight on behalf of the town.

The group that Chisolm recruits includes gambler and magician Josh Faraday (Chris Pratt), Civil War veteran and skilled marksman Goodnight Robicheaux (Ethan Hawke), knife-wielding Billy Rocks (Byung-hun Lee), Mexican outlaw Vasquez (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo), tracker and frontiersman Jack Horne (Vincent D’Onofrio) and Comanche archer Red Harvest (Martin Sensmeier). The seven hired guns make short work of Bogue’s armed enforcers in the town. When word reaches Bogue of their defeat, he leads his entire “army” into battle to crush the resistance.

The seven gunmen train the townsfolk to fight, set traps, etc. Various interpersonal conflicts arise among the gunmen, which are neatly resolved in time for the climactic battle. The final sequence pits Bogue’s ruthless forces against the outnumbered and outgunned farmers, led by the seven gunfighters. Heroics inevitably ensue.

The 1960 version of *The Magnificent Seven* is a generally charming and entertaining film. It is notable mainly for Elmer Bernstein’s iconic score and for its excellent cast, which included Yul Brynner, Eli

Wallach, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, James Coburn, and others. Audiences were no doubt drawn to the premise of a crew of outlaws and drifters coming together, with contradictory but generally selfless motivations, to defend helpless people. An early scene that had the Brynner and McQueen characters (who roughly correspond to the Washington and Pratt characters of the remade version) standing up to a group of bigots in order to ensure that a Native American man can be buried in the local cemetery was particularly remarkable.

Fuqua's film dispenses with much of this in order to fashion a "revenge" Western in the mold of the recent *The Revenant* and *Django Unchained*. While not as repugnant as either of those films, *The Magnificent Seven* ups the violence and bloodshed significantly and includes its share of gruesome maimings and murders. Chisolm is primarily motivated by a desire for personal vengeance for a bloody episode from his past. The final encounter between him and Bogue, in which he seeks retribution, is particularly sadistic.

Tonally, the film is grim, dour and joyless. Gone is the relatively lighthearted humor of the original, replaced with a heaping amount of self-seriousness and angst. What levity exists comes in the form of strained and cringe-inducing "quips" in the dialogue, which are mostly Pratt's burden to bear.

To Pratt's credit, he manages to portray the somewhat ridiculous gunslinger-magician Faraday with a bit of easy-going swagger. Washington's understated performance is fine. Hawke, who portrays Robicheaux as a man haunted by his experiences in the Civil War, gives the strongest performance in the film, and his scenes are generally the most interesting.

The rest of the cast is given little to do. In place of Eli Wallach's colorful and philosophizing bandit from the original film, Bogue is unrelentingly cruel, cold—and boring. His declaration that his rapacious activities represent "capitalism" and "progress" amounts to little more than pseudo-oppositional window dressing for the violence and mayhem.

The characters seem to have been created mainly to satisfy some studio "diversity" mandate: the Mexican Vasquez, the Native American Red Harvest, the Korean Billy Rocks, etc. Their characterizations, far from being a genuine attempt to portray the broad variety of life and cultures that inhabited the "Old West," instead end

up becoming justifications for the various fighting techniques highlighted in the action sequences. One character is an expert with knives, another with a bow and arrow, another with hand-to-hand combat, another with a long-distance rifle, etc. One feels, unhappily, the influence of the decade-plus of "superhero" team films, where every character is essentially a walking special-effects gimmick. The final battle is shrill and dull. Unable to care about such hastily drawn characters, one simply waits for the film to be over.

One senses a tiredness in such efforts, a kind of creative fatigue from going through the motions and retelling the same stories in the same way, again and again. And not only from the filmmakers: the audible sighs heard at this reviewer's screening indicate that audiences are getting fed up with this kind of entertainment as well. The situation is increasingly untenable.



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