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## **Introduction: Sam Peckinpah, Savage Poet of American Cinema**

Running out of space and time in a modernizing West, a band of outlaws led by Pike Bishop (William Holden) rides into the Texas border town of San Rafael to stick up the railroad office. The railroad, however, has hired a passel of bounty hunters to annihilate the Bunch. Led by Pike's old friend Deke Thornton, the vulturelike bounty hunters ambush the Bunch from the rooftops of the town, killing outlaws and townspeople with indiscriminate glee. Pike escapes, along with Dutch (Ernest Borgnine), Lyle and Tector Gorch (Warren Oates, Ben Johnson), and Angel (Jamie Sanchez). They are joined outside town by old Freddie Sykes (Edmond O'Brien), whereupon they discover that the bags of cash they took from the depot are dummies stuffed with worthless washer rings. Broke, they cross into Mexico, pursued by Thornton and his gang. The Bunch go to work for General Mapache (Emilio Fernandez), a cruel despot fighting on behalf of a corrupt government and against a popular revolution. After the Bunch steals guns for the general, Mapache seizes and tortures Angel. To avenge Angel, the Bunch confronts and kills Mapache, precipitating a sustained slaughter during which the members of the Bunch wipe out most of Mapache's army and are themselves killed. The survivors,

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Freddie Sykes and Deke Thornton, join forces with the peasant revolutionaries.

Sam Peckinpah modestly said that with *The Wild Bunch* he wasn't trying to make an epic but only to tell a simple story about bad men in changing times. But *The Wild Bunch* is an epic work, and it has had an epic impact on the American cinema. The scale and scope of its bloodletting were unprecedented, and Peckinpah's use of multiple cameras, montage editing, and slow motion quickly became the normative style for rendering screen violence. The film helped move the Western into a mud-spattered, more brutal, and psychopathic territory, and it showed subsequent filmmakers the power of irony as a narrative voice and its effectiveness as a tool for exploring, and portraying, a brutal screen world. Director Martin Scorsese called the film "savage poetry."<sup>1</sup>

Part of this savagery lies in Peckinpah's unflinching depiction of the characters. The outlaws led by Pike Bishop are stone killers, and the film presents them without apology. Pike coldly executes a wounded comrade after the botched holdup in San Rafael that opens the film, and astride his horse, he remorselessly tramples a woman during the confusion ensuing from the rooftop ambush. In the prelude to this ambush, as the Bunch ride into town, a group of smiling, laughing children look up from their play. But these are not the typical children, icons of sentimentality and innocence, that were so prominent in earlier generations of film. These children are patiently, joyously torturing a scorpion to death. By intercutting this torture with the following action, the shootout in town, Peckinpah encapsulated in striking imagery a vision of brutality and violence unfolding within an implacably cruel world, and he ensured that the depicted violence assumed a metaphysical dimension, as a force observable throughout human life, evident in the behavior of children as in that of adults.

Peckinpah, though, went beyond the immediate savagery of the material to search out the humanity that coexists in the Bunch with their remorseless use of violence. Typically, and in keeping with his other work as a filmmaker, Peckinpah located this redemptive humanity in the experience of psychological an-

**FIGURE I**

Peckinpah confers with actor William Holden, who plays Pike Bishop. Pike's anguish provides the psychological foundation of the film.

guish and torture. *The Wild Bunch* is Pike Bishop's film, and it is Bishop's anguished awareness of his terrible failings that gives the film its psychological depth and the violence its emotional resonance. The Gorch brothers are not well individuated as characters, and Dutch, though a forceful character, lacks the inner darkness of self-betrayal and the lacerated consciousness that Peckinpah would locate here, and in his other films, as indexes of the spiritual suffering that transforms and ennobles his fallen heroes. Through this psychological suffering, the inner humanity of these characters, otherwise debased through violence, asserts itself. Pike's call to his gang to confront Mapache and reclaim Angel follows from his horrified, haunted glimpse of his inner corruption, and this defiant assertion of loyalty to a comrade is Pike's means of refuting and overcoming everything that he has become and that he

hates. But this transcendent assertion of humanity precipitates and accompanies a scene of apocalyptic violence as the outlaws massacre Mapache's men and are themselves annihilated. Peckinpah audaciously mixes ferocious, orgiastic violence with humanistic assertions about the importance of honor and loyalty and about the internal, psychological suffering that is the spiritual accompaniment, and consequence, of physical violence. Through this volatile mix, he achieves what Scorsese perceptively recognized as savage poetry, going inside the hurricane of violence to reveal its internal features and the residual, if deformed, humanity that exists, frighteningly, inside acts of brutality.

Peckinpah showed this brutality more candidly than any American filmmaker had before, but he went beyond its mechanical stylization to explore its effects upon heart and mind. He aimed to prod audiences into an ambivalent response, excited by the aesthetic stylization of slow-motion violence while being appalled by its physical effects and emotional and moral consequences. Peckinpah's explicit screen violence was not exploitive, nor was it a cold calculation for box-office effect. Peckinpah was a serious artist and moralist, and his use of violence in *The Wild Bunch* was sober and didactic. It was also so spectacular that he would forever after be identified with the turn in modern cinema toward graphic bloodshed. We will turn to these issues and explore the significance of the film's violence in a moment. First, it will be helpful to place *The Wild Bunch* within Peckinpah's career and to consider his decisive impact upon the Western genre.

#### PECKINPAH'S EARLY CAREER

Peckinpah started work in the film industry in the 1950s as a dialogue director working with Don Siegel, a filmmaker under contract with Allied Artists. Siegel had apprenticed as an editor in the montage unit at Warner Bros., and his pictures as a director (which would include the cult hit *Dirty Harry* [1972]) were distinguished by their crisp and efficient editing. Thus, it is fitting that Peckinpah trained under Siegel because Peckinpah's mature

work as a director features a remarkable style of editing. As a dialogue director, Peckinpah worked on five Siegel pictures: *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), *Private Hell 36* (1954), *Annapolis Story* (1955), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *Crime in the Streets* (1956). Peckinpah also appeared in *Body Snatchers* in a cameo role. In later years, he affectionately recalled Siegel's formative influence:

I must say he was kind enough not to laugh openly while watching me run about with both of my feet in my mouth and my thumb up my ass. (This is not easy.) . . . He was my "patron" and he made me work and made me mad and made me think. Finally, he asked me what his next set-up was and for once I was ready, and he used it. I guess that was the beginning.<sup>2</sup>

Following the training with Siegel, Peckinpah worked for the next several years primarily in television, where he quickly established the Western as his special metier. From 1955 to 1960, Peckinpah wrote scripts for *Gunsmoke* and other popular television series including *Tales of Wells Fargo*, *Broken Arrow*, *Zane Grey Theater*, and *The Rifleman*. Peckinpah helped create this last series, and wrote and directed several episodes, but he left the show because of a difference of interpretation over the material. Peckinpah wanted the show to have an adult and serious focus in showing the passage of young Lucas McCain (Johnny Crawford) into manhood. The other producers, however, envisioned the series as a kids' show and preferred that Lucas remain a child and not be depicted as growing up. Following this spat, which prefigured the later stormy relationships with film producers that would eventually help derail Peckinpah's career, Sam got the chance to direct and produce his own series, *The Westerner*, about a wandering drifter, Dave Blassingame (Brian Keith). Though the series was canceled in 1960 by the network before completing its first season, Peckinpah had brought to television a markedly more adult tone, a harder-edged violence, and an unsentimental depiction of Western riffraff and lowlifes that clearly foreshadowed the direction in which he would take the genre in his feature films. In a letter to Chuck Connors, who starred in *The Rifleman*, Peckinpah

described Blassingame as “a drifter and a bum; illiterate, usually inarticulate. He is as realistic a cowboy as I could create.”<sup>3</sup>

Peckinpah continued to write Western film scripts, some of which were eventually made by other filmmakers (*One-Eyed Jacks*, 1961; *The Glory Guys*, 1965; *Villa Rides*, 1968), and when the opportunity to do features arose, he quickly achieved a mature artistic success with the magisterial and now-classic *Ride the High Country* (1962), his second feature. Peckinpah infused this simple story of two aging gunfighters (Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea) in the twilight of their career with remarkable feeling and the sneaky affection for slopbucket, redneck, peckerwood trash (in the randy Hammond clan, the film's villains) that would surface again so memorably in *The Wild Bunch's* bounty hunters. *Ride the High Country* was tossed away by its studio, MGM, as a drive-in movie, but its evident artistry suggested that Peckinpah might indeed be the most important director of Westerns since John Ford (*Stagecoach* [1939], *The Searchers* [1956], *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* [1962]).

Certification of that potential had to await *The Wild Bunch*, however, because Peckinpah's next film, *Major Dundee* (1964), was a troubled production – over budget, over schedule, cut by the studio against the director's wishes – and it earned Peckinpah the reputation of a troublemaker. The studio cut up to twenty-seven minutes from the film, rendering its story about a unit of Union and Confederate soldiers pursuing a band of Apaches into Mexico nearly incomprehensible. The resulting mess that the studio released badly damaged Peckinpah's reputation, but the director fought back. He wrote to the film's producer, Jerry Bresler, “The 18 minutes that you have cut, disregarding my strongest objections, have in my opinion effectively destroyed my concept of story, character development, mood and meaning. . . . You are a well-poisoner, Jerry, and I damn you for it.”<sup>4</sup>

To a reviewer who complained that the film was bewildering and confusing, Peckinpah wrote, “You are absolutely correct. After seeing it at the Press Screening, February 4th, 1965, I didn't know what in hell it was about and I was the director. . . . The film I made is on the cutting room floor.”<sup>5</sup> While this experience was

undeniably a bitter one for Peckinpah, and while *Major Dundee* was not the great film Peckinpah would claim it to be, he retained the ability to joke about it. He maintained a warm correspondence with star Charlton Heston (who played Major Dundee), and while in Mexico working on *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah wrote to Heston, who had just scored a big success with *Planet of the Apes* (1968).

I am sitting here with Gordon Dawson, in Torreon, in the middle of a dust-rain-hail storm, thinking of new projects and we have decided to make a new picture. It will be called "Major Dundee Goes Ape" – grabs you, doesn't it? Sex, sentiment, and security – security, that is, if we can get Jerry Bresler to come back.

Peckinpah closed by saying, modestly, that *The Wild Bunch* "might turn out to be a reasonably good film."<sup>6</sup>

### PRODUCTION OF *THE WILD BUNCH*

He was absolutely correct, and the picture was so great, defiant, and trend-setting that it relaunched Peckinpah's career after the *Dundee* disaster and his firing that same year as director of *The Cincinnati Kid*, a Steve McQueen picture. In 1967, Peckinpah had submitted a script called *The Wild Bunch* to Kenneth Hyman, a young vice-president at Warner Bros.–Seven Arts, who was committed to the policy and philosophy of a film director exercising artistic control over a film's design and production. The script, rewritten by Peckinpah, originally had been penned by Walon Green from a story by Roy Sickner. The narrative itself is fairly simple, but Peckinpah transformed it into an epic portrait of loyalty and honor and filmed it with ferocity and passion. The picture was cast in early 1968, and, with the decision to film entirely on location in Mexico, principal photography began on March 25, 1968. Seventy days were allotted for filming the 541 scenes in the script. As a measure of the intensity and responsibility with which Peckinpah worked (he told Ken Hyman, "Of all the projects I have ever worked on, this is closest to me."<sup>7</sup>),



**FIGURE 2**

Peckinpah (far right) watches as his crew films the Bunch as the outlaws ride into San Rafael before the ambush.

principal photography was concluded on June 27, 1968, only nine and one-half days behind schedule.

The first two weeks of shooting were devoted to one of the film's most complicated sequences, the payroll robbery in San Rafael and the consequent shoot-out, filmed on location in Pararas, Coahuila, Mexico. On day one, the company was called at 6:30 A.M., had gotten their first shot by 9:30 A.M., and wrapped at 6:30 P.M.<sup>8</sup> Shooting the San Rafael material required the presence of up to 244 extras and 80 animals. Despite the complexity of this material, Peckinpah successfully captured his footage within the allotted two-week time frame.

The Aqua Verde material, the film's other most structurally complex sequence, was filmed over a period of thirty-two days, from the twenty-seventh day of shooting through the fifty-sixth day. Despite the intensity of the physical action depicted on screen during the gun battle between the Bunch and Mapache, physical accidents were relatively infrequent. On day fifty-one, a misfiring squib burned actor William Holden's arm, and two days after that,





**FIGURE 3**

Peckinpah plans the filming of the Aqua Verde sequences.

actor Ben Johnson (as Tector Gorch) broke his middle finger while firing the machine gun. The Aqua Verde filming required that Peckinpah coordinate over 300 extras and more than 500 animals. This scale of production makes his achievement of a 79-day shoot all the more impressive, especially given the necessity of solving each day's routine but aggravating problems. Peckinpah outlined some of these in his memos to producer Phil Feldman. They included badly functioning special effects, hazards posed by weather and locale, and the logistical difficulties of moving a large production company from place to place:

During the first weeks of the show props, namely guns, were inoperative. Special effects were worse than inoperative, a situation which still exists. Sets are not ready and dressed when needed.<sup>9</sup>

Whether to save money, water or just lack of planning, the water trucks have been watering less than one half of the road and

stopping after one trip. At least half of us are eating dust all the way.<sup>10</sup>

Grenade explosion timed correctly, however had not been pre-tested and dust obscured two-thirds of the action. . . . Impossible to make next shot before lunch as shoulder squib placed in Lyle's shirt did not match master shot . . . all squibs in Lyle's shirt have to be replaced because they are visible to the camera.<sup>11</sup>

Wind storm and rain; 1 hour, lost the light but finished sequence with brutes. Moved to the bridge; people, horses and props, 30 minutes to two hours late. Returned, rehearsed, broke for lunch, overcast could not shoot.<sup>12</sup>

Working with a sustained level of commitment and passion that he never again achieved in his career, Peckinpah surmounted these and other problems. With the completion of shooting, Peckinpah and editor Lou Lombardo had the difficult task of turning miles of raw footage into a disciplined, organized narrative. To appreciate what Peckinpah and his crew accomplished, it is instructive to consider how some of the film's scenes and story structure were shaped during the critical phase of postproduction. (Postproduction is the work of filmmaking that follows cinematography, including, chiefly, picture and sound editing.) The shaping in postproduction of narrative and theme is a routine occurrence on every film. Filmmakers never get things exactly right at the point of shooting, and very often, considerable reshaping of the material occurs on a postproduction basis. Perhaps the film's most memorable imagery is the opening scene's tableau of the children with the scorpion and ants. Initial plans also called for the incorporation of a train in the opening since the Bunch rides into San Rafael through the railroad yards. This did not work out, however, as Peckinpah explained to Feldman. "We have decided that the value of the train in the opening sequence is negligible because there is no way to get any speed in that area. We are therefore concentrating on scorpions and ants."<sup>13</sup>

The design and cutting of this sequence were the subjects of