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**PECKINPAH'S FAMILIES: A STUDY OF SEVEN FILMS**

*The University of Oklahoma*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

PECKINPAH'S FAMILIES:  
A STUDY OF SEVEN FILMS

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By  
JERRY GEORGE HOLT  
Norman, Oklahoma  
1983

PECKINPAH'S FAMILIES:  
A STUDY OF SEVEN FILMS  
A DISSERTATION  
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PECKINPAH'S FAMILIES: A STUDY OF SEVEN FILMS

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This was an auteurist study of the films which American director Sam Peckinpah made beginning with The Wild Bunch in 1969 through Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia in 1974. The attempt was made to bring these films together as a sequential body of work through the unifying theme of family, actual and surrogate.

Through the use of biographical criticism, historical criticism and myth criticism, the study established that Peckinpah does in fact work out his theses on the human condition through examination of actual traditional family groups such as the ones found in Junior Bonner; through examination of marriages, as can be seen in Straw Dogs or The Getaway; and through examination of the unsocialized "bunch," as reflected in The Wild Bunch, or Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid. More than one variety of "family," moreover, may appear in a single film: a situation which the director uses for purposes of comparison.

The study also dealt with the loss of faith in family which seems, for the director, to inevitably accompany the passage of time from the nineteenth to the twentieth century and then, in a concluding chapter, the study examined ways in which the director has returned to the theme of family in a recent film, The Osterman Weekend, after a five-year absence from the screen.

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## ONE: INTRODUCTION

### I.

Now that almost a decade has passed for reflection, it begins to appear that the late 1960's and early 1970's will emerge as a period of extraordinary creativity in the history of American film-making. To be more specific, the period beginning with Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde in 1967 and continuing through Robert Altman's Nashville in 1975 was one fertile enough to bring forth many motion pictures which have already achieved a "classic" status: Nichols' The Graduate; Altman's M.A.S.H.; Coppola's Godfather films; Boorman's Deliverance--these are films which are regularly considered in academic settings, and films which are used as standards against which to weigh more recent products. It has also become known as a time of the director's cinema: a time when committed Americans made, to overstate the point, committed films about America.

There was, of course, a supreme collision of influences which made such a cinema possible. The influence of the Vietnam war cannot be denied here: though the Hollywood studios tended to be queasy about making films directly con-

cerned with the war during the war (John Wayne's 1968 The Green Berets is the exception and it, predictably, is hawkish), they had no reservations about approaching the subject allegorically. Thus the films, like the music of those times, always had a reference point; market research pinpointed the audience as relatively young, and therefore the films reflected the spirit of youth protest alive in the country. American films of those years, whatever else they were, tended to be supremely about something: they were charged with a moral fervor; a strong purpose.

In addition, the auteur concept of moviemaking was allowed to flourish as it has virtually never been allowed to flourish before or since. Into the early 1960's, the system of studios employing "contract" directors was still very much in effect: international influences and the equally influential commentary of director-oriented critics like Andrew Sarris had persuaded film followers that, most of the time, it was proper to see directors as the architects of cinema--but directors were also still paid employees: few beyond a Hitchcock had really achieved autonomy. But, in 1969, when it became clear that a \$350,000 project like Easy Rider could gross \$30 million before it ever left this country, studios got the message: Dennis Hopper, the director of that film, was, until Easy Rider, untried. Clearly, it became economically feasible to give the creative sector a freer hand, to gamble on unknown quantities--and to invest

in directorial commitment. Such commitment was, after all, selling tickets.

Now, in the 1980's, it becomes clear that much of this period is marked by excess: Easy Rider itself looks terribly dated today. There is a virtual graveyard full of names which held great promise all those years ago: names which were going to revolutionize communication--now all but forgotten. If names like Michael Sarne, Sidney J. Furie, Robert Downey, or Monte Hellman seem now lost, other names such as Arthur Penn or Dick Richards or even Coppola, in present day, seem no longer associated with lofty ideals; no longer looked to for the great promise they once had. It almost seems that when the reference point went away, their creativity ceased. And another point seems almost to go without saying: When their projects no longer made money, they became unbankable--and thus, in the mechanics of the film industry, unable to work.

It might be quite easy to put Sam Peckinpah into both of these categories. He has, after all, not had a major film release since 1978, and he hasn't had a picture which made money in this country since The Getaway in 1972.<sup>1</sup> The popular association between Peckinpah and graphic screen violence tends to ground him in the war period--and some of the themes we have come to associate with him like the Territorial Imperative and his male-oriented ethics are

equally linked to that era. And yet he is responsible for at least three films that now have an undisputed "classic" status, The Wild Bunch, Ride the High Country, and Straw Dogs, and at least two more, The Ballad of Cable Hogue and Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, which are close enough to such a status to continue to inspire a strong amount of critical debate. For a director whose major feature career really only spans the years 1969-1978, this is an amazing output. And it is also amazing that these films left the mark they did: Peckinpah has been credited/blamed with destroying the Western genre; initiating a technique for cinematic violence that has now become a ground rule rather than a technique; revolutionizing the film editing process. It is lamentably easy to look at the techniques of current younger directors ranging from Steven Spielberg to Michael Cimino and see that Peckinpah technique, if not Peckinpah content, is still very much with us.

Clearly, the film historian has yet to make his peace with Sam Peckinpah. There is much to blame him for--and much for which to credit him. But his strongest works still tend to make critics and audiences nervous: those who claim to fully understand The Wild Bunch tend to cite mystical revelation; Straw Dogs continues to polarize opinion: is it a "fascist work of art,"<sup>2</sup> as Pauline Kael would have us believe, or a strong study of a marriage in trouble? "Since

Peckinpah considers himself too sophisticated to tell a story," Andrew Sarris wrote in 1968, "it yet remains to be seen whether he can develop a theme."<sup>3</sup> Critical opinion now seems to affirm, all right, that he did develop a theme--the question currently seems to be: what was it?

I do deem Peckinpah to be perhaps the most significant American filmmaker to appear in this country in the last 20 years. I count a relative few of his films as unqualified successes, but that in no way diminishes the significance of his contribution to American film as a literary art. Perhaps it is best here to rely upon Melville, who said of Hawthorne's work (and, indirectly, of his own) that "He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great. Failure is the true test of greatness."<sup>4</sup> Peckinpah's works of the Vietnam years remain, for me, perhaps the most American films of recent cinema in their raggedness, their rough exteriors. They have the authentic feels of works-in-progress, the feel we associate with Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga, or Thomas Wolfe's books--or, yes, Moby Dick. They are works which are at once meditations of American at midcentury--and works which are American in form.

And though he certainly was under no obligation to do so, I also believe that they are works which not only pose problems, but also offer tentative solutions. The world of the director, whether its specific locale is the Texas-Mexico border in 1913 or the remote south of England in

present-day, is a violent one; filled with chaos. It is a realistic world--one in which form fits content, so that the violent death of a human being becomes at once sickening in its bloody transience and gallant in its slow-motion flourishes. It is a world in which betrayal is the order of the day; a world in which trust is the rarest of human qualities. Animal imagery permeates this world; greed defines it. The view of man is a diminished one, but also, in its relative sense, a curiously exalted one.

And, ironically, it is also a world in which trust is possible--and even love. The world of The Wild Bunch, for example, which employs many of the naturalistic devices of a Norris or a Dreiser, is hardly naturalistically viewed: it is suffused with a sense of love and loss. This kind of film may even have begun as naturalism--but the director's involvement with his characters rather quickly turned it into something else. Perhaps this is what Peckinpah meant when he said of this film: "I wasn't trying to make an epic. I was trying to tell a simple story about bad men in changing times. The Wild Bunch is simply what happens when killers go to Mexico. The strange thing is that you feel a great sense of loss when these killers reach the end of the line."<sup>5</sup>

There is a strong point to be made here about the study of any Peckinpah film: as happens more often than we might care to believe in moviemaking, concept and execution tend to be two different things. Though this study will assume

the posture that film is the director's medium, it is, finally, a collaborative effort. And the organic nature of a Peckinpah film seems often perceived by the director only in the process of making the film. But remember, too, what a fertile time that war period was for this kind of creative venture: a time when directors were actually allowed the space to let their works emerge. It is certainly such a climate which allowed Peckinpah to work best: it remains to be seen whether this is the only climate which would allow him to work at all. But first let us make some comments that will help to locate the director in his proper critical, cinematic, and biographical contexts.

## II.

There is little doubt that auteur film criticism found its happiest American home during the late 1960's. The concept, of course, is French--but its main American champion is Village Voice critic Andrew Sarris. This critical technique, which asked for a director-oriented cinema, one which celebrated that figure as prime mover, found its initial manifestation here in 1962 and culminated in the publication of Sarris's The American Cinema in 1968. This text argued that a director, finally, must be judged by the totality of his work, and that, in the cases of American directors, it might be possible to find the greatest pearls residing in studio genre pieces. Thus an action director like Don Siegel could be said to

have a world view just as a Bunuel or an Ingmar Bergman would: in the case of Siegel, however, much of his career would have been devoted to laying it between the lines of entertainment-oriented cinema. Sarris stated his criteria as follows:

Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial autobiography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist. He looks at a film as a whole, a director as a whole. The parts, however entertaining individually, must cohere meaningfully. This meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings with skill and purpose. How often has this directorial domination been permitted in Hollywood? By the most exalted European standards, not nearly enough. Studio domination in the thirties and forties was the rule rather than the exception, and few directors had the right of final cut.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the 1960's this theory gained in influence. The French turned it into a form of hero worship--most profitably in some instances, since Francious Truffaut, inspired by Hitchcock, arguably went on to make even better films than those of his master. And the theory also spread to academia, where it became a staple of university film classes. David Pirie, in a recent book, explains that phenomenon in this rather brusque manner:

As more avid and knowledgeable filmgoers comprised a larger portion of the crowd in theatres, so they and their children began to receive an education in "film studies." That's where the auteur theory triumphed, for it appealed deeply to teachers who had grown tired stale or weary with Milton and George Eliot. They reckoned to increase their



enrollments, prove their hipness and have fun in class, without compromising their own ideals about Great Artists, if they changed to Fellini and Hitchcock.<sup>7</sup>

And it must be added that they were anxious to celebrate their contemporaries, as well: the filmmakers which Hollywood invested in during the late '60's tended to be young, and they tended to be "movie brats": Peter Bogdanovich, who went on to make The Last Picture Show (1972) and What's Up, Doc? (1973), but who started in 1968 with a thriller named Targets, claimed to have seen over 60,000 feature films by the time he arrived in Hollywood.<sup>8</sup>

There is, certainly, much wrong with the auteur theory: for one thing, it often elevates poor products. For another, it diverts attention from the screenwriter, who is, after all, an author himself. But for all the starry-eyed French and all the above-mentioned foppish professors who adhere to the technique, it must be remembered that more than few good directors like Bogdanovich were also raised on it--and believe in it. They actually believe that a world view can be communicated through the cinema. Peckinpah is one of these people. Given to flamboyant overstatement in interview, he nonetheless makes his conception of himself as an artist clear: "You're not going to tell me the camera is a machine;" he has commented. "It is the most marvelous piece of divinity ever created."<sup>9</sup> Similarly his professional sense is articulated in comments like: "If you're a director and you don't get

a chance to direct you start to die a little bit."<sup>10</sup> And his sense of purpose comes through when he says: "If I get sucked into this consumer-oriented society, then I can't make the pictures about it that I want to make."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, whether Peckinpah would actually use the term or not, the description of auteur filmmaker seems to fit him well. It is also helpful to remember that Peckinpah was a writer before he was a director, and that he continues to do extensive rewriting on his scripts. There are signatures--turns of phrase--in every Peckinpah film that let us know that we are witnessing a continuing world view. They may develop an existential motif, as in the repeated use of "It's a game"/ "It's not a game" exchanges which can be found in Peckinpah's work from the early Westerner television series through The Getaway and beyond. They may be affectionate dialogue jokes like the use, in the westerns, of the appellation "red-necked peckerwood," or a phrase repeated in both Ride the High Country and The Ballad of Cable Hogue: "Smellin' bad enough to gag a dog off a gut wagon." They may ponder darker questions of morality, like the vageries of "being wrong and admitting it": this question is raised in an early exchange in The Wild Bunch and, in nearly the same words, in Peckinpah's new film, The Osterman Weekend. Or there can be a phrase which approaches ritual; one which, while cryptic, seems to sum up the duality of hopelessness and

possibility which repeatedly preoccupies the Peckinpah protagonist: the one I have in mind is "Why not?"--a reply that runs like a leit-motif through these films.

And there are the themes: 19th century protagonists adrift in the twentieth century; the tyranny of the machine; personal code versus public morality--and man's search for home. There is nothing new in these themes, to be sure--but Peckinpah has his distinctive ways of confronting the issues, and his distinctive ways of telling such stories. From thematic preoccupation through the "look" of a Peckinpah picture --its flash-cut editing; its slow-motion interludes, its expansive panoramas--it's hard to mistake anybody else's work for Peckinpah's. And thus we are posed with the dilemma of accepting the artist on his own terms: if he isn't a conscious artist deliberately expressing a continuous world view, he certainly thinks he is. And this study intends to give him the benefit of whatever doubt may be left in this regard.

### III.

It is quite common to raise questions about where Peckinpah fits: what traditions he belongs to in the American cinema. His personal preferences in films and directors tend to be electric: he has expressed fondness for works as diverse as Rashomon (1950), La Strada (1954), and The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948). He has read--and continues to read--voraciously, and admires writers ranging

from pulp novelist Jim Thompson through the more respectable William Faulkner. His "ace-in-the-hole script"<sup>12</sup> is an adaptation, done with Jim Silke, of James Gould Cozzens' Castaway, and he continues to believe that he will someday get the chance to make the picture. His influences, in short, are many.

But if we take an overview of American cinema, we can see that, perhaps involuntarily, Peckinpah does fit into several traditions. Though he has actually made only five feature films which can be considered westerns, he owes some debt to John Ford, certainly. Ford's protagonists, who must weigh duty to community against personal code, like Wyatt Earp in My Darling Clementine (1946); Nathan Bittles in She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1948); or Tom Doniphon in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1960) can be said to prefigure heroes of Peckinpah pictures--Deke Thornton in The Wild Bunch: Pat in Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid--Steve Judd in Ride the High Country. A Ford treatment of obsessive revenge--the sort associated with Ethan Edwards in The Searchers (1950), has its echoes in Cable's obsession in The Ballad of Cable Hogue. And the sense of family that Ford displays in The Grapes of Wrath (1940) informs all Peckinpah films, Junior Bonner a warm example. But Peckinpah is far more fond than Ford of the unsocialized bunch--protagonists who may only have a commitment to themselves and their way of life instead of some larger order. We assume a standard of acceptable behavior in Ford's people that cannot easily be transferred

to Peckinpah's--Peckinpah just might decide to give us glimpses of humanity in a character as reprehensible as Liberty Valance himself.

Howard Hawks, a favorite of auteur critics, also seems to have influenced Peckinpah's cinema--particularly with Red River (1950). Beyond even the preoccupation with something closer to an unsocialized bunch in the uneasy union of the traildrivers, we find markedly similar turns of phrase, and bits of rustic dialogue which sound like they came from Peckinpah films: "I don't like it when things is all good or all bad," a drover says. "I likes 'em in between." Or, another character pronounces: "Three times in his life a man has cause to howl at the moon: When he gets married, when his children come, and when he finishes something he was crazy to start in the first place." And, in the once-again obsessive character of trailboss Tom Dunson, it is easy to see foreshadowings of Peckinpah's own Major Amos Dundee.<sup>13</sup>

Many other studies have commented upon the clear borrowings that Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch makes from John Huston's The Treasure of the Sierra Madre. The motif of hollow laughter; the greedy quest for gold--in particular, the character of Freddie Sykes, who performs a similar function to the character which Walter Huston played in the earlier film--these clear references constitute homage. Too, John Huston's films do have that preoccupation with the misfit which Peck-

inpah also claims for his own. And Huston and Hawks both allow their characters the dignity of professionalism--another advantage which Peckinpah characters display: the concept that there is a certain absolution in doing a job right.

These three directors, Ford, Hawks and Huston, are good Peckinpah references in another way: they have made a wide variety of films, and have generally operated within the genres. Each of these three forerunners is equally at home in the world of westerns, for example, and thrillers (Ford perhaps less so in the latter), and each has easily stamped his own world view upon genres of the action cinema. Similarly, the most of Peckinpah's work thus far gravitates between the western genre and the thriller.

Another point is worth making here. Though Peckinpah's career in feature film spans just over twenty years, he seems much more in the tradition of these "older" directors--the studio professionals--than he does in the current generation of filmmakers. The distinction is easy to make: Ford, Hawks, Huston--even Peckinpah's avowed mentor, Don Siegel, bring life to cinema in that they all have complex personal biographies, have lived hard, been involved in their various wars, and manifest certain "literary" preoccupations: Ford filmed Steinbeck and Eugene O'Neill works; Hawks found his ideal screenwriter in William Faulkner during the 1940's and '50's; Huston has attempted Melville and Crane and Tennessee Williams, among others. These are men who bring much to their cinema--

and, clearly, Peckinpah does follow this tradition.

The current breed, perhaps beginning with Bogdanovich, tends to bring cinema to cinema. By their own admission, Bogdanovich, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Lawrence Kasdan were raised on the movies, and their films show it: Bogdanovich's Paper Moon (1973) derives from Capra and Preston Sturges; Spielberg's Raiders of the Lost Ark from RKO '40' serials; Lucas's Star Wars from the same source (with unacknowledged debts to many "B" westerns), and Kasdan's Body Heat from the '40's film noir tradition of Fritz Lang. They offer little in the way of originality, and seem to have lived almost no life outside the movies. Their visions are not personal, but derived. Francis Ford Coppola and Stanley Kubrick, of course, have literary preoccupations, but even they give the impression of leading lives insulated by the cinema. It is also significant that these directors also function as producers, moving freely between both the commercial and artistic areas of the medium. Try as he might, Peckinpah can't do that. "Like a good whore," he says, "I go where I'm kicked "<sup>14</sup>--and, in so saying, echoes earlier days of studio control, but also a preoccupation with the artist's role to the exclusion of business concerns.

In short, our current directors do tend to be a savvy lot--most knowledgeable craftspeople, it is true--but also individuals whose history extends only into the movies of their youths. Motion pictures, it is not too much to say,

are life for them, instead of reflections of life. This fact alone may say a lot about why Peckinpah's films, no matter how surreal they may sometimes become, continue to play realistically. To use a trite phrase, there is always "felt life" in a Peckinpah picture--and that commodity in current film is becoming rare indeed.

#### IV.

We have now made some strong claims for Peckinpah as an artist who works in cinema, but whose preoccupations reach far beyond the medium. One possible yardstick by which to measure the relevance of a filmmaker is the extent to which his works can be scrutinized using traditional literary critical tools. That is to say: Would the biographical critic, or the historical critic, or the myth critic find ample material to work with in Peckinpah? This is no small consideration when dealing with a film director, since the relatively young discipline of film criticism still seems to be auteurist at its most scholarly (and sometimes pedantic) and something closer to formalist at its most emotional (and, very often, plebian). There are certain films--usually placed in the categories "classic" or--for current films--"major"--which attract the attention of critics who do not usually write on film or scholars who wish to use a film or films as examples from which to make a larger case: 2001 (1968) certainly benefited from the variety of critical approaches that were brought to it, and Bonnie and Clyde



(1967) became a cultural landmark because of the same kind of input. Marxist critics have, for some time, been illuminating studio products of the 1930's, and Leslie Fielder, in his more recent work, has applied the myth principle profitably to many films of the past twenty years. Peckinpah's work as a whole has not really enjoyed this density of criticism, but two of his films have certainly been illuminated by it: The Wild Bunch and Straw Dogs.

In truth, the work of this director offers new levels when examined from almost any critical approach. It is, for example, quite profitable to apply a biographical method to Peckinpah--something that many involved with Peckinpah's work--not the least of them the director himself--are fond of doing. When we survey the known facts about the director, we find that he is a child of the west himself: born and raised on a ranch in the Sierra foothills of California, near Fresno. His father was a lawyer; his paternal grandfather a rancher and owner of a sawmill; his maternal grandfather a judge and sometime cattle rancher. Peckinpah, born in 1925, inherited from both sides of his family a love of the outdoors and a respect for nature, a respect for home and family, a strong amount of religious instruction which went along with family Bible readings, and an equally strong concern for the law.

His childhood was idyllic--described by Peckinpah him-

self in this manner: "When I was five or six years old, I remember riding my horse up around the pines in Crane Valley. Her name was Nellie, and I'd only have a rope around her nose for a rein--a handmade hackamore. It was where my grandfather, Denver Church, ran his cattle. And a couple of miles away my Grandfather Peckinpah had built his sawmill. It was the finest time of my life. There will never be another time like that again."<sup>15</sup>

The sense of loss in the foregoing statement is clear enough--plus a goodly amount of romantic despair. There is an echo of Thomas Wolfe here: "O lost, and by the wind grieved ghost, come back again."<sup>16</sup> That time in the director's childhood, much closer to the last century in some ways than to this one, is a time that cannot be gotten back--that is lost forever. And Peckinpah has spoken in equally romantic, equally doomed terms about his particular communion with the natural order as he was growing up:

One year, I remember shooting my third dear. He was at the edge of a bluff, maybe a hundred yards off. It was snowing. I was walking. I snuck around a tamarack and shot him in the neck. When I circled around to where he was, he was hanging half over the edge but still alive. As I approached him he watched me with this mixture of fear and resignation, and I wanted to say "I'm sorry" because I really didn't mean to kill him. I got caught up in the chase. But there was nothing I could do except pull his hindquarters away from the edge and put a bullet through his head to end his suffering. When that was done, I knelt beside the carcass in the snow to gut it and found myself unable to control my tears.

I had had such incredible communication with that animal. I would have done anything to have seen him run again. But when you're really hunting there is a relationship between a man and what he kills to eat that is absolutely locked. It's hard to explain to people who think that meat comes from their local grocery store or to these cats who come out and shoot anything that moves for trophies. But I cried for that deer with more anguish than any other time in my life. It was dusk, and the snow was coming down harder. It was one of the most extraordinarily moving moments in my life."<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the ironic comparison with headlines like the one which Life magazine would use in 1972: "Sam Peckinpah: Master of Violence,"<sup>18</sup> the story reflects communion with, again, a time--and a place where deer ran free, the air was clear, and you killed only what you ate. It was a colorful region, as well, and one which Peckinpah biographer Garner Simmons profiles nicely with a list of regional names: "...Slick Rock and Round Rock, Bear Butte and Badger Flats, Hookers Cover, Whiskey Creek, Deadman's Gulch, Shuteye, Bootjack, Dogtooth, and Rattlesnake Lake."<sup>19</sup> There's even a Peckinpah Mountain, there--and, again an immeasurable sense of loss: this is country settled by cattle people and miners--and towns which knew huge populations 100 years ago are now nearly ghost towns. Simmons concludes his geographical panorama quite significantly: "From the grass-covered mounds of Boneyard Meadow to the pines on Horsecamp Mountain above Bailey Flats there is a wealth of material for a thousand stories. And more than forty years ago, when Sam Peckinpah

was a boy, it was an area closer to the nineteenth century than the twentieth."<sup>20</sup>

And one of the mining towns up there was named Coarsegold, and Coarsegold would turn out to be the precise destination of Steve Judd and Gil Westrum in Peckinpah's early success: Ride the High Country.

For Peckinpah as for his brother and two sisters, the sense of family was pervasive. Although he explicitly claims he has never used his family as characters in his films because "they got too respectable,"<sup>21</sup> the evidence, as we shall see, indicates otherwise. His mother, according to Peckinpah, believed "absolutely in two things: teetotalism and Christian Science."<sup>22</sup> Dinner table conversation was about "the Bible and Robert Ingersoll."<sup>23</sup> And his father is given this impressive description:

My father was of the opinion that you earned what you got. Nothing was ever given to you. Then all of a sudden out of nowhere, something would happen-something nice, something special. He was the 'Boss,' and that's what Denny (Peckinpah's brother) and I called him. Even when we grew up, he was still tough, and he'd knock you on your ass if you were out of line; but he never held a grudge. That term 'Boss' was used with such affection. You called him 'Boss,' but he was more than that. He was your friend. He was always behind you, helping you."<sup>24</sup>

From this family, Peckinpah went forth to complete a high school education at San Rafael Military Academy near San Francisco; enlist in the Marine Corps, in which he served from February of 1942 through August of 1945, missing the

shooting war but serving in China in the Pacific Theater;<sup>25</sup> then back home to attend first Fresno State College and later USC, majoring first in history and later in drama. Along the way he married for the first time, and left his graduate work to seek employment when his first child was born.

He worked for a television station, sweeping floors, then connected with an independent producer, Walter Wanger, who gave him work on a Don Siegel picture, Riot in Cell Block II (1954). He stuck with Siegel, who liked him, through three more low-budget films, including the classic Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956), in which Peckinpah has his first screen appearance--as a meter-reader.

Peckinpah was in love with film by this time and, arguably, would have done nearly anything to keep working in the business. He'd have to: the now-familiar story of Hollywood ups and downs, of sabotaged projects and studio black-listing begins as early as his first feature, The Deadly Companions (1961), in which his female lead, Maureen O'Hara, used her brother as production chief. Television would save Peckinpah again and again: he prospered as a writer/director on the Gunsmoke and Rifleman series; created The Westerner in 1960, which did not last, but which contained scripts far above the caliber of most series television. Ride the High Country made him critical points in 1962, but the big-budget Major Dundee, cut viciously by Columbia studios in

1965, gave him the reputation of maverick--a director who was simply too much trouble to work with. And, indeed, he remained out of major work for four years--until The Wild Bunch.

But in 1967 the television production of Katherine Anne Porter's Noon Wine brought him back into prominence, and thus television served him well again. This success led to The Wild Bunch, and the films to this time. Peckinpah has remained tough, exacting--and often at odds with his studios and producers. The debacle of Convoy in 1978 led to another unofficial blacklist and, as this manuscript is being written, Peckinpah is only now preparing for his first major release in almost six years. On top of his professional problems, he suffered a heart attack in 1979, and was forced, in 1982, to do a second-unit job to prove that he was able to work. Touchingly, old friend Don Siegel came to his rescue again: it was Siegel's film Jinxed (1982) that allowed Peckinpah to re-prove himself.

It's a colorful life, and the biographical critic would be quick to point out that Peckinpah has, in truth, always drawn subject matter from it. The affectionate "Jeff," an episode of the short-lived Westerner television series, was based upon an encounter the director had had with a prostitute in a Nevada mountain bar several years before. The continuing character in that series, Dave Blassingame,

was so named for Peckinpah's father, David, and a ranching family of Peckinpah's childhood. His low-budget early success, Ride the High Country, employs the region in which Peckinpah grew up and actually uses the name "Coarsegold"; the deeply moral Steve Judd character in the film is given the line "All I want is to enter my house justified." This is a reference to the humble tax collector who cannot lift his eyes to Heaven which is recorded in Luke 18: 9-14. This is the man--because of his humility--who "went down to his house justified," Christ tells his disciples--and the quotation was a favorite of Peckinpah's father. "That line... was paraphrasing a Biblical verse I learned from my father," Peckinpah has said. "He was a great student of the Bible, and this is one of the things I remember from my childhood."<sup>26</sup>

The opening shootout in The Wild Bunch is set in the south Texas town of San Raphael, another obvious autobiographical borrowing--as is the use of "Hefe" to refer to Pike Bishop of that film--and, sometimes, to the corrupt federales leader Mapache: it means "Chief," or "Boss." When the young Mexican, Angel, says to Pike: "I go with you, Hefe," the surrogate father-surrogate son nature of their relationship comes clearly through. And thematically, of course, both Ride the High Country and The Wild Bunch reflect vividly the contrasts--both beautiful and harsh--between the lost world of the nineteenth century and the emerging world of the twentieth which

Peckinpah was so aware of in childhood.

These autobiographical elements continue into Peckinpah's career. Pauline Kael, hardly one to rely on this critical approach, has even given an entire interpretation of The Killer Elite which depends upon seeing the film's conflict between dark forces in the CIA and the protagonist's individual integrity as being something close to an allegorical picture of studio control versus Sam Peckinpah. "He's crowing in The Killer Elite," Ms. Kael writes, "saying, 'No matter what you do to me, look at the way I can make a movie.' The bedevilled bastard's got a right to crow."<sup>27</sup> And more significant to this study, a year before, critics had noted the physical similarities between Peckinpah and Bennie, the protagonist of Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, as played by Peckinpah's long-time friend Warren Oates.<sup>28</sup>

Others have suggested that Peckinpah borrowed his references to "they" and "them" in The Wild Bunch from a letter to him from Katherine Anne Porter on the subject of studio control; that phrases like "He played his string out to the end" are common to the director's assessments of actual people, and that the near-paranoid view he takes of the business of making pictures does find allegorical enactment in every portrait of bureaucracy's threat that he gives us on film. And, there is no denying that it is easy to see railroads and stage lines and the CIA and other forms of bureau-



crazy in a comment like this one:

This isn't a game. There's too much at stake. And the woods are full of killers, all sizes, all colors. I didn't know about all of this when I was just a writer...a director has to deal with a whole world absolutely teeming with mediocrities, jackals, hangers-on and just plain killers. The attribution is terrific. It can kill you. The saying is that they can kill you but not eat you. That's nonsense. I've had them eating on me while I was still walking around. My basic job is dealing with talent in terms of a story and getting it on. I wish the rest of it were that simple. But there's all the shit that comes before and after.<sup>29</sup>

Thus it becomes profitable to understanding Peckinpah's work on at least one level to measure his plots and, in a larger sense, his themes against his life so far. Directors we have compared with Peckinpah like Ford and Huston have been able to work in many genres with stories which do not necessarily contain personal reference for them and, in this way, they may be seen to differ from Peckinpah: the latter figure does seem to make conscious attempts, on the allegorical level if no other, to fit the material to his life. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Ford was at his most endearing when working with subject matter which reflected his native Ireland (The Quiet Man; The Informer), and that Huston's two perhaps most celebrated films (The Maltese Falcon (1941); The Treasure of the Sierra Madre) are distinguished partly by the roles he wrote for his own father, the actor Walter Huston.

## V.

An historical approach should illumate through examining the director's work in relation to his times, and there is a wealth of material here to open Peckinpah's films even further. Peckinpah's westerns do, after all, deal with specific times in our recent American past: Major Dundee, with its end-of-the-Civil-War setting, is the director's farthest journey into the past to date. In this regard, it is important to demonstrate the strong sense of history of these films in order to establish that the director does have a sense of himself as American cinematic historian. Commentary on the American past, after all, can be commentary on the American present.

The western films do reflect a strong historical sense, but hardly an accurate one. Peckinpah, it seems, is far more interested in the myth-life of this country, and thus he is willing to rearrange historical data to suit his purpose, as he certainly does in both Major Dundee and Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid. Even so, the films reflect that he knows his history, and often pulls actual situations into the framework of the films in ways which help to tell his story. One such borrowing may point this out.

In The Wild Bunch, there is a train robbery sequence which has become quite famous for its intensity and the sweep of its technique. In this sequence, Pike Bishop and the

other members of his bunch loot one of the General Pershing's military trains of a shipment of rifles and make their escape by uncoupling the engine from the rest of the train, running it down the track, and putting it in reverse, running at full speed, before they abandon it. The result is that the engine careens back up the train track and collides with the rest of the train as army soldiers are attempting to get their horses out of the train and give chase. The Bunch accomplishes this with the kind of professionalism that these men show in the heat of action, and move closer to earning the respect of the audience in doing so. But what is important to us here is that this spectacular action show-piece of the film is based on a piece of actual history, from 1913 which occurred when Pancho Villas's troops were fighting President Mercado's federales between Chihuahua City and Juarez. Villa's particularly bloody--and effective--lieutenant, Rodolfo Fierro, was in charge of destroying the railroad track which the federales would use, and, according to one account, his method would be quite familiar to viewers of

The Wild Bunch:

...for three days the battle of Tierra Blanca raged. Mercado's 5000 regulars, reinforced by a column of 2000 Juarez survivors proved unequal to Villa's 5000, and by November 25th the federales were attempting to withdraw toward Chihuahua City. Then Rodolfo Fierro struck. In a moment of inspiration, Fierro had decided to ignore the laborious and temporary destruction of track. Concentrating instead on the last of Mercado's trains, Fierro's detachment

blocked the rails, charged the train, surprised its troop escort and disarmed them. He then shot the officers. Finally he uncoupled the engine, loaded its cowcatcher with a tremendous load of<sup>30</sup> dynamite and studded this with explosive caps.

At this point, Fierro opened the throttle, and then leaped out of the train. Here is what ensued:

The "crazy engine" raced northward, around a broad bend. Ahead lay Tierro Blanca and Mercado's 10 other trains, stalled end to end by Villa's attack. As the cowcatcher met the last caboose, an earthshaking explosion ended Mercado's hopes. When the enormous black ball of fire and smoke had lifted, the rear troop train lay scattered over half a mile, a broad stretch of track had been twisted into blackened junk, and the federales were in wild retreat.<sup>31</sup>

Since, in the course of the film, the Bunch winds up doing Pancho Villa's work for him, this piece of history illuminates the film. It is a casual reference, to be sure--just as the melting-pot of soldiers--Union and Confederates, black soldiers, chicano--who ride with Major Dundee in that film is a casual reference to a divided America which needed to be reunited in the wake of the Civil War, or the "Wild Bunch" appellation of that title calls to mind that this was the name often given to some very real turn-of-the-century train robbers: Butch Cassidy and the Hole-in-the-Wall gang. This ability to suggest both fact and legend allows Peckinpah to rework the famous advice from John Ford's The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance--"When the legend becomes fact, print the legend"--to his own purposes: for Peckinpah, there

can be no distinction. Ford may have seen fact as diminished in stature as compared to the more colorful legends, but Peckinpah, with a typically ambiguous eye, finds them to be inextricably joined. The reason why apparently bad men sometimes become heroes, as they do at the end of The Wild Bunch, is that our myth-life is forever enlarging on mundane fact.

In the same way, specific historical criticism of Peckinpah can illuminate him as a filmmaker for the Vietnam years, a time in which most directors tended to make their statements about the war in allegorical fashion. This kind of approach has led David Cook to write an interpretation of The Wild Bunch--which bears the dubious title "Zapping the Cong"--equating the presence of the Bunch in Mexico in 1913 with the presence of the United States in Southeast Asia during the year in which the film appeared, and the federales with the corrupt government of South Vietnam:

If Bonnie and Clyde was about the type of romantic rebel who would fight the military-industrial complex to end the war and usher in the greeting of America, Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch (1969) was about America's mercenary presence in Vietnam itself...a year before the revelation of the My Lai massacre, the outraged critics (of the film) could not know that they were watching an allegory of American intervention in Vietnam. <sup>32</sup>

While Cook's analysis is irritating because it simplifies badly a complex piece of work, it is nonetheless a popular approach to both The Wild Bunch and Straw Dogs.

Certainly, if we took historical criticism of Peckinpah no further, we would have to say that the examinations of violence which these films provide are inseparably bound to the war headlines of the late sixties and early seventies.

The myth critic, as well, looking for that kind of "sympathetic resonance"<sup>33</sup> which indicates that a viewer is having an archetypal response to a work, will find more than enough material in Peckinpah. The mythical associations of water as purification and redemption can be found again and again in Peckinpah's use of the Rio Grande: it is the scene of the climactic battle in Major Dundee, the battle which Dundee's forces, at last united, must win to re-enter the United States in their own new unity. It is the Rio Grande into which the Wild Bunch rides, heading for Mexico and the purifying experience which will grant them a nobility that might have escaped them. The healing power of water is conveyed wonderfully in The Ballad of Cable Hogue--for it is water that the desert rat Cable finds--"where it wasn't." A swim in a lake in a public park renews Doc McCoy just a short time after he has been released from prison at the beginning of The Getaway--and, even in a lesser film like Convoy, it is, once again, the Rio Grande which first claims the trucker-hero, Rubber Duck, at the conclusion of that

film--and then gives him up in symbolic resurrection.

Peckinpah's use of color is myth-oriented, as well: he has made no feature films in black-and-white, and he coordinates his colors very carefully. The stark black-and-white clothing of Peckinpah protagonists like Steve Judd in Ride the High Country and Pike Bishop in The Wild Bunch is invariably a reflection of their inflexibility: their appealing but tragic propensity to see life in terms of absolutes. The lush green of Angel's Mexican village in The Wild Bunch, full of growth and wonderfully ordered, is shown in stark contrast to the red of blood spilled throughout the film--the blood of chaos which symbolizes man's propensity for disorder. An indication of hopeful elements in the ending of that film can be found in the way that the director calls forth once more an earlier ride by the Bunch out of Angel's village--a ride through trees of the deepest green which, somewhere, still live, still grow--even though the Bunch has gone to its doom--and its immortality.

The deserts in both The Wild Bunch and Cable Hogue touch mythic chords with their connotations of death; of waste--and the stark landscape of England's Land's End performs a similar function in Straw Dogs. But Peckinpah's films provide balance throughout, juxtaposing aridity with growth in many ways which are meant to once again suggest the ambiguous texture of the human condition--and of life.

It is true that there is less ambiguity seen when Northrop Frye's archetypal phases are applied to the films: Peckinpah's penchant for dealing with characters just past middle age, out of place in the twentieth century, tends to summon Frye's sunset phase: the British title of Ride the High Country, significantly, is Guns in the Afternoon, referring to the ages of the film's two protagonists.<sup>34</sup>

The use of anthropology, too, that myth criticism likes to incorporate seems appropriate for an artist who has an avowed dedication to interest in the theories of Robert Ardrey propounded in works like African Genesis and The Territorial Imperative--and indeed coming to terms with Peckinpah does involve, to some extent, coming to terms with our primitive selves. But it must be remembered that it was, after all, James Frazer, in The Golden Bough, who emphasized that, among all cultures, food and children are the primary needs for survival, making man at once hunter and family-maker. This study hopes to illuminate Peckinpah by taking the emphasis off the human being a hunter and putting it on his latter function.<sup>35</sup>

## VI.

The period which this study of Sam Peckinpah encompasses, then, is the one which begins in 1969 with The Wild Bunch, and which ends in 1974 with the film that I believe the director considered a capstone work: Bring Me the Head of



Alfredo Garcia. I maintain that the films of this period constitute a clear and conscious progression on the director's part, and I offer the following as principal targets for consideration:

The Wild Bunch (1969)

The Ballad of Cable Hogue (1970)

Straw Dogs (1971)

Junior Bonner (1972)

The Getaway (1972)

Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (1973)

Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia (1974).

I am interested in uniting the works into a coherent whole--an auteurist statement by the artist-as-filmmaker. And, while there are several themes well worth the tracing, I intend to use the one I consider at once the most obvious--and the least discussed thus far. This is the theme of family: traditional family and surrogate family. It is uniform in importance throughout these seven films--as uniform as the very look of the works. Despite the fact that the Peckinpah violence technique has become a staple of action film today, the mature work of the director still has a certain texture that's hard to mistake: Peckinpah films just don't look like anybody else's--and the contribution of cinematographer Lucien Ballard is not to be underestimated here. Beyond that, Peckinpah himself was originally schooled as

a film editor, and his jittery, end-of-the-tether cutting style is unmistakable. Even when British cinematographer John Coquillon assumes the lensing duties, as he does for Straw Dogs, the look may become more claustrophobic, but the style remains clearly that of Peckinpah.

Certainly, this is true for some of the director's surface concerns, as well: they are easily spotted. Peckinpah films are male-oriented, likely to reveal the director's avowed sympathy for "losers and misfits." The protagonists, from the grizzled Pike Bishop of The Wild Bunch to Benny, the drifter whose journey is recorded in Alfredo Garcia, are men out of place in time: figures who must come to terms with the 20th century or die--and figures who often elect to do the latter. They are often infuriating in the shallowness of their codes: Pike says: "When you side with a man, you stay with him"--although his history reveals that he has consistently been unable to; and Benny's meager defense is that "Nobody loses all the time." And they are often repellent to us in their capacity for destruction. But in their very ambiguity lies their attraction: we are forced to learn to like these characters--and thus we come to care more deeply about them because we have met them partway.

And though their quests tend to come to nothing and their battles reveal no real victors, there is a certain ragged heroism in them. Virtually everyone, sooner or

later, tends to get his dignity in a Peckinpah movie--and, again and again, the director provides for us an index to that dignity. And perhaps the first clear manifestation of our theme of family is in the 1962 film which first brought Peckinpah to critical attention: a low-budget jewel named Ride the High Country. In that film, two very typical Peckinpah protagonists, aging cowboys played by Joel McCrae and Randolph Scott, take a job carrying a payroll to a mining town, Coarsegold, which is located high in the California mountains. They will then transport the gold back to the bankers in the valley. Along the way, they pick up a young lady who is fleeing a vengeful father in order to marry her fiance, one of the miners in Coarsegold. The two protagonists attend the wedding ceremony, which is held in Coarsegold's brothel.

It's a bad situation, and one that will clearly come to no good end. Billy Hammond, the miner who is the groom, plans to share Young Elsa Knudson, the bride, with his three brothers; the atmosphere is filled with corruption and decay. In the midst of this, Judge Tolliver, who takes some pains to point out that this is a civil ceremony, comes drunkenly forth to preside. Elsa and Billy, flanked by the lecherous brothers and whores for maids of honor, are rowdy at first, but they quiet as the judge speaks. Here is his speech:

We are gathered here in the high country to join this couple in matrimony. Now, I'm not a man of the cloth: this is a civil ceremony. But it's not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly...A good marriage is like a rare animal: hard to find, and almost impossible to keep. You see--the glory of a good marriage don't come at the beginning. It comes later on---and it's hard work.

Though the general climate of corruption will immediately prevail once more, the speech is arresting: it seems to stop the film. The judge, himself a symbol of a corrupt world, has pinpointed one purity in the midst of chaos: "the glory of a good marriage." The film gently reinforces the judge's speech by expanding "marriage" to mean any human relationship: the cowboys, Steve Judd and Gil Westrum, go back a long way--but will turn briefly against each other in the course of the story, as Gil decides that the gold is his for the taking, and Steve is forced to protect it. But they reconcile--and the glory of their relationship comes at the end, with Steve near death.

Ten years later, in the modern-day Texas of The Getaway, Doc and Carol McCoy are in danger of dying just this side of Mexico, outside an El Paso hotel, when, like a cheery Charon, an aged cowboy appears with a salvage truck: the logos on the side reads: "Our business is picking up." Doc and Carol commandeer cowboy and truck, and demand that he drive them across the border. These two, armed to the teeth, are clearly desperadoes, but the cowboy complies,

remarking: "Shoot, I been in trouble with the law a time or two myself." As they reach the border, he asks them if they would mind a personal question, and then inquires: "Are you two kids married?" When he learns that they are, he is relieved. "That's the trouble with this world today--no morality. Kids--today--" he muses--"They think that if they ain't livin'together, they ain't really livin'."

The contrast between the cowboy's sanctimonious words and the McCoys' extralegal lifestyle is, certainly, ludicrous--just as the similar contrast in Ride the High Country between the judge's speech and the brothel setting proved to be. But the cowboy becomes strangely touching when he speaks of his wife: "Been married to the same old girl--thirty-five years. She's a tough old hide--but everything I am, I owe to her." Clearly, the cowboy is not much by any social standard--but, just as clearly, the director thinks he's worth quite a bit. Thus, his advice takes on weight when, across the border in Mexico, he tells Doc and Carol to "settle down, get a little place...raise some kids," and "quit this runnin' around the country." In fact, what he has just told these two that he wishes for them is what the audience has come to wish for them, too.

And so, after Doc gives the Cowboy \$30,000 for his truck, the final exchange between the two, in which Doc tells the Cowboy "I hope you find what you're looking for," and the Cowboy replies: "Vaya con Dios," takes on plenty of reson-

ance. Doc is able to say this to a man who has obviously helped him to find what he's looking for--and we really do get the idea that Doc and Carol, their marriage secure, have succeeded in what the Wild Bunch only dreamed about: the attempt to "make one good score and back off." And what will they back off to? A little place where they'll raise some kids--some embodiments of the dream of being a child again.

Such resolves seem a bit pat in the wake of chaotic action that a Peckinpah film inevitably churns up--even pedestrian. They are, arguably, not even necessary: no one says that the artist has a responsibility to do more than present the problem. But to see Peckinpah's films without understanding that he is didactic enough to insist on at least the consideration of solutions is, I think, to see only part of the films. And this concept of family is one that the director approaches with characteristic ambiguity: there are good families and bad families in Peckinpah; families of killers and families of victims. There are people who have been caught in perverse family structures, and those who are involved in ailing relationships which, potentially, can get better. Beyond that, these films deal with many different aspects of family union: some, like The Getaway or Straw Dogs, are about marriage. Some, like both The Wild Bunch and Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, are about sur-

rogate families. Others like Alfredo Garcia or Cable Hogue, explore courtships. And Junior Bonner, perhaps the most obvious--though not the best--example of my thesis, takes a family through three generations.

There is, of course, another level to this familial preoccupation which manifests itself in the casting and crew selection of Peckinpah films: these works, much like those of the director John Ford, tend to feature a troupe of players before the camera, and they tend to be put together by the same people. Those who know these films and appreciate them have developed a strong tolerance for character actors like Warren Oates and Ben Johnson and L.Q. Jones. Those who pay attention to how they get made distinguish clearly between the camera work of Lucien Ballard and John Coquillon; understand the importance of the musical scores of Jerry Fielding; know something of the editing style of Lou Lombardo. If one starts with The Wild Bunch, moves through Cable Hogue, and then goes to Junior Bonner and The Killer Elite, it is possible to watch the director's son, Matthew Peckinpah, grow up on camera. His daughter, Sharon Peckinpah, gets more than one credit for dialogue director. This kind of reliance on actual and surrogate family in the composing of the films reinforces the importance to the director of the concept with which we will deal.

I would make one more observation in this regard. The body of work with which we will deal is a most American phe-

nomenon: Peckinpah's influences are American; his background is California agrarian. The many flags which appear in his films have received a lot of critical attention: during the late '60's, it was common for reviewers to see them as dark humor. In retrospect, though, they don't seem to have much ironic intent. The United States flag which Cable Hogue raises above his desert stagecoach station finally flies over a symbolic bit of America. The flag which Tyreen hands Major Dundee in the Rio Grande battle at the end of that film is a prize worth the capture. The flag under which Doc McCoy waits outside of Huntsville prison after his release points towards the American journey which he is about to take. And Ace Bonner, the great American patriarch in Junior Bonner, takes his place in the rodeo parade, we are told, "between the Indians and the flag."

And what, after all, is the American experience? It's that which takes place between the Indians and the flag: between the image of this country uncorrupted by settlers, and the image of the country after "settlement," as reflected in its emblem: the flag. What is central to that experience? A patriarch; a family--the basic unit which stands for human beings banding together. In dealing with the family in all its ambiguity, Sam Peckinpah may well feel that he is dealing with a microcosm of the American experience.

Clearly, though, such an approach sounds overly sentimental, even maudlin when applied to a director whose name is



associated with a cinema which is notorious for its ruthless portrayals of man's darker nature. How, then, to presume in the face of the near naturalistic aspects of much of Peckinpah's work?

It would, of course, be easy enough to point to the realist-romantic tension which goes unresolved through most of American art, but, for the sake of argument, why not proceed by taking some of the director's darker public statements on their face value? Peckinpah has made a number that he would probably prefer to live down--but he has shown no signs of repudiating this one:

I think it's wrong--and dangerous--to refuse to acknowledge the animal nature of man. That's what Robert Ardrey is talking about in those three great books of his, African Genesis The Territorial Imperative and The Social Contract. Ardrey's the only prophet alive today. Some years ago, when I was working on The Wild Bunch, a friend of mine came to me with African Genesis and said I had to read it because Ardrey was writing about what I was dealing with, that we were both on the same track. So after I finished Wild Bunch I read him and I thought, wow, here's somebody who knows a couple of nasty secrets about us.<sup>36</sup>

Ardrey's trilogy, while it has been popular, is hardly held in highest respect in the larger world of anthropological thought. There is something perhaps too accessible about the way Ardrey states man's evolutionary background--and about the way he relates man's priorities to an instinctive need to defend territory. But Ardrey's writing makes use of a good deal of "hard" science, and quite a bit of

it may offer terms more applicable to Peckinpah than Ardrey's overall thesis is. In The Territorial Imperative, for example, Ardrey traces scientific conceptions about man's dual nature through the 19th and 20th centuries, and concludes that it results from man's functions as a social being--from his necessity to get along in the larger social order so that he may protect his own:

The dual nature of man has puzzled philosophers since philosophy began. In the same individual we find infinite capacity for tenderness, sympathy, charity, love, and infinite capability for cruelty, callousness, destructiveness, hate. Herbert Spencer saw it as the natural consequence of the life of social man, who must obey two codes: there is the code of amity, which he must honor in his relations with his social partners, and the code of enmity, which he must honor in his relations with the outside world. He follows them unthinkingly, since he has no alternative. Let enough members of a society disobey the code of amity, and the society will fragment; let enough disobey the code of enmity and the society will be crushed.<sup>37</sup>

Let us, for our purposes here, adapt the "term" "society" to mean "family" here--and we may begin to take a more detached look at Peckinpah's major concern: the amity of the group, as mirrored in the traditional family situation, or even the nontraditional situation: the surrogate family, the unsocialized group--or the "bunch." This unit, perhaps because of Peckinpah's own upbringing, seems to be the repository of human value for Peckinpah, and he consistently tests his characters in regard to how able they are to preserve

traditional or nontraditional family. Put simply, he subscribes to Darwin's observation that "When two tribes of primeval man, living in the same country, came into competition, the tribe including the greater number of courageous, sympathetic, and faithful members would succeed better and would conquer the other."<sup>38</sup> And Peckinpah does not consider his protagonists to be that far advanced from primeval man, even though he is bemused by them, attracted to them--and often <sup>~</sup>respectful of them.

The second level of Peckinpah films, beyond the testing of amity, can be seen as the testing of enmity. This latter concept is secondary for Peckinpah--it doesn't necessarily hold the values of traditional family. The "family" may find every reason and indeed have every right to break enmity with the larger social order--and even to be crucified for it. It comes down to willingness to die for a cause--and, in Peckinpah, the cause worth dying for is always amity--the preservation of family. Thus the objective element of Darwin or Spenser is lost for Peckinpah: his romantic nature takes over when his families run afoul of the social order. He agrees with the realities of the evolutionary process enough to admit that man cannot deny his dual nature: this is why violence is such a reality for him. But he is partisan in finding the strength of his characters in their adherence to family rather than social order.

He goes so far as to say that this is what is best about us--and, by extension, its reflections in our larger social order are the best parts of that, too. Thus the Wild Bunch acts out of amity, a private concern, but inevitably winds up acting in favor of a larger good by striking out against the federales whose oppression threatens to end the social order worth preserving in the film: agrarian Mexico.

Interestingly, Ardrey also quotes William Graham Sumner, the nineteenth century thinker who commented upon the beneficial aspects of war and other forms of unrest in the larger social order upon a specific group like the family. We come together in our small units, Sumner says, because we must consistently face extermination by the larger social order. And, in coming together, we become strong:

The relation of comradeship and peace in the we-group and that of hostility and war towards the others-group are correlative to each other. The exigencies of war with outsiders are what make each insider, lest internal discord should weaken the we-group. These internal exigencies also make government and law in the in-group, in order to prevent quarrels and enforce discipline. Thus war and peace have reacted on each other and developed each other, one within the group, the other in the inter-group relation.<sup>39</sup>

The implication that the process through which we protect family is also the process through which we protect country is clear here. It may also become incidentally clear where Peckinpah got the name for his Straw Dogs protagonist, David Sumner, who is faced with learning to protect his own family

situation in remote rural England after he has fled from political confrontation in the America of the Vietnam years. Peckinpah consistently uses the concerns of family to mirror the larger concerns of country--specifically the United States--and thus preserves his role as American allegorist. What is strong in family for Peckinpah--loyalty to each other as opposed to loyalty to an abstraction; empathy; self-sacrifice; forgiveness--these are the things that we must cherish in the larger concept of country as well. Unsavory families--or unsavory "bunches"--in Peckinpah are those that are bound together for reasons of greed or revenge or lust or power--and these are, of course, the things that may eventually be the ruination of country, as well. Thus it is no accident that Cable Hogue quite proudly and sincerely raises an American flag over the place where he has made a home in that film, or that Pike Bishop says of his bunch: "We hold very few sentiments with our government"--meaning, certainly, the colonizing aspects of the Wilson white house, or that Doc and Carol McCoy, in The Getaway, reunite their marriage first beneath the flagpole outside of the Huntsville prison. We are not talking about a concept of patriotism here--only commentary. We are saying that a study of family can also be a study of country. The simplest example of this, certainly, is in a film outside the scope of our study, 1965's truncated Major Dundee, in which the Major's ragtag

regiment of various factions of political belief, race, and creed becomes emblematic of the United States at the end of the Civil War--or the United States today. Perhaps this is why the cutting that Columbia studies did of the picture hurt Peckinpah so badly--why he claimed that it was like "losing a child."<sup>40</sup>

And so we begin the specific consideration of a group of films that were conceived in a spirit of hard-eyed realism that corresponds to an inevitable evolutionary process, but which at the same time wish to celebrate that which their director finds noble in man: his respect for family. Since it has been demonstrated that this "family" concept can and will, in these films, act as a mirror for larger concerns of country and the social order, there is no doubt that Peckinpah's themes are big ones. As an American artist, he follows in the tradition of Melville, in Moby-Dick, or Faulkner in Absalom, Absalom! Stories about strength of the group and family --and stories about their weaknesses-- can be stories about the United States. Peckinpah is quite willing to extend the metaphor, incidentally, to the artist's community as well: it's overstated, again, but, as a linkage between his conception of his role as artist and the concerns of his art, the following statement is most revealing:

Sometimes I want to say the hell with it  
and pack it in, but I can't do that. I  
stick or I know I'm nothing. Then I look  
around and I notice I'm not entirely alone.

There are maybe 17 of us left in the world. And we're a family. That family is composed of the cats who want to do their number and get it on. It's the only family there is. My father said it all one day. He gave me Steve Judd's great line in Ride the High Country: "All I want is to enter my house justified."<sup>41</sup>

The weary, beaten Pike Bishop in The Wild Bunch tells his surrogate family: "We're gonna stick together--just like it used to be. When you side with a man you stay with him, and if you can't do that you're finished! We're finished!" At that moment in the film, it is pitiable, and Pike is pitiable. And though we know the director understands this, we also know that he is clearly giving Pike a certain nobility here, as if he speaks the truth. And these seven films represent Peckinpah's attempt to at once view our American experience realistically and preserve our dreams for us by mirroring that experience through the concept of family. It's a sometimes comic, sometimes unbearable tragic journey which was clearly at times bitter hell for the artist to take, and which may have a similar effect on the viewer. But to say it is not worth taking is to deny ourselves: whatever else may be said about Peckinpah, his journey through these films is an American experience, and it seems to become even more pertinent as time goes on.<sup>42</sup>

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 1

<sup>1</sup>See Garner Simmons, Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage (Austin, 1982), p. 168, p. 187, p. 223, and p. 236. The Get-away grossed more than \$18 million in the United States and Canada. No succeeding Peckinpah film to date would come close to that.

<sup>2</sup>Pauline Kael, "Peckinpah's Obsession," as reprinted in Deeper into Movies (Boston, 1973), p. 398.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Sarris, The American Cinema (New York, 1968), p. 219.

<sup>4</sup>Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," Moby-Dick: A Norton Critical Edition (New York, 1967), p. 545.

<sup>5</sup>As quoted in Paul Seydor, hereafter cited as "Seydor," Peckinpah: The Western Films (Urbana, Ill., 1980), p. 76.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Sarris, The American Cinema (New York, 1968), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup>Anatomy of the Movies, ed. David Pirie (New York, 1981), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup>Peter Bogdanovich, Pieces of Time (New York, 1975), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup>As quoted in Seydor, p. 250.

<sup>10</sup>As quoted in "Sam Peckinpah Lets It All Hang Out," Take One, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Jan.-Feb., 1969), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup>"Playboy Interview: Sam Peckinpah," Playboy, No. 8 (Aug. 1972), p. 192.

<sup>12</sup>As quoted in Michael Sragow, "Sam Peckinpah Rides Again," The Movies, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Oct. 1983), p. 38.



<sup>13</sup>See Seydor, p. 55. Seydor has also noted the exact quotation of a line from Red River in Major Dundee: both Tom Dunson and Amos Dundee, when men are brought to them on horseback who have sinned against the group, say: "I don't want to have to look up at him."

<sup>14</sup>Playboy interview, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup>Simmons, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York, 1961), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>Simmons, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>P. F. Kluge, "Director Sam Peckinpah, What Price Violence?" Life, Vol. 73, No. 6 (Aug. 11, 1972), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>Simmons, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>21</sup>Playboy interview, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>24</sup>Simmons, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup>See Simmons, p.p. 19-20: Peckinpah did an eighteen-month tour of duty in the Far East. At one point, a troop train in which he was riding was fired upon by communists, and he saw a Chinese coolie die. He calls that moment, "one of the longest split seconds" of his life--and therein may lie the genesis of the Peckinpah use of slow-motion camera.

<sup>26</sup>As quoted in Ernest Callenbach, "A Conversation with Sam Peckinpah," Film Quarterly, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter 1963-43), p. 7.

<sup>27</sup>Pauline Kael, "Notes on the Nihilistic Poetry of Sam Peckinpah," The New Yorker (Jan. 2, 1976), p. 75.

<sup>28</sup>See Doug McKinney, Sam Peckinpah (Boston, 1979), p. 190, hereafter cited as "McKinney" for one such comparison and Louis Black, "Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia," Cinema Texas Program Notes, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Oct. 28, 1980), p. 31, for another. There is also specific help from the film's text: consider, for example, Bennie's reference to "bein' drunk in a hotel room in Fresno, California," or the compo-

sition of the shot in which Bennie and Elita have their picnic as compared with the 1957 photograph of Peckinpah and former wife, Begonia Palacios, in the photo section in Simmons. Simmons' caption reads: "Unemployed and unemployable, Sam Peckinpah shares an intimate moment with his second wife, actress Begonia Palacios." The autobiographical parallel with the afore-mentioned scene in Alfredo Garcia is even visually unmistakable.

<sup>29</sup>Playboy interview, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup>William Douglas Lansford, Pancho Villa (Los Angeles, 1965), p. 197.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>32</sup>David A. Cook, A History of Narrative Film (New York, 1981), p.p. 631-32.

<sup>33</sup>Wilfred Guerin, Earle G. Labor, Lee Morgan, and John R. Willingham, A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (New York, 1966), p. 116.

<sup>34</sup>See Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (New York, 1957), p.p. 206-223 for a discussion of tragedy most pertinent to the Peckinpah view of the passage from 19th to 20th century as reflected in Ride the High Country, The Wild Bunch, and The Ballad of Cable Hogue, as when Frye writes: "...while catastrophe is the normal end of tragedy, this is balanced by an equally significant original greatness, a paradise lost."

<sup>35</sup>See Robert Ardrey, The Territorial Imperative (New York, 1966), p.p. 267-282 for Ardrey's comments on man's innate aggression, and compare Peckinpah's comment as quoted by Dan Yergin, "Peckinpah's Progress," New York Times (Oct. 31, 1971), p. 90: "'...everybody seems to think man is a noble savage, but he's only an animal, a meat-eating animal. Recognize it! He also has grace...and love...and beauty. But don't say to me that we aren't violent. Because we are! It's one of the greatest brain-washes of all times to say we're not.'" The director's balance of violent aggression with "'Grace...and love...and beauty'" is crucial to our discussion.

<sup>36</sup>Playboy interview, p. 68.

<sup>37</sup>Robert Ardrey, The Territorial Imperative (New York, 1966), p.p. 262-63. Hereafter cited as "Ardrey."

<sup>38</sup>Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man, as quoted in Ardrey, p. 262.

<sup>39</sup>William Graham Sumner, Folkways, as quoted in Ardrey, p. 263.

<sup>40</sup>Seydor, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup>Playboy interview, p. 192.

## TWO: THE WILD BUNCH

Even those who had followed the career of Sam Peckinpah could not have been prepared for the 1969 cinematic explosion that was The Wild Bunch. The 1962 low-budget film Ride the High Country had accumulated its following, but its lyrical look at the passing of the days of the gunfighter conveys an important Peckinpah theme without the use of the mature Peckinpah style. And 1965's Major Dundee remains, even now, so viciously cut that we apparently will never know whether the director's claim that this could have been his "finest picture" has some real basis.<sup>1</sup>

The television work, like Ride the High Country, signals themes, but style only intermittently. "The Losers," for example, done for The Dick Powell Theatre in 1962 and aired in January of 1963, employed one slow-motion sequence, and several speeded sequences like the ones Peckinpah would use in The Wild Bunch and The Ballad of Cable Hogue, respectively. Thus, even those who screened The Wild Bunch in 1969 with some prior knowledge of Peckinpah's work were caught completely off guard: the first twenty minutes, it is safe to say, riveted the eye like very little cinema had ever done before. The touch was assured; confident--the cinematography and editing brilliant

without apparent effort. Here was masterful work by someone who hadn't had a feature film in four years. Clearly, Peckinpah's years without work after Major Dundee, years spent on a virtual blacklist, had not been idle ones for the director. Perhaps like Hawthorne between the disastrous publication of Fanshaw in 1828 and the triumphant publication of Twice-Told Tales in 1837, he had been spending time learning his craft. Perhaps like Whitman between his departure from New York City in 1848 and the publication of Leaves of Grass in 1855, he had undergone a period of total self re-evaluation.

The comparisons are more apt than they at first may seem to be. Hawthorne, after all, was looking for a kind of allegory which would, in great part, allow him to comment upon American history, and but one of the symbols which served him well was that of the corrupt city: "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is a night journey through a most ambiguous American town, where levels of good and evil intermingle, which ends in a burst of mass violence--a tarring-and-feathering. Whitman, too, turned his attention quickly to the symbol of city in "Song of Myself": he embraced the dark underside of city life, affirming himself even further as poet of the masses.

Peckinpah's "city" is the south Texas town of Starbuck--or, if we prefer, San Raphael: settlements in this area in 1913, it must be remembered, had often been subject to

claims by two different empires. It is a dark biographical joke that the "San Raphael" appellation is a direct reference to Peckinpah's military school education at the San Raphael Academy, located above San Francisco: the men we will come to know as The Wild Bunch make their first appearances wearing U.S. Army uniforms--stolen ones.

It is the dead heat of a summer's morning. This is a railroad town, headquarters for an unscrupulous man named Harrigan, probably modeled on E. H. Harriman, the real-life railroad tycoon who was often terrorized by Butch Cassidy's Hole-in-the-Wall gang. The Harrigan of this film has posted railroad deputies in the roofs of the town's buildings, waiting in ambush for the outlaw gang which will ride in shortly to attempt to rob the train office. One of these deputies is the reluctant Deke Thornton, who once rode with Pike Bishop, the leader of The Wild Bunch. Deke has no interest in pursuing Pike, who once was his friend--but he has won his freedom from a federal penitentiary through being willing to cooperate with Harrigan--and thus he finds himself in this situation, saddled with a group of bounty-hunter incompetents who are in every way inferior to Pike and his men.

There is much activity in Starbuck/San Rafael on this morning. People are out and about, doing business; an open-air meeting of the South Texas Temperance Union is in progress, and the minister is preparing to lead his group on a march

through the streets while they sing "Shall We Gather at the River."<sup>2</sup> Children are playing. Clearly, Harrigan's preparations for this ambush have not extended to making provisions for protection for the general populace. If shooting starts, a lot of innocent people are going to be hurt, even killed.

The Bunch makes its entrance as we see the credits: they are done in freeze-frame which plunges the screen into black-and-white, with a suggestion of tintype, as each principal character is identified. The freeze on the name "William Holden" gives us our first close-up of Pike Bishop: a man past his prime whose wary eyes reveal him to be a cautious schemer. Because the audience is likely to bring a certain mythology to any character William Holden plays, we also know Pike to be tough and unsentimental, but basically compassionate.<sup>3</sup> The effect is disorienting: Can the William Holden we have known from softer films actually be playing the leader of a band of cutthroats--a Wild Bunch? This effect is also sustained in the freeze on Ernest Borgnine: he is Dutch Angstrom, Pike's second-in-command--but the sight of that familiar face evokes a mixture of feelings: Borgnine has been the sympathetic "Marty"--and he has also been the sadist-in-uniform of From Here to Eternity.<sup>4</sup>

The credits, after a couple of viewings, also reveal some typically dark Peckinpah humor: Robert Ryan's name, for example, appears beside a freeze on a horse's rear. Though Ryan's Deke Thornton emerges as sympathetic in the film, he

is also a man who has consciously made compromises with the twentieth century ("What I want and what I need are two different things," he says), and thus he must be seen as at least partially a turncoat. In a more wistful form of joking, we see the names of Warren Oates, Ben Johnson, and Jaimie Sanchez frozen against the faces of smiling children. Oates and Johnson play Lyle and Tector Gorch, the childlike natural brothers of the Bunch, who are bumbling but endearing beasts. Sanchez is Angel, the Mexican lad who finally becomes the film's symbol of near-innocent sacrifice. The three share similarities in that they are governed by the childlike response of impulse: Pike and Dutch, by comparison, consider themselves thinkers who plan their courses of action. "Being right," Pike is fond of saying, "is my business."<sup>5</sup>

The Bunch confronts a wonderful bit of foreshadowing on its ride into town. Near the edge of Starbuck, children are playing in the dusty street with sticks: they are jabbing a scorpion, which lies helpless on a pile of red ants. I suspect that this image has become one of the most famous symbols of American film in the last twenty years, and it is thus perhaps ironic that the director only hit upon it after filming of The Wild Bunch had already begun: it was suggested by the Mexican film director Emilio Fernandez, who plays the feder-ales leader Mapache in the film. Children play this game of ants-and-scorpion frequently in poor villages of Mexico--and Peckinpah saw in the image a sustaining symbol for the con-



cepts of Social Darwinism which he would entertain in The Wild Bunch. Pike and Dutch regard this spectacle as if they feel that someone had just walked over their graves--and they are quite right. The film opens up throughout, as Paul Seydor, among others, has pointed out, by returning to this image: the Bunch is like that scorpion--a clumsy, violent group which has a certain efficiency, but is always in danger of helplessness in its hostile environment. The ants become, variously, bounty hunters or Mexican federal troops, or even--at the beginning--the people of Starbuck, swarming over the Bunch as inevitably as the twentieth century has swarmed its implications of a new way of life; a dying frontier. The image works well: it is repellent, but uncannily apt.<sup>6</sup>

As the credits progress, the Bunch arrives at the train office and its members dismount. "All's quiet, sir," one tells Pike--and, with a glance at the surrounding rooftops, Pike replies: "Let's fall in." On the way across the street, a woman with packages bumps into Pike, and he extends a courteous nod and helps her recover her parcels. They continue to play the roles of gentlemen-soldiers until they enter the train office. A supervising clerk is in the process of dressing down an underling, and we hear him say: "I don't care what you meant to do...It's what you did that I don't like. You've made a fool of me and this whole railroad in the bargain." As the clerk turns to greet Pike, unconcerned with his employee's embarrassment, he says: "Yes, sir. Can I

help..." But that is all. Pike grabs him by the lapels and throws him across the room. The Bunch draws firearms. Tight closeup on Pike's face. "If they move," he says, "kill 'em." That is the final freeze-frame. The credit that accompanies it reads: "Directed by Sam Peckinpah."

Within a moment, Angel will spot rifles on a roof across the street, and the Bunch will find that it has to shoot its way out of Starbuck. The battle is really a massacre, and the town's citizens get repeatedly caught in the crossfire--particularly the Temperance Union marchers. It is a delirious sequence--and, for the first time, Peckinpah's editing concept, never before used in an American film, assaults the viewer full-force. Along the way, he has learned to employ the "flash-cut," a process by which a piece of action is registered on the screen for only a few seconds--and he has come to understand the value of integrated slow-motion. There are really no "pure" slow-motion sequences in any of Peckinpah, since they are consistently intercut with flash-cuts at regular speed. But it is the combination of the two which gives this way of filming action montage its clout.<sup>7</sup> And the Starbuck massacre, to this day, is a savage assault on the senses--an assault made all the more savage because the director's narrative concept has already made us aware of the characters as individuals: clearly, there are relationships here--even though, at this point, we remain unsure of what they are. But the fact that Pike and Deke recognize each other and fire

upon each other but deliberately miss; Pike's cry of "C'mon, ya lazy bastard," to Dutch and Dutch's reply, "I'm comin', dammit!"--these are clues that we know will have some payoff. The townspeople and bounty hunters who die may be anonymous--but even they get a weird dignity as Lucien Ballard's camera singles them out: the flash-cut technique affirms that death is, indeed, a very individual experience.

So strong an assault upon our senses is the sequence, in fact, that it becomes perhaps too easy to forget the railroad clerk's telltale comment: "It's not what you meant to do; it's what you did that I don't like." As we will see in this study, Peckinpah is fond of putting his thesis statement up front--usually placing it during the credits; often putting it in the mouth of a minor character, or giving it to a major character as a throwaway. Such is the case here. For, once we know these characters better, we must come to consider the gulf between what they meant to do, and what they have done. This problem will have many echoes through the film--indeed, it is the philosophic dilemma posed by the film--but, even with the opening sequence, it is easy to pinpoint its significance.

Consider Pike Bishop: a professional thief approximately 50 years old. Pike has survived in a career where longevity is not common. Part of his survival can be accounted to the fact that he's good: we'll see him at his best, in fact, in the later train robbery sequence. But he also has, as is

obvious in the Starbuck sequence, the qualities of a natural leader: the ability to inspire confidence in his followers; indeed, devotion. When it becomes clear in the train office that the Bunch is surrounded, Pike tells the half-witted Crazy Lee, newest member of the Bunch, to hold the office employees there while the Bunch tries to break out. "I'll hold 'em here till hell freezes over or you say different," Crazy Lee replies--and hold them he does. But the more aware members of the Bunch similarly look up to Pike: one, on the ride out of Starbuck, falls from his horse, his face a bloody mask from the gunshot wound he has sustained. At first, on his knees, he rationalizes: "I can't see," he says, "but I can ride." Then he capitulates. "No--I can't even ride...Finish it, Mr. Bishop." And it is up to Pike to perform a mercy-killing. He raises his pistol without a word, and does so.

Yes--Pike is a leader. Peckinpah takes some pains, in fact, to give him Teddy Rossevelt trappings. Later, in camp, as the Gorch brothers stage a minor rebellion against his authority, Pike, gesturing with a stick, tells them: "Go ahead. Fall apart: Go for it. Walk softly, boys." And, as Lyle Gorch begins to tell him: "Now, Pike, you know..." Pike cuts him off with: "I don't know a damned thing except that either I lead this bunch or I end it right now." And by this time, his hand is on his pistol.

But even though the command is sometimes tenuous, it's always there. And Pike's leadership is of a basically benevo-

lent sort: his rule is based on tradition, on comradeship, and on taking care of one's own. He has kept Freddie Sykes around for this job: an old-timer who used to run with Deke Thornton and him long ago. Even Crazy Lee has blood ties: he is Freddie's grandson, a fact which Pike doesn't know when he leaves Crazy Lee behind to die in Starbuck; a fact which would have caused him, Pike's face when informed implies, to do otherwise if he had known. Two members of the group, Lyle and Tector, are literally brothers; Pike and Dutch might as well be. And Angel is like an adoptive son. Later, when Pike threatens to leave Angel in his own Mexican village unless he can reconcile himself to the fact that he has lost his fiancée, Angel replies: "I go with you, Hefe." Hefe: the chief; the boss--the name which Peckinpah and his brother and sisters gave to their own father.

And so what Pike means to do is keep his family together: what's left of their "profession" isn't much, but Pike believes that it will be enough to "make one good score and back off." These are men who live together, ride together--depend utterly upon each other. And Pike is their leader. The Starbuck job, which he set up, was intended to provide the financial security his family must have. He meant to plan correctly: being right in his business. He meant to account for every variable--but he didn't count on Deke Thornton, who knows him so well that he can virtually predict his next move to Harrigan and the railroad. And

thus the job fails: the Bunch escapes with payroll sacks, but they're filled with washers. They've been set up. Old Freddie has the laugh, here. He reprimands the bunch by telling Lyle:

Big tough ones, ain't ya? They waltzed you in and tied a tin can to your tails, and waltzed you out again. And here you are with a sack full of washers, a thumb up your butt, and a big grin on your face to pass the time of day!

Pike sadly agrees, and admits his culpability by answering Lyle's angry demand to know who "they" are. "Railroad men," Pike says, "bounty hunters--Deke Thornton." These are the variables that eluded him despite all of what Lyle will call his "fancy plannin'." The "one big score" that Pike meant to make has turned into a botched job which has brought them nothing but sacks of washers. It's what he's done that he doesn't like.

From another standpoint, this is equally true for Deke Thornton. Thornton is a sympathetic man, more sinned against in the larger framework of the film. Years ago, he and Pike were caught in a bordello, and Pike ran out on him. And even now, though he could reasonably blame Pike for his capture, he only replies to a question about what kind of outlaw Pike is: "The best. He never got caught." In Starbuck, Deke wants a bloodless rout of the Bunch. He wants to give the conflict between himself and Pike the structure of a game, as if to say "Look: this time it's you, Pike, who got caught."

But there are too many guns in town on that morning, and too much at stake. The result is a bloodbath, which is nothing like what Deke "meant."

In these ways, we are introduced to characters whose dreams and realities are miles apart. There is no doubt that the men of the Bunch are dreamers: When Tector Gorch first sees the washers tumble out of those purloined sacks, he childishly exclaims: "Silver rings!" And Pike's dreams are, in some ways, the most childish of all. The morning after Starbuck, when the Bunch briefly threatens to dissolve again, Pike declares:

We're gonna stick together--just like it used to be. When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can't do that, you're like some animal. You're finished! We're finished! Now, mount up!

And, as if to punctuate the hollow ring of his words, Pike's stirrup immediately breaks, sending him toppling to the ground. He'll amass enough poise to mount his horse anyway, and ride on with tragic dignity--as Lucien Ballard's camera bobs "in sympathy," as John Simon has pointed out.<sup>8</sup> But Pike's credo is clearly an ideal--a way he wishes things were, but aren't... and never were. To stick together "like it used to be" cannot, for example, be a reference to Pike's leaving Deke in the bordello. Was there ever really a time when this bunch, in any form, stuck together? Or is this the way Pike means things to be as measured against the grim scale of the way they are?

Audiences of 1969 would have had little difficulty in accepting Pike as a flawed but charismatic leader. One of the central figures of the counter culture of the war years was, after all, Bishop Pike, the clergyman who led his own protest family. It is also conceivable that audiences who were used to ideological splits within families--usually over the violent issue of Vietnam--would have felt some empathy for Pike's continued efforts to keep his surrogate family group together. But the mixed critical response to The Wild Bunch can also be an informative index to how uncompromisingly realistic Peckinpah was in his depiction of tenuous family in a violent world. The characters he shows us, for example, are rather consistent sinners against the traditional family unit. Pike, we learn in flashback, sustained the wounds he has in his leg while courting another man's wife. His rendezvous was surprised by an irate husband, who killed the woman and wounded Pike. When the Bunch rides into Angel's village for temporary shelter, the Gorches poke much bad-natured fun at Angel, calling that they would like to make the acquaintance of his sister, his mother--or even his grandmother for sexual purposes. Angel's reaction to this banter is terse: "I have invited you to my village," he says. "Any disrespect to me or to my family...and I will kill you."

Indeed, only Angel is given a blood family that we see. His mother is seen in his village, as are his sisters. His closeness to his roots are cast in sharp relief when he learns



that a decadent leader of Huerte's federal troops, Mapache, has raided his village, killing his father and taking his fiancée, Teresa, to be his whore. And in this regard, Angel's impulsiveness will even lead him to sin against the family: later, in Mapache's encampment at Agua Verde, he guns Teresa down when she tells him that she will stay with Mapache because she has, for the first time in her life, known something besides poverty.

In Peckinpah's films, people are always people: they respond in the variety of ways to human experience that human beings actually do. Thus we will see the Wild Bunch, at various times throughout this film, behaving in ways we do not traditionally even associate with our rogues; our picaros--let alone our more socially assimilated heroes. They fight; they fall out--they pointedly use two different women as shields during a gun battle--We even hear Pike, in reply to Angel's question about whether he should be expected to steal guns for Mapache to use against his own people, reply: "Ten thousand cuts an awful lot of family ties." Pike is speaking of the money they have been offered to steal these guns and, for a moment, he has indeed convinced himself that gold is more important than family.

It takes a lot to warm up to these fellows. They're not overly smart; they're crude and they're willful. But it is always necessary to go that extra mile in accepting the protagonists of a Peckinpah film. It is not too much to

say that we finally come to know and find empathy with these characters by grudgingly extending to them the same forgiveness that we extend toward the ne-er-do-well uncle; the prodigal son or brother. Knowing the Wild Bunch becomes an exercise in learning to forgive: an art worth the practice in 1969--or now. It is, unfortunately, not necessarily the kind of thing that's mass-marketable. From Pike Bishop through Cable Hogue to Bennie of Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, Peckinpah's protagonists tend to get less overtly appealing instead of moreso. The rewards to be reaped from giving them our empathy are great, but it does seem clear that audiences have become increasingly less willing to do so: as noted, Peckinpah has not had a film which made real money in this country since The Getaway in 1972. But, in partial defense of his audiences, it must be reiterated that Peckinpah is asking of the viewer an extension of compassion usually reserved for intimates; for family. It's not easy to give--and this, of course, is the reason why The Wild Bunch is arguably his best film and probably unarguably his most powerful: it wrenches that compassion out of us involuntarily.

The Bunch stays at Angel's village long enough to renew its dream faculty. In this pastoral place, lushly filmed in dominant greens, the Gorch brothers chastely romance the women they had planned to take by force; Pike and Dutch visit with the oldest man in the village. When Pike finds the innocent behavior of his Bunch hard to believe, the old man

comments: "Not so hard. We all long to be a child again. Even the worst of us. Perhaps the worst...most of all." This exchange is a beautiful one, not at all undercut by the fact that Pike and the old man immediately go ahead to conspiratorially admit that both of them, in their ways, have lived lives as bandits. In this quiet setting, the Wild Bunch has found the home, however briefly, that it has only dreamed about heretofore. This image of home will again be relegated to dreams--just as soon as they ride out in the morning. But they now have a concrete vision to attach to what had heretofore been an abstract idea--and they will keep it in their minds. They even take, on that morning ride, parts of the village with them in the best sense: Dutch receives a rose; Lyle a sombrero which he will wear to his death. It is now forever a part of them: their image of home, and Peckinpah will reprise their ride on that morning, as the villagers sing "Los Golondrinas" to them, one last time. It is the final image in The Wild Bunch; the scene upon which the final credits freeze.

They will need this vision to sustain them in the last days of their life. In fact, the final act they perform, which must be said to have its own kind of heroism, would not have been conceivable had they not shared that time in Angel's village. Their journey deeper into Mexico reveals that country in 1913 to be what we already know it was: a country caught in an earthquake of social upheaval. Huerte's

fascist government tenuously runs the show; Pancho Villa's populist troops fight against it. The rest of the world is on the brink of World War I, and this ominous fact is conveyed by the presence of German advisors in Mapache's camp.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it is a beautiful country, one which offers the promise of adventure; of the recapture of a little of what the United States might have held for Pike and his men in the 19th century. This is not to say that the Bunch necessarily understands such promise: as they prepare to cross into Mexico earlier in the film, Angel says: "Mexico lindo," to which Tector Gorch replies: "I don't see nuthin' so lindo about it: just looks like more of Texas as far as I'm concerned." But Angel has the last word, here, for he tells Tector: "You have no eyes." Mexico is as multileveled a country as our characters are morally ambiguous: a beautiful, violent land that cannot be reduced to simple formulas. It is the ideal country at the ideal time for Peckinpah's decidedly romantic world view.

The meeting with Mapache in Agua Verde nearly costs the Bunch Angel: as already noted, he kills Teresa in the middle of Mapache's encampment, even as she sits on the General's lap. Here again, the scorpion-among-ants image appears masterfully, as the Bunch moves into a tight circle, protecting Angel, palms raised against Mapache's federales, the ants threatening to consume them. But Mapache and his German advisors see some value in these gringos who, as Pike tells

them, "hold very few sentiments with our government." The Bunch is offered \$10,000 in gold to rob an army troop train, back across the border in the United States, of its shipment of rifles.

This could be the "one big score" of which Pike still dreams--and reality intrudes on his dreaming only briefly. If Angel is to go, the Mexican lad says, he must be allowed to give one case of the rifles to his people to fight Mapache. More to the point, of course, this is Angel's dream intruding upon Pike's, since, as Dutch points out, "one case of rifles ain't gonna stop 'em from raiding villages." But Pike agrees, because Angel refuses to go along otherwise. Thus, at the very point at which Pike is arguing that "\$10,000 breaks an awful lot of family ties," he is desperately affirming the need for his own family to stay together by agreeing to Angel's dubious plan.

"Last go-round, Dutch," Pike says as they ride toward the train. "This time we do it right." Thornton, to be sure, is waiting again--but, this time, he's no match for the Bunch working in the heat of action. The train robbery is perhaps the most brilliantly sustained action sequence in American film. It works in terms of scope; it also works in its attention to individuals. The train cars are uncoupled by Angel, and Deke and his bounty hunters are left briefly stranded--until they take to horseback. Peckinpah's hair-trigger edit-

ing comes into full play, here: the initial hiss of the train's brakes during the heist builds suspense, and then, as the uncoupled train careens wildly down the tracks and Dutch falls between two cars, the sequence goes into high gear. Dutch is rescued by Angel, and the Bunch nearly makes it into Mexico before being caught on a bridge over the Rio Grande ("You Are Now Leaving the United States," a signpost in the foreground ominously reads) by Deke and his men.

As the two groups exchange fire, the Bunch's wagon carrying the stolen load of rifles hits a crack in the bridge and sinks in. Chaos prevails. Angel has lit what is clearly a dynamite fuse connected to the bridge. It's rigged--and, unless it can hold off Thornton and push that wagon out of the crack in the bridge, the Bunch may be hoist on its own petard. Worse, the Army regular troops which were riding on the train have now also made it, on horseback, to the bridge: they are swarming the hills. As Angel cries "C'mon! It's lit!" Deke's bounty hunters advance on the Bunch, and the viewer perhaps recalls that on the initial ant pile shown during the credits of the film, at one point there were two scorpions fighting amongst the ants for their lives.

If I were restricted to one phrase to describe the action technique of Sam Peckinpah's cinema, I suppose that I could borrow from Angel: "It's lit!" comes close to accuracy. The breakneck flashcutting of this sequence, jarring

from sizzling dynamite fuse to Dutch and the Gorches pushing on that wagon, to Pike and Deke once again trying desperately not to hit each other with their gunfire, to all those Army troops accomplishes a prime goal of movies: to move. It is mostly wordless, visual storytelling that pushes a specific situation outward to the point where it must explode--and explode it does: just as the sequence is actually about to become unbearable in its suspense, the wagon is freed--and suddenly the Bunch is across the bridge and Deke and his men, who have not seen the dynamite, have ridden onto it. Pike, now on the other side of the river, raises his hat and stretches it forward in salute to his old friend... and the dynamite blows, sending men and horses cascading, in the film's most sustained slow-motion usage, into the Rio Grande below. We know instantly what we will hear very shortly anyway: that this won't stop Deke. But that, of course, adds to the exhilaration that this footage inevitably produces. It seems to me to be the pivotal action sequence in the film in one very specific way: only when the audience realizes how badly it wants the Bunch to get off that bridge does it realize how much these flawed men have ingratiated themselves; how much of that extra distance of acceptance has already been traveled. It is a sequence that is truly masterful on every level: conception, execution--and thematic integration. The director said of the Bunch's exit from Angel's village: "If you can ride out of there with them, you can die with them."<sup>10</sup> The remark seems overblown, but read from the vantage point of the bridge scene, it is apt. In the heat of action,

we have inadvertently realized that we care, as we might for distant relatives who suddenly don't seem so distant any more.

Peckinpah wisely backs up this sequence by reestablishing the familial nature of the Bunch. In temporary safety, they repair the wagon while Pike has a laugh over Deke "ridin' a half-case of dynamite into the river." But Old Man Sykes is there with his typical caution: "Don't expect him to stay there," Freddie says, "He'll be along and you know it." This sobers Pike, who walks to his horse, his bad leg clearly hurting again. As he mounts up, Tector Gorch, who, significantly, has questioned Pike's leadership twice before in the film, now rides over and extends Pike the Bunch's mutual whiskey bottle. Framed against the blue sky on horseback, the two men take on a momentary grandeur. Pike accepts, and then the ritual of bottle-passing is conducted, with Lyle undergoing a bit of comic exclusion. Or is it so comic? Lyle and Tector, after all, are the blood relatives of the Bunch. Doesn't his exclusion, which is gently handled, really indicate strongly that the Bunch has found its more important family? From this point on, there will be very little tension between them--and no question about Pike's role as leader. They have arrived at a solidarity worthy of the viewer's respect. No matter what else we may think of them, they have now achieved a union that we all desire; that we all hope we have--or hope to find.



Angel's people, whose unity abides, will collect their rifles; Mapache dispatches a regiment to intercept the Bunch and take the guns without paying for them. Though Angel's people catch the Bunch off guard ("Gettin' so a feller can't sleep with both eyes closed," Lyle grumbles), the federales are held at bay when the Bunch threatens to dynamite the guns if they come any closer. In the heat of action, Pike and his men once again triumph through presenting a unified front.

And Mapache initially profits from playing the Bunch straight: he is presented with the rifles, plus a machine gun which was also stolen from the train as a bonus. But "the mother of the girl he killed" has turned Angel in--and Angel is taken by Mapache's men. This scene is especially hurting in the family framework: Dutch and Angel have ridden in to get the last of the gold, and Dutch is forced to abandon Angel. When Dutch says to Mapache, "You take care of him--He's a thief," the viewer cannot help but recall Dutch's rescue by Angel on the train, or the general closeness of the Bunch during the last few sequences. It is, of course, simple enough to realize that Dutch isn't going to do anybody much good by going up against 4,000 federales--but his statement hurts, nonetheless, and the pain does not subside as Angel raises his hand forlornly when Dutch rides away, and the dark laughter of Mapache's camp rises to engulf him.

At their encampment, the Bunch, brooding over Angel,

is forced to watch Freddie Sykes, attempting to return to camp, be shot by Thornton's men. They assume he is dead, lying in the rocks below. "Damn that Deke Thornton to hell!" Dutch cries, and an exchange occurs which clarifies the central concerns of the film:

PIKE: What would you do in his place? He gave his word!  
 DUTCH: To a railroad!  
 PIKE: (raising his voice) It's his word!  
 DUTCH: That ain't what counts! It's who ya give it to!

There is a silent moment during which the two glare at each other, framed against the blue sky as Pike and Tector had been earlier. Something is sinking in on Pike: the fact that others may understand his code better than he does--that, once again, what he meant and what he's done are very different things. Peckinpah has called Dutch "the conscience of the Bunch," and, certainly, what he has said reflects the best morality they have: it states a clear preference for the flawed but potentially intact unit which they have over the dehumanized agents of a repressive social order. Dutch picks the scorpion over the ants, and he says that he believes Deke will, too. Based on Deke's dress-down of his bounty hunters shortly before, Dutch is right. Deke has said:

You think Pike and Old Sykes aren't watching us right now? They know what this is all about, and what have I got? A handful of egg-sucking, chicken-stealing gutter trash without sixty rounds between you. We're after men, and I wish to God I was with them.

It is this kind of realization which cause the Bunch to bury its gold and return to Agua Verde, where they think they can hole up for awhile--at least until Thornton gives up. "We'll take one sack (of gold) to pay our way," Pike says. "Bury the rest--together." They do, and return to Mapache's camp to find Angel being dragged behind Mapache's automobile, near death. Pike offers half his share of the gold to buy Angel back--but Mapache literally wants to torture Angel until he dies. The Bunch--minus Dutch--has a brief interlude with Mapache's prostitutes: Pike significantly bedding down with a young woman who has an infant in the room with her. But putas do not compensate for Angel. Pike confronts the Gorches, and says simply: "Let's go." Lyle Gorch's reply sums up their apocalyptic hopelessness (and that giddy, dreaming quality the Bunch has that this time things just might work out) with one phrase: "Why not?" Dutch is waiting outside, and they begin their gunman's walk.

When they confront a drunken Mapache, surrounded by his troops, with their demand for Angel, Mapache brings the near-dead Angel forward, Angel's now-untied hands spread in mock-crucifixion, and then the General cuts his throat, as the Bunch looks on in horror. They shoot Mapache, and a frozen moment occurs in which four men square off against hundreds. This is the end, the faces of Pike and Dutch and Lyle and and Tector say--and so Pike rises from a crouch, picks out

Mapache's German advisor, now decked out in full uniform, and fires the first shot by an American at a German of World War I. The ensuing battle gave The Wild Bunch its notoriety: it is bloody indeed.

It is also almost unbearable, by this point, to watch these men die. Their gesture is appreciated, but rings hollow, since they must know they will die--and thus it seems gratuitous to see them do so. But Peckinpah, symbolically, has more story to tell, here: Pike's fatal shots are fired by a woman (upon whom he initially elects not to fire), and a little boy, who is dressed in the uniform of Mapache. His retreat from the basic socializing patterns of traditional marriage and family have, in some ways, brought him to this sorry pass. But, conversely, he has picked his family, and he has died with and for it. Taking shelter behind an overturned table, Pike and Dutch give each other one last hopeless look. As Pike looks up, he recoils at the sight of Lyle Gorch dying behind the machine gun he has briefly captured. "C'mon, ya lazy bastard," Pike says to Dutch--and they die together--with Dutch crying Pike's name. For the first clear time in their lives, they have acted out of love--and, as reward, their deaths are rosy crucifixion.

In a way, of course, the Bunch has won a victory. The false family of Mapache and his federales and his whores has been destroyed in Agua Verde. Shortly, the "gutter trash"

that are Deke's bounty hunters will be caught by an army patrol and killed, too. And Deke himself will live to join Old Freddie Sykes and a group from Angel's village in revolutionary activities. "It ain't like the old days," Freddie, jaunty and very much alive, says, "But it'll do."

And for the encroaching twentieth century, apparently this new Bunch which rides off at the end of the film, blending in to the reprise of the faces of the Wild Bunch and their ride out of the Angel's village, is meant to be adequate. It has as its base, after all, the more admirable influences we have seen in the larger film. The impetus toward violence, however, is obviously still there as well--and, even though violence may have been almost ecstatically presented at times in this film, it has never been presented as productive.

From 1969 to the present, the text of this film has been read and reread. It is, we have been told, a Vietnam allegory in which the United States doesn't look all that bad; it is an "anti-western," meant to kill off the genre. It's misogynist; it's a bloodbath. It's even terribly confused. These various readings of the film, certainly, are part of its strength: it is rich enough to expand upon repeated viewings. But I find it important that The Wild Bunch tends to continue to attract on its very basic level--long after political winds have shifted. Brian Garfield, in a recent book on the western film, has difficulty writing

strong words of praise about the film--but then devotes ten pages to it, anyway. "Of all the Westerns available to me," he says, "The Wild Bunch is the single film I screen most often. I have never tired of it; I have never failed to find new wonders in it... I can only say I love the film. I cannot condemn those who don't."

I often wonder whether it really brings "new" rewards, or whether, instead, the film offers continued affirmation, through repeated viewings, of some very basic concepts. One of the most famous stills of movies of any decade has become the shot of Tector, Lyle, Pike, and Dutch, lined up from left to right, preparing to take their gunman's walk. It tends to appear in texts without explanation, as if the truth of the photograph were apparent. And it evidently does work on an archetypal level. That Bunch, finally, is a bumbling group of not-very-intelligent men who have, somewhere along the line, learned the importance of a very basic human unit, and who have made an ultimate commitment to keep it together. Is it a wonder that Peckinpah's simple story had such reverberations in the uprooted days of 1969? "In Vietnam they called us cowboys,"<sup>12</sup> Lt. William Calley said--but what we took from his My Lai mission was that Americans were capable of the unthinkable: the murder of families. And--just in time--here is Peckinpah with a cowboy family, violent and rather slow--but a family, nonetheless. It didn't take a great deal of interpretation to understand that the

Bunch's gunman's walk was, indeed, the ultimate walk with love and death.

The contention of this study is that the image of family becomes near-obsessive for the director in the progress of his films from 1969 to 1974, and that the inevitable pull toward dealing with twentieth century stories will cause him to deal with more and more "socialized" family groups. The hair-trigger violence of The Wild Bunch, after all, signifies a world where domesticity is not the rule--a male-oriented world. With The Ballad of Cable Hogue, however, Peckinpah's "families" will come to be more and more sustained--and ignited--by male-female combinations. And for the familial complexities of a Straw Dogs, The Wild Bunch, on that level, can only be seen as rehearsal.

## FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup>As quoted by Richard Whitehall, "Talking with Peckinpah," Sight and Sound, Vol. 38, No. 4, (Autumn, 1969), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup>The singing of hymns figures into most of the Peckinpah westerns, and is prominent in Ride the High Country, Major Dundee, The Wild Bunch, and The Ballad of Cable Hogue. "Shall We Gather at the River" serves as a thematic reinforcement, as well, since to "gather" at the Rio Grande in Dundee, The Wild Bunch, The Getaway, and Convoy is to find a source of potential spiritual rebirth.

<sup>3</sup>See Seydor, p. 106, for his discussion of how the role of Pike Bishop was adapted to William Holden. In a film which is filled with performances of great integrity, Holden's remains a standout: perhaps this is what Peckinpah meant when he referred to the entire film as, in fact, "about what Bill Holden is today--fifty, middle-aged, wrinkled, no longer the glamor boy," as quoted in Paul Schrader, "Sam Peckinpah Going to Mexico," Cinema 5, (1969), p. 21. Holden himself seems to have understood the importance of this film: he made personal appearances in defense of The Wild Bunch just after its release when it was attacked for excessive violence.

<sup>4</sup>See Simmons, p. 84: the original script description of Dutch read: "'Dutch is big, young, good-natured with a fast gun hand, strong loyalty and, like Pike, a bone-deep distaste for rules and regulations. He can sing (and) has more than his share of charm.'" Ernest Borgnine does not immediately spring to mind when one reads this description--although, with the exception of the word "young," the essence comes through in Borgnine's playing of Dutch--along with several other aspects which make the character far more interesting.

<sup>5</sup>This line only appears in the director's version of The Wild Bunch, as opposed to the American theatrical print. The director's version has been restored in 16-mm by Twyman Films, and is available in its full running time, 145 minutes, for rental in Cinemascope print only. All future reference



to The Wild Bunch are references to this version and not the 124 minute theatrical print.

<sup>6</sup>See Seydor, p. 123; and Simmons, p.p. 86-87. Peckinpah, incidentally, may have gotten even more than the scorpions-and-ants sequence from Fernandez: see Carl J. Mora, Mexican Cinema: Reflections of the Society--1896-1980, p.p.58-59 and elsewhere for an interesting discussion of the Mexican directorial career of Fernandez. "El Indio," as Fernandez is called, has been working in Mexican film since 1941, and his features have earned him a reputation as the film poet of the Mexican Indian. His pictures tend to be nationalistic, and, of his technique, Mora has this to say: "Fernandez, in close collaboration with the renowned cameraman Gabriel Figueroa, was to glorify Mexico's landscapes, dramatic, cloud-laced skies, and, more importantly, its stoic, beautiful Indian faces...It has often been said of Fernandez (and, of course, Figueroa) that he is the principal Mexican exponent of the Eisensteinian style as embodied in the never-completed "Que Viva Mexico!"

Admirers of The Wild Bunch will find an apt description of the look of that film in the above description of Fernandez's films--if the names "Peckinpah and Ballard" are substituted.

<sup>7</sup>See Simmons, p. 49 and p. 51, and McKinney, p. 57, for discussions of the genesis of Peckinpah's technique. Simmons quotes Frank Santillo, who would work as film editor on Ride the High Country, The Ballad of Cable Hogue, and Junior Bonner, as saying that "' Sam has always given me credit for teaching him how to 'flash cut' like that.'" Santillo, during the 1930's, worked in editing at MGM, where he was assistant to Slavko Vorkapich, a montage expert who edited such films as Viva Villa! (1933) and The Good Earth (1936)--and his comment is instructive here: "'...I had done montage for Hetro for years, and during the Second World War I had worked for the military censors at the Pentagon. We'd get the footage shot by the Army, and we'd have to cut it quickly, making a little story out of it, and then turn it over to the newsreels...because of my work with Vorkapich, I knew that even with a one-frame cut the audience could retain something of what was on the screen, and because of my war experience, I knew how exciting a battle sequence could be made by cutting it to a fast pace. When a guy is shooting, you don't have to show him standing there, then aiming, then firing. You've got to imply a lot. Boom!--he fires. Boom!--somebody's hit. Boom!--somebody else is hit. You make the sequence move by allowing the audience to fill in the gaps.'"

Santillo then describes how he applied this technique to help Peckinpah edit the climactic gunfight in Ride the High Country--generally acknowledged to be the first real manifestation of the "Peckinpah technique"--even though it does not

use any slow motion footage. Peckinpah's contribution, of course, is not to be downplayed here: Santillo also notes: "'Sam had an uncanny feeling for editing. One night while we were cutting the picture I said to him, 'You're going to be one of the really great directors in this business because you're really sharp on detail'...He was constantly striving to bring out nuances in his characters, and not just the good guys but the bad guys as well. He'd start in with 'Trim this. Cut that. Change that,' until we really got what we wanted. And that's why Sam is so much better than so many other directors. They'll just look at a sequence, and they'll say 'That's fine,' but they'll never really bring out the potential of what's on film.'"

<sup>8</sup>John Simon, Movies into Film (New York, 1971), p. 176.

<sup>9</sup>Those who see a Vietnam allegory in The Wild Bunch in which Pike and the Bunch somehow become representative of the United States might look more toward General Frederick Mohr (Fernando Wagner), who, significantly, appears first in the garb of plain-clothes advisor, but later in the full military uniform of the Imperial German Army. The parallel here seems a bit clearer, since the United States appeared first in Vietnam in an advisory capacity--but later in half a million uniforms.

<sup>10</sup>As quoted in Seydor, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup>Brian Garfield, Western Films (New York, 1982), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup>William Calley with John Sack, Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story, as quoted by Julian Smith, Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam (New York, 1975), p. 28.

### THREE: THE BALLAD OF CABLE HOGUE

"Well, I'm worth sumpthin', ain't I?" Cable Hogue, desert rat, reprobate--but mysteriously favored of God--tells a banker who is about to turn him down for a grubstake, thus setting the stage for a drama which is partially about the dignity of the individual--and partly about the necessity to sacrifice self for family.

Peckinpah's next project needed to be downbeat--not so much of an explosion as The Wild Bunch. Thus he chose a story which was originally brought to him by L. Q. Jones and Warren Oates--a story which, in time frame, is close to The Wild Bunch. Other writers have put the time of Cable Hogue at 1910--three years earlier than The Wild Bunch<sup>1</sup>--but the southwest locale--is similar: not Texas and Mexico this time, but the Arizona desert, looking every bit as arid. What we see of civilization--a town named Dead Dog and, at the end, a sinister automobile--is reminiscent of the civilization-in-flux of The Wild Bunch, and the references of closing frontier permeate, as they did in the earlier film. Even so, The Ballad of Cable Hogue is to The Wild Bunch rather like Melville's

Pierre is to Moby-Dick: it is the "rural bowl of milk" that follows the epic. And, to strengthen that comparison, Cable Hogue, like Pierre, is far too dark to be anybody's "bowl of milk," no matter how both projects may have been conceived.

At film's opening, Cable Hogue (played by Jason Robards) is, in effect, apologizing to a gila monster he is about to shoot: the reptile is food, Cable says, and there's nothing personal in this. This first image that assaults the viewer, in fact, is that of the gila monster being blown apart in slow motion: those members of the audience who might have been familiar with The Wild Bunch could easily have assumed that more of same, in terms of violent cinema, was about to be served up.

This presumption would have been reinforced even more by the appearance of Taggart and Bowen, Cable's two prospecting partners, yet another pairing of L. Q. Jones and Strother Martin, T. C. and Coffey, the vulture-like bounty hunters from The Wild Bunch. Yet the mood struck from the beginning is clearly lighter than that of the previous film. True enough, Taggart and Bowen are about to leave Cable in the desert--without a mule, and without provisions, since, as Bowen reminds him, there's only water enough for two. Taggart and Bowen are striking off on their own because they have perceived Cable as their weak link--and they are utterly convinced of the truth of their perception

when Cable actually pulls his rifle on them, but is unable to use it. "Cable's yellah!" Bowen calls, and improvises some lyrics to the tune of "Sweet Betsy from Pike" on the subject as he and Taggart trek out across the desert. Cable, deserted by his one-time partners, is left alone.

The film begins, then, with the betrayal of the surrogate family. The implication is that these three have been together for awhile, and that Cable has trusted Taggart and Bowen. But the film will also reveal that there is the taint of false (perhaps "unnatural" would be a better term) family here: the relationship between Taggart and Bowen is one of only thinly veiled homosexuality. This had probably been true of the earlier pair, T. C. and Coffey, which Strother Martin and L. Q. Jones created in The Wild Bunch: it is perhaps instructive to quote Martin's understanding of the characters he and Jones were playing in that film: "The character of Coffey was this strange, violent little man who probably had one friend in the world that he cared about and that was T. C. And Christ knows what their relationship was. They'd probably go off and bugger a mule together!"<sup>2</sup> The pair is about the same in Cable Hogue--but the relationship is far more explicit. Later in the film, Bowen will tell Cable: "You know how it was...between Taggart and me." And Cable, dismissively, will only reply: "Yeah--I know."

This is not the last time we will see homosexuality used as indication of the false family: Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia also has such a pair. When this combination is presented, it is safe to say that the two men do not escape the director's compassion--but, significantly enough, they invariably represent a false standard--a corruption of family. Is Peckinpah's rather fundamental religious upbringing betraying itself here? Are we again close to the world of Melville where, as in Billy Budd homosexual bonding is seen as the ultimate corruption of the ideal--the platonic male relationship? I don't really find Peckinpah strong enough on the platonic male relationship to strongly argue the second alternative, and I find him too complex to argue the first one. Perhaps it is best to point out that we accept a very similar treatment of homosexuality as given in the films of Alfred Hitchcock and, for the time being, leave it at that.<sup>3</sup>

And besides, this is the point in the film at which Cable turns his attentions very much away from man, and very much to God. Alone in the desert, he finds voice to pray--and prays himself through the credits, which, in split-screen fashion, depict his near-Biblical wanderings. At first he is cocky: "Lord" haven't had any water for three days, now. Just thought I'd mention it." Later, he is repentant: "Lord: if I've sinned in some

way, just send me some water--and I won't do it no more. Whatever the hell it was I done." And, finally, near death, he is utterly submissive: "Lord: You call it. I'm.. all..done...in."

And, in truth, Cable could have died at this point. He may die--making the body of the film wish-fulfillment, as one critic has suggested.<sup>4</sup> It is certainly true that Peckinpah chooses this moment, as Cable, near death indeed, sinks to the arid ground, to give us something close to an omniscient camera angle: through the eye of the incipient desert dust storm, we see Cable far below, a forlorn, insignificant figure who is nonetheless, in the very eye of the storm. Something up there--God or director or both (for practical purposes, they are the same)--has singled Cable out, has declared him worth saving. Thus Cable's later question to the skeptical banker, "I'm worth sumptin', ain't I?" is one that has been answered before the credits close: yes, Cable Hogue is a member of Peckinpah's Elect.

And so he finds water--where, as the film will remind us many times, it wasn't. The water is a gift from omniscient forces to a penitent soul, if one wishes to affirm the supernatural in the film. If one does not, it's the luck of the draw. In any case, Cable's reaction to the water source, contradictorally, is to assert his own would-be omniscience: when it becomes clear that he is going

to survive, he immediately shakes his fists at the skies, assumes an Ahab-like posture, and shouts: "This is me talkin'! Me! Cable Hogue!" As the day becomes clear and calm in the wake of the storm and the final credit appears: "Produced and Directed by Sam Peckinpah," the wheels of a classic story have been set in motion. Cable is a man who has begged for divine intervention and, upon receiving it, immediately committed the sin of pride.

And it is with pride that he establishes his "oasis in the desert," a waterhole between Gila and Dead Dog, heretofore a twenty-mile stretch of pure drouth. The first sight he sees upon emerging from his penance in the desert is a stagecoach: he comes upon it just at twilight, and the drivers prove to be amiable drunkards (one is played by the venerable Slim Pickens; the other by Peckinpah's sometime producer, Bill Faralla) who are immensely sympathetic to Cable, unlike their passengers, Bible-quoting representatives of the repressive elements of Dead Dog. The stage drivers offer Cable a ride, which he refuses, anxious to guard his claim; they give him whiskey, and even untie the ropes securing their irritating passenger's luggage to the top of the stage so that Cable is left with a few provisions to begin his life in the desert--his life as proprietor of the one water hole in the twenty miles between Gila and Dead Dog.



Cable's first customer brings violence: he is a lone cowboy who refuses to pay for his drink of water. Cable has toughened considerably since he refused to fire on Taggart and Bowen--and he manages to get his hands on the stranger's rifle, orders him to ride away, and drops him when the cowboy tries to fire on him. Cable's Territorial Imperative thus comes forth strongly: it's his place, and he'll fight like hell to keep it.

His next encounter is far more positive: from out of the desert comes one of Peckinpah's most endearing creations: the Reverend Joshua Duncan Sloan, wonderfully depicted by the British actor David Warner. Joshua is a self-professed man of God, pastor of a church "of (his) own revelation," a grinning lecher who is interested chiefly in saving the souls of young maidens by debauching them. But religion is never a simple matter in Peckinpah, and thus Josh is presented to us as a character with more than one saving grace. If we refer to the strict Mysterious Stranger formula delineated by Roy Male in Enter, Mysterious Stranger, we find that Cable's enclosed environment of the water hole is in fact penetrated by a figure whose roles vary from savior (Josh tells Cable that he's got to stake his claim) to Angel of Death (Josh preaches Cable's funeral sermon).<sup>5</sup> Joshua Duncan Sloan is a commendable combination of the secular and the divine: though his all-purpose collar may be turned to that of Pastor or that of

townsman, his message is one of forgiveness and of the folly of revenge--a message that Cable badly needs to hear.

For even more than he is covetous of his land, Cable is vengeful: he is determined to meet up with Taggart and Bowen again--and this time, he knows he will kill them. "Everybody's got sumpthin' he can't forget," Cable says, "Me--I got me two of them: Taggart and Bowen." And when Josh reminds him that vengeance is the province of the Lord--Cable replies: "That's fine by me--as long as He don't take too long, and I can watch."

The kind of relationship that Josh and Cable strike up is a wary one--based upon Cable's distrust of everybody. But it's also a warm one: they drink together, carouse together--and become fast friends. In fact, Joshua's first act of friendship toward Cable is to extend his hand--a beautiful sequence--and his next, though involuntary, is to loan Cable his horse, which Cable commandeers to ride into town and stake his claim. He hates to "go in among 'em," as he terms a journey to town--but he knows he must. And his new friend Josh is left at what will become Cable Springs to seek the only shade available: that which exists at the bottom of Cable's recently-excavated site for a three-holer.

Dead Dog at first appears, deceptively, a brisk, ugly, repressive place: the claims agent sells Cable \$2.50 worth of land and dismisses him with the same abruptness with

which he swats a fly; Quittner, the manager of the stage line, refuses to believe that Cable has found water and throws him out bodily; the banker, Cushing, almost dismisses Cable--but, at the last moment, grubstakes him \$100. This action also indicates that there are saving graces in Dead Dog: it is a town rather like the one which Robin confronts in Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," in that it is meant to be an index to America at a particular time in history. While Hawthorne's index was to Revolutionary America, Peckinpah's is to America at the turn of our century--and though it reflects some depressing signs of the times, it also is the home of some pretty decent people. Cushing the banker is one of them--and Peckinpah emphasizes with a tag line. Just as he has apparently dismissed Cable, we get this exchange, as Cable turns back in a pride that is this time acceptable, because it is humble:

CABLE: I'm worth sumpthin', ain't I?" (Receiving no response, he turns hopelessly away.)

CUSHING: (Abruptly) I want to hear more.

CABLE: (Suprised) Why?

CUSHING: Why not?

The last time we heard that "Why not?" it was uttered by Lyle Gorch, an agreement to Pike's summons for the rest of the Bunch to join him in that last apocalyptic battle. As surely as the phrase then meant "This is the end of the

line," it here means possibility: the assumption by this crusty banker that, finally, Cable might really be worth something. Like everything in Peckinpah, "Why not?" is dual, drenched in ambiguity: it works both ways. And because Cable has asserted his self-worth in a humble manner, in an echo of his earlier dying prayer, the phantom of possibility comes within his grasp.

With his grubstake clutched in his fist, Cable, blissful, gets one other windfall: he meets Hildy, Dead Dog's resident prostitute. Hildy is another of Peckinpah's more durable creations: the part is played by the engaging Stella Stevens, who has since had harsh things to say about working with Peckinpah, but, in retrospect, one wonders if they are all that justified.<sup>6</sup> The American cinema, like American literature, has much maturity to gain in its treatment of female characters--and Hildy shines in a time period for the films of this country during which there just weren't credible women.<sup>7</sup> She's a good deal different from the traditional image of the hooker with the heart of gold: her first romantic encounter with Cable ends in a slugfest when Cable refuses to pay her. But she's quite capable of love--and does, in fact, fall in love with Cable. And she's also capable of some very important insights. She also warns Cable against his obsession with revenge--and, in many ways, she teaches Cable the meaning of home.

Cable's hapless first contact with Hildy introduces their very attractive relationship--and it also serves to point out the differences in their priorities. Cable is determined to stay in the desert; Hildy wants to go to San Francisco and marry a rich man. There is the hard edge of practicality to both of their dreams: Cable is interested in holding on to what he's got, and Hildy has talent that she knows she can use. But this first meeting will be interrupted before they ever go to bed: Cable hears the voice of a revivalist coming from a tent meeting across the street--preaching against the satanic evil of "machines." The whole interruption turns Cable suspicious, and he quickly convinces himself that Josh has jumped his claim. He dashes out without paying Hildy ("For what?" he demands)--and manages to accidentally bust up the prayer meeting with his chaotic exit. The usual Peckinpah children grace this sequence: children to direct Cable toward his horse, and to act as Greek chorus for the errant actions of the adults.

It is important that Hildy's first act in relation to Cable is to give him a bath. The history of Western movies is filled with instances of barbering<sup>8</sup> and bathing to indicate the return to civilization--but here is an instance, since we know that Cable is heading right back to the desert, of that ritual used to signal the beginning

of a mature man-woman relationship. Here, it is Hildy who bathes Cable. Later, when they are spending their idyllic time at Cable Springs, it will be Cable who bathes Hildy.

When Cable returns to find that Josh is patiently waiting, the two go back to Dead Dog by night to complete what Cable has begun. Cable and Hildy and Josh form an interesting triangle: Josh often professes designs upon Hildy, but we know he has none that can be taken seriously--and thus the image we keep of them is of a rag-tag family. Though Cable and Hildy do not, of course, marry, Hildy comes to live with Cable in the desert, and Josh blesses their union: on his first meeting with Hildy, he tries to perform the actual wedding ceremony for the pair.

The time that Cable and Hildy spend at Cable Springs reinforces all the best things that we want to believe about Cable himself: it is difficult to miss the contradictory nature of his name, with "Cable" indicating "communication" and "Hogue" suggesting "hoggish," or "selfish"--but the days he spends with Hildy put the emphasis upon his better nature. When Hildy arrives, the shack he has built for himself with Josh's help is a wreck: he wildly cleans it as Peckinpah jokingly films in fast-motion<sup>9</sup>--Hildy was quite unexpected. Finally, Cable shaves and combs his hair outside by moonlight as Hildy chastely prepares for

bed inside. "It never bothered you..." she asks. "What I am?"

CABLE: Nah. What are yuh, anyway? A human being. We all have our ways of livin'.  
 HILDY: And lovin'?  
 CABLE: I guess. For you...it's San Francisco.

And at this point, Hildy, clad in a radiant white nightgown, opens the door. She is bathed in moonlight.

HILDY: But not tonight.  
 CABLE: (Regarding her in wonder) Now, that's a picture.  
 HILDY: (Smiling) You've seen it before.  
 CABLE: Lady--nobody's ever seen you before.

It is a beautifully conceived, beautifully acted moment. It is impossible not to feel that these people are behaving not only as well as they can--but that they are demonstrating the best of which human beings are capable--and it's quite a lot. Peckinpah backs up this lovely sequence with a montage which accompanies the song "Butterfly Mornings." We see Cable and Hildy living as man and wife, performing domestic duties, and making love. Every scene features images of teeming life: the two unloading a newly arrived shipment of chickens; the two using a sluice for water. This sequence comes at the center of the film, and it is its very heart. If there have been doubts that this totem of family is such a totem to the director to this point, the unabashed sentimentality of this sequence should allay them. And in that song's title, "Butterfly Mornings," there is a world about the

temporal nature of this seemingly perfect state--a state that can take wings and disappear at any moment. What Cable and Hildy enjoy during this interlude is like a good marriage--that "good marriage" described in Ride the High Country as "a rare animal...hard to find, and almost impossible to keep." Cable and Hildy get there--and they lose it. Their "good marriage" is lost to Cable's desire for revenge.

Yes--Hildy asks him to go with her, and even tells him that "revenge always turns sour." But at the end, on their last night together, the Old Adam in Cable rises up--and as they sit at dinner with Josh, who is fleeing an angry husband from Dead Dog, Cable demands that Josh pay for his meal.

HILDY: But you ain't charged me nuthin'!  
 CABLE: That's because you ain't been chargin' me anything!"

The freeze, even in that desert, is a felt presence. We don't even need Josh's "Oh, Brother Hogue--You are a true Samaritan!" to know how badly Cable has erred. Hildy, near tears, asks for a grace--and, when Cable refuses to let Josh pray over "his food," she says it--a grace that ends with "Bless this food...and bless this house." It is ironically appropriate that Hildy ask for the blessing on Cable's house: it is because of her that we know that house has, in truth, already been blessed.



And so Cable stays on to await the return of Taggart and Bowen--and Hildy heads for San Francisco. Josh is off again as well, and Cable passes his days and nights in a place that has become something less than a home for him. Each day he raises the flag that the stage line has given him; each evening he lowers it. "I reckon this is the most important thing of all," Ben Fairchild, the stage driver, has told him when Cable is first presented with the flag--and, symbolically, it is important to Cable: What he has achieved, after all, is something close to the traditional American dream of self-sufficiency, of showing a profit, of being his own man. What he achieves with Hildy is part of a larger dream--but one not incompatible with America, as Peckinpah demonstrates in a sequence which shows them lowering the flag together--and another one, the one in which Hildy first rides up. Cable has been taking the flag down at sunset. At the sight of Hildy, he runs it back up again. The patriotic connections are no less obvious than the phallic ones.

Taggart and Bowen do, finally, come--and Cable is able to set a trap for them by showing off his prosperity. The two are stage line passengers when they first arrive; they return later on horseback. Assuming that what they have determined to be Cable's cowardly nature is still intact, they plan to kill him and take the money he has told them

he salted away. But Cable's trap is indeed clever: they think he is not there, and attempt to dig up the premises in search of the goods--only to have Cable dump rattlesnakes on their heads from his vantage point above. Bowen surrenders, but Taggart tries to draw on Cable. Cable shoots him dead.

The finale of the film is rather like a stage play. Though Cable's initial plan is to make Bowen walk into the desert as Cable himself was forced to do, the appearance of an automobile--the first that Cable has ever seen--interrupts all this. The depersonalization which a car stood for in The Wild Bunch still goes here: Bowen runs to the car, which holds an affluent-looking group of Sunday drivers, begging for mercy--they ignore him and drive on. But now the characters begin to gather for an obvious denouement: the stage drivers arrive; then Hildy, dressed (literally, as it turns out) to kill--in another automobile, complete with Negro driver. Hildy's made her score in San Francisco, and is headed for New Orleans. She's stopped to see if Cable wants to come along.

Cable does--and, amazingly, his desire for revenge has been expunged. He turns his place over to Bowen, insisting on the full name ("Samuel D. Bowen!") as he had shouted his own at the desert dust storm so long ago. But he doesn't leave, despite his assertion that he's

"already gone": Hildy's car goes out of control and runs over Cable as, ironically, he is pushing Bowen out of its path.

The last stage entrance is made by Josh. If Hildy spread her arms like a butterfly on her entrance, Josh hovers like an angel of death. He arrives on a motorcycle-- but he's in control of that. "Just a means of transportation," he says, and it becomes clear that Josh, like Deke Thornton, will survive into the twentieth century. He can make the compromises necessary to do so--or, in his more symbolic light, perhaps it is more appropriate just to say that death, that oldest mysterious stranger, is with us in any century. Josh's function here is to preach Cable's funeral sermon and, though it begins as a joke, Cable is being buried at its close.

"He wasn't a good man," says Josh, "He wasn't a bad man. But Lord, he was a man...Take him, Lord--but, knowing Cable, don't take him lightly." The sermon is another of Peckinpah's set pieces, like the wedding ceremony in Ride the High Country. It is a touching piece of writing, a fitting epitaph for any man. And therein lies the point: Cable's dual nature is the makeup of any man. His better nature is most admirable, one which adheres to family and which establishes home. His darker nature is bent on revenge, and swollen with pride. The latter kills him; the former brings him all the happiness he ever knows.

If we are also to accept Cable as symbolically American, the flag that flies over these proceedings now takes on special significance: we as a nation, Peckinpah is telling us, are made up of that same uneasy balance--and it is pride gone wild that will finally kill us. It was Hawthorne's message in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"; it was Melville's in Moby-Dick. And thus we must not take Cable lightly, either: Josh calls him the Lord's "dim image," but he must also surely be our own.

Susan George, who would work in Peckinpah's next film, Straw Dogs, has said of Cable Hogue: "Ever since I saw that movie, I thought it was Sam. Not just the character Cable Hogue, but the whole movie."<sup>10</sup> And here she may not know how truly she has spoken: Peckinpah is a typically American artist, and not a unique one. Like Melville, and like Hemingway--and certainly like Faulkner, the tortured, contradictory psyche of his country is clearly also his own.

#### FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, McKinney, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Simmons, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup>Though Hitchcock's homosexuals are often literate and engaging, they are always damned beyond redemption. See Bruno (Robert Walker) in Strangers on a Train (1951) or Leonard (Martin Landau) in North by Northwest (1959) for good examples--or the fictionalized Leopold-Loeb story in Rope (1948).

<sup>4</sup>See Kenneth R. Brown, "Reality Inside-Out: The Ballad of Cable Hogue," Film Heritage, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall, 1970), p.p. 1-6 and p. 30 for a revealing interpretation here.

<sup>5</sup>See Roy R. Male, Enter, Mysterious Stranger: American Cloistral Fiction, (Norman, OK, 1979), p.p. 19-27 and p. 25. Though Joshua's role is to serve as commentator on his surroundings as opposed to transformer of them, he does come and go in traditional Mysterious Stranger fashion. He also makes his first appearance in partial form only: in a shot from Cable's point of view, we see Josh's shadow as he approaches the rim of the three-holer that Cable, deep inside, is in the process of digging. Cable, wary of strangers, shoots at Josh--and Josh is forced behind a rock so that we next only hear his voice. And, indeed, Josh functions well as some secret part of Cable (which is why it is symbolically right to see him first only partially: Josh is Cable's twentieth century self--his adaptability). Josh, with his blessings and his mock wedding ceremony and, finally, his funeral sermon, brings aspects of civilization to Cable's "Cactus Eden" in the same way that Hildy later will bring love--but Josh's brand of civilization is not the debilitating kind that we see in Dead Dog. Josh's first official act to Cable is to offer his hand in friendship--and he continues to represent adaptability--social progress without dehumanization. He is, certainly, an aspect of Cable's better nature. Note also Peckinpah's experience with Mysterious Stranger stories in adapting Porter's Noon Wine for television in 1967.

<sup>6</sup>See Simmons, p.p. 112-114.

<sup>7</sup>1969, the year in which the film was made, it must be remembered, was the year the male bonding theme was enjoying an all-time pervasiveness even in the Hollywood film industry, which had depended upon it in a way that must have exceeded even Leslie Fiedler's wildest dreams for years. As example, this was the year that the Oscars celebrated such hymns to the buddy relationship as Midnight Cowboy, Easy Rider, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. 1970, the year in which Cable Hogue could have competed for an Oscar, was the year of M.A.S.H. and Patton. In both of those years, the Academy gave its Best Actress award to women who were Britishers: Maggie Smith for The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie in 1969 and Glenda Jackson for Women in Love in 1970. Thus, when Stevens says that Peckinpah "'threw away thirty percent of (her) best moments,'" it must be remembered that, even if this is true, her performance is still a standout in American film during two years of heavy male emphasis.

<sup>8</sup>See Jim Kitses, Horizons West (London, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>There are several sequences in which Peckinpah uses fast-motion in Cable Hogue: this one; another when Josh is trying to escape from an irate husband; and yet another when Josh is being menaced by rattlesnakes. On one level, this technique can be seen as Peckinpah's attempt to distinguish this film completely from The Wild Bunch, with its near-trade-mark slow motion. On another level, this fast-motion functions as a wedding of form and content, I believe: our protagonists in The Wild Bunch are characters who are journeying into the past: a Mexico of the twentieth century that recalls the United States of the nineteenth century. Thus a use of slow-motion (the arresting of time) becomes appropriate in the same way that the use of fast-motion does for the protagonist(s) of Cable Hogue, who are hurtling inexorably into the twentieth century.

<sup>10</sup>As quoted in Dan Yergin, "Peckinpah's Progress," New York Times Magazine (Oct. 31, 1971), p. 91.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### STRAW DOGS

With 1971's Straw Dogs, Sam Peckinpah's heroes, who had lingered on the fringes of the twentieth century for so long, moved bag and baggage into modern settings--and, to date, there would be only one backward look: in Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid. But the themes remain: Straw Dogs is the familiar triad of obsessions--home, family, and violent explosion. And if our protagonist, David Sumner, seems something different than the usual brand of weathered, over-the-hill Peckinpah figure, it is not only because the role is played by Dustin Hoffman. In David Sumner, we also have a protagonist that the director has deemed a "heavy."<sup>1</sup>

Straw Dogs is perhaps one of the most critically debated films of the 1970's. It has many detractors, including Pauline Kael, who would later go to some lengths to defend Peckinpah as his career declined. Kael called the film "a fascist work of art,"<sup>2</sup> which must be interpreted as phrasing that damns with great praise. The supporters, on the other hand, may well have done the film even more critical harm than the detractors. The running line there made elaborate

comparisons between the film and Robert Ardrey's The Territorial Imperative, the afore-mentioned 1966 biological study which says, in essence, that man--and all animals--will defend territory above all else. Thus the film became, for these observers, a rites-of-passage-story about the acceptance of violence within all of us. I will submit up front that this interpretation is, simply, not illuminating.

Straw Dogs, with its deeply gothic trappings, owes a great deal to the thriller genre that Alfred Hitchcock has found so habitable. This is not surprising for Peckinpah: his entire career demonstrates that he is, like his sometime mentor Don Siegel, infinitely at home in the world of the genres. If he has a film that is not a genre piece, it is the German-based Cross of Iron, and even it conforms closely to the rag-tag regiment war dramas that are familiar to us, in their American forms, as The Great Escape and The Dirty Dozen and Kelley's Heroes. Straw Dogs is reminiscent of American films of menace in a small-town setting like John Sturges's Bad Day at Black Rock (1955) and even Don Siegel's Invasion of the Body Snatchers, the first feature film on which a young Sam Peckinpah ever worked. The critic William S. Pechter, who gave a better early reading to Straw Dogs than most American critics did, also finds similarities between Peckinpah's film and Hitchcock's The Birds (1963).<sup>3</sup>

The story, probably familiar even to filmgoers who don't



know the rest of Peckinpah's work, concerns a doctoral candidate, David Sumner, who leaves the United States and takes up residence with his wife, Amy (Susan George), in her father's house outside a small village in the Land's End region of England. David has retreated from an America of confrontation: a country on fire with the protest and rebellion of the 1960's--and of Vietnam. It is also clear from the beginning that he has not confronted the facts of his marriage very squarely, either--David is a product of much intellect, and little experience. His faulty family will be consistently contrasted with the local Hedden family, which is an ugly unit--but one which stands together.

The villagers are wary of David, and seem intent on emphasizing their insulation to him. Except for the discomfort Amy causes him in this regard, that would be fine with David: he wants to pursue his blackboard, where he is working out a theory of "celestial navigation." But incidents draw him ever closer to the village: a violent eruption he witnesses in a bar; his relationship with the men from town who are working on the roof of Amy's family's place. When one of these workers asks him if he's seen any of the protest violence back in the States that they've been hearing about, David replies: "Just between commercials." Amy will taunt him by saying: "You never took a stand." And the film will provide him with his opportunity to do so.

It is, however, the kind of stand that David takes which has promoted such critical controversy. David endures a series of humiliations at the hands of the town rowdies that would provoke anyone: he is joshed, ridiculed--finally taken on a hunt and left in the woods to play the fool. Amy, who invites a good part of her trouble, is preyed upon by one particular villager: Charlie Venner, who was once her lover. She fancies herself beyond Charlie--at one point he reminds her of how he used to "take care" of her, and she replies: "But you didn't." The reference here is not to sex, but to creature comfort and status: David, whatever his deficiencies, has been responsible for Amy's escape from the village; he has assisted her in beating the trap of environment. But her sexual interest in Charlie remains, and ultimately she will give herself to Charlie in a half-rape, half-submission which occurs while David is on his hapless hunting trip. Then she'll get more than she bargained for: another villager has entered the house, and is brandishing a shotgun, demanding that he take his turn. He does--and the house and its inhabitants are completely violated.

Thus, when the town's idiot, Henry Niles (played by David Warner, Preacher Josh from Cable Hogue), runs terribly afoul of the locals, on the run after he has witlessly, quite accidentally, killed the young Hedden girl, the situation provides the excuse and not the reason for David to react

violently. On their way back to the farm in the night fog, after a church social that is more like a black mass, David strikes Henry with his car, and the two, despite Amy's protestations, take the injured Niles to the farmhouse. This sets the stage for the final confrontation: the Heddens will come for Niles, and David will take his stand. "This is where I live," he tells Amy. "This is me. I will not allow violence against this house."

The last part of the film is truly a seige: the Heddens and Charlie Venner and assorted hangers-on attack the house from virtually all its aspects, killing in the process, the town constable who arrives to bring a measure of order to the situation, and driving Amy to hysteria. Amy and David hardly stand together here: Amy wants her husband to give them Niles, and she even attempts to open the door and let the attackers in at one point. Throughout this seige, David becomes very much his own man. Once he makes his declaration, he proceeds with cold efficiency. Henry Niles is locked upstairs; traps are set. He boils lye to throw in the faces of the intruders; he catches one man's head in a broken glass pane and viciously wires him in. The glasses which David once used to provide a sort of intellectual's mask for him become broken in a manner reminiscent of Piggy's glasses in Golding's Lord of the Flies; the house crumbles about him--but David remains horrifyingly calm; utterly methodical.

Even his violence is cold: when Amy attempts to open the door he slaps her about and drags her away by her hair, in a manner much like Charlie has done during the rape sequence. When the man who is trapped in the glass pane protests that if he moves, he'll slit his own throat, David, with grim satisfaction, replies: "I hope you do, you son of a bitch." If he had employed this kind of efficiency in the dissertation work, he would have been finished long ago!

And he does get them--"every one," as he tells us--with the exception of one man who pounces at the end, and who Amy kills with shotgun. The sequence is a tour-de-force of the kind of direction that is always associated with Peckinpah: The clipped editing, the wordless confrontations; the machine-gun burst explosions of violence form a pattern of complete directorial control: this is one of those sequences of which it must be said that only Peckinpah could have done it. The film builds to its bloody climax, and David, victorious, leaves Amy in a house strewn with corpses to drive Henry Niles who, quite incidentally to the point, has been saved, into town. "I don't know my way home," Henry says childishly. "That's O.K.," the bloodied-but-victorious David replies with an ironic grin: "Neither do I." And the car drives off into the night fog.

So far as audiences have been concerned, it must be admitted, the ending of the film has already occurred: after

the last villager has been killed. It is virtually impossible to watch the sequence and not root for David: his collective Goliath, after all, is outside the house, trying to get in. And David is played by Dustin Hoffman, a figure who commands immediate audience good will. But here we must also take heavily into consideration the director's comments: they apply in unusually important ways to this film. Of David, Peckinpah has said: "He's a heavy." And, later: "I failed in Straw Dogs. No one picked up that the hero was running away from confrontations and testing his marriage. Everyone missed the interaction of the piece."<sup>4</sup> Peckinpah may be open to the criticism of reshaping his intentions after the fact here, but I really doubt it. The interpretation he favors, it seems to me, is present--even painfully obvious--in the text of the film, and this interpretation, with the key phrase "testing his marriage," fits well with the thesis of this dissertation. Let's examine the film's text from yet another aspect, then: Can Straw Dogs be seen not as a film about the defense of home, but a film about the building of home?

Peckinpah's source for Straw Dogs is a 1969 novel by Gordon T. Williams named The Seige of Trencher's Farm. According to the director there wasn't much real inspiration here: with typical roughness, he said the book would make you "die gagging in your own vomit."<sup>5</sup> Beyond the hyperbole,

though, is the important suggestion that, while the situation of The Seige of Trencher's Farm held interest for the director, the protagonist(s) did not.

At first look, it seems that the book's hero, George Magruder, should have been more than a little interesting to Peckinpah. He is not a mathematician in the novel, but instead a professor of English. His wife is not Amy, but Louise--and they have an eight year-old daughter. He has a penchant for old western films--actually old films in general. But his attitude toward westerns should have impressed the director, perhaps , more than it did:

If old films were his nonhobby, Westerns were his specialization. He remembered the plots of innumerable sagebrush sagas starring Roy Rogers (with Dale Evens). He was a connoisseur of second-grade cowboy stars: Rod Cameron, John Payne, Randolph Scott.

There was nothing surprising about all this, he often said--defensively, for there is something embarrassing about comprehensive knowledge of a subject which few other people are aware of.

"Great mind like simple things," Louise would say, reassuring him.

"There's a peculiar and unexplored potency to mass subculture," was another of his rationalizations. Yet...was John Wayne swapping punches with other giants any more ludicrous a fantasy than Branksheer's bawdy England? Given the choice, wouldn't any man prefer to know he could defend his land and log cabin against Shawnee war parties--instead of being stuck at a desk?<sup>6</sup>

Magruder's research is, obviously, not on "celestial navigation"--but on Branksheer, a late 18th-century English diarist. Though overtly committed to the Age of Reason and

all things neoclassical, Magruder fantasizes about defending "his land and log cabin against Shawnee war parties"<sup>7</sup>--and goes ahead to muse:

It was not an idea he could ever reveal to the people he worked with. It couldn't stand up to severe analysis, but it was real. It had started as a joke and then grafted itself onto his consciousness; the frontier was no more and a man had to settle for the second-best. Like being a professor.<sup>8</sup>

Thus we may see that the protagonist of The Seige of Trencher's Farm holds--or should hold--at least generic interest for Peckinpah. This film would mark only the second time that Peckinpah had worked from a novel in feature film form--the first was the disowned The Deadly Companions. But his adaptation of Porter's Noon Wine in 1967 proved his ability to translate. If he had wished to put George Magruder, passive family man, father, husband on film--em-perical evidence indicates that he could have done it. Let me suggest that what the director did not like about George Magruder has more to do with the manner in which Magruder moves from the civilized world into--out of necessity--the violent, and then quickly back to the civilized world once more.

At the novel's end, Magruder has defended his territory without killing anyone. The local police have come to restore civic order. He has had problems with his wife, but now they are solid in their marriage once more. Louise Ma-

gruder has even experienced something very positive as a result of George's briefly manhandling her during the seige: we are told that she now feels "the way she'd always wanted to feel, like a woman. Protected."<sup>9</sup> And, at the end, we are further assured: "George told himself that he and Louise were happier together at this moment than they'd been for years."<sup>10</sup> Let us call to mind again David Sumner's last line of the film, in reply to Nile's childish comment that he doesn't know his way home: "That's OK," says David. "I don't either."

George and David are different people. George's defense of Trencher's farm is necessary in the structure of the novel; it's good violence. And the author, Williams, condones it within its limits.<sup>11</sup> David Sumner's violence, on the other hand, is hardly that simple. The director takes some pain to build David as a character who secretly longs for the violent explosion he will get--who, in many ways, actually brings his confrontation about. Rory Palmieri has argued persuasively that David, as played by Dustin Hoffman, is a classic paranoid personality, and, like a classic paranoid, he rejects most that which he most longs for.<sup>12</sup> "You never took a stand." Amy chides--but he wanted to. And here, in this isolated situation far from his homeland, David actively maneuvers to take that stand: to prove his prowess in a place far removed from his physical home. Does it not sound



like our own country in war? Though Williams passingly mentions Vietnam in the opening line of his novel and then generally abandons the analogy, Peckinpah makes it a pertinent subtext: David is fighting his own Vietnam and his own '60's protest wars all at once: Trencher's Farm is the arena he has avoided at home--or overseas, for that matter.

If David sounds less than sympathetic in this interpretation, that would seem to follow well with the director's avowed intentions. Early in the film, David stands in the village pub, watching his wife through a venetian-blinded window as she sits in their car talking with Charlie Venner. He is clearly jealous, but he is also clearly a voyeur. Moments later, violence erupts in the pub when the Hedden family patriarch, Old Tom, is told that he has had enough to drink. Tom crushes a glass with his fist. David watches in meek terror--but also with some admiration.

Similarly, though we are put off by the Lolita-like wiles of Amy as she tries to interfere with David's work, we might do well also to note that David does his fair share of baiting Amy. Of the furnishings at Trencher's Farm, David singles out the chair that Amy is sitting in, and rather viciously inquires: "Is that your daddy's chair?" Amy's reply, "Every chair is my daddy's chair," is playful--but, with this pair, there is always a malevolent strain just beneath the surface. Their banter is the not-very-assured

banter of young marrieds who are quite uncomfortable with each other. The structure of their lives centers around games and ritual: before bed, David jumps rope a requisite number of times; a continuing chess game, on a portable board, awaits him in Amy's lap. Even their lovemaking is far from spontaneous: Amy becomes peeved when David must first wind the clock, and set the alarm. Much of the building of the film is posed in a manner which suggests the question: "Can this marriage be saved?"

But the ugliest manifestation of problems in the Sumner marriage turns symbolically around the housecat. The cat is presented as a nemesis to David. Amy spends a fair amount of time looking for it; Davis is shown throwing fruit at the cat in the kitchen after Amy has called him to bed. David even threatens to "kill" the cat if it has gotten into his study. And he will tease Amy in front of Charlie and two other workers with: "Have you found your--uh--kitty, kitty, Amy?" All in all, he's quite merciless about the cat.

And it is the cat which is given us as the first symbol of the villagers' ability to penetrate the house. Preparing for bed, David reaches into the bedroom closet to pull the string light--and finds the cat hanged from it. Amy will tell him: "They did it to prove they could get into your bed." Most critics willingly attribute the killing of the cat to the men working on the roof:<sup>13</sup> we have

seen earlier that Norman Scutt and Chris Cawsey (also called "Ratcatcher") have sneaked into the house and stolen a pair of Amy's panties. Clearly they would have access--and Amy herself tells David that she is sure Cawsey and Scott have done the hanging. But what motivational evidence we have suggests another interpretation as well: it could have been David himself who hanged the cat.

And why? David hates the cat, of course, and associates it with Amy, whose attitudes he resents. But more than that, it may well be that David is anxious to advance--and here the pun works--the cat-and-mouse game that he is playing with the villagers; anxious to bring it to violent confrontation. True to his regressive nature, he may not even be aware that this is what he wants to do--but it must be recorded that Peckinpah is at some pains to set David and that cat up as adversaries. If there is validity in this interpretation, it does become possible to see the educated, urbane David Sumner as something less than the fop he is often interpreted as. It becomes possible to see him as an aggressor.

The Hedden bunch, when they do attach Trencher's Farm, after all, are certainly repulsive--but they seem to have something that David and Amy do not. They are united in fear for someone close to them: the niece of Tom Hedden is missing. True, they are like a lynch mob--but they also

must be said to have a sense of place, a sense of home--a sense of family. These are the very things that David and Amy do not have and, as a result, they manifest some severe problems ranging from paranoia (David) to barely-repressed nymphomania (Amy). Both feel that they belong no place: David was also ill at ease in America; Amy feels uprooted from her home because of her marriage to David. And they are distrustful and resentful of each other. The stand they make at the film's end is hardly a unified one: even to the final act of violence, Amy's shooting of the last intruder who goes for David, we don't get a sense that these two are together. As David leaves with Niles, he asks Amy no more than if she thinks she'll be all right. And Peckinpah himself has said that he doesn't see much hope for their future at film's end. And why should we? Though David has demonstrated some ability to plot and carry out violence, he still hasn't demonstrated that he can cope with the basics of a marital relationship--and Amy hasn't, either. In that kind of battle, violence would be of use to David not at all.

Peckinpah read Robert Ardrey's 1966 study The Territorial Imperative after the filming of The Wild Bunch and, perhaps because of the publicity Peckinpah himself gave this study, the book and the film have long been compared. Ardrey's thesis, of course, is that man is like the other animals

in that he will cling to and defend territory before and long after anything else. Ardrey writes:

The territorial nature of man is genetic and ineradicable. We shall see, farther along in our inquiry, a larger and older demonstration of its powers in our devotion to country above even home. But as we watch the farmer going out to his barn with the sun not risen above the wood lot's fringes, we witness the answer to civilization's central problem which none but our evolutionary nature could provide. Here is man, like any other territorial animal, acting against his own interest: in the city he would still be sleeping, and making more money too. What force other than territory's innate morality could so contain his dedications? But here also is the biological reward, that mysterious enhancement of energy and resolution--territory's prime law and prime enigma--which invests the proprietor on his own vested acres. We did not invent it. We cannot command it. Nor can we, not with all our policemen, permanently deny it.<sup>14</sup>

This argument is, certainly, open to much debate--and, indeed, Ardrey has been generally ignored in the field of anthropology as being too obvious, or, in some of his points, ill-informed. But it is not our purpose here to dispute his text: our question is whether it is the basis for Straw Dogs.

I would submit that if we are to use the concept of the Territorial Imperative in regard to this film, we must see Straw Dogs as a refutation of the concept. By casting David as the "heavy," Peckinpah presumes that there is a more desirable standard of conduct for him; a better way to be. If, at the film's end, he can begin a serious attempt to find his way home--or, more specifically, his way

toward a meaning of home that is mature--then he has profited from his experience. His admission that he does not know his way home can be taken as the first step on such a journey.

Peckinpah borrowed his title from the works of Lao-Tze that "the sage is ruthless...and heaven and earth are as Straw Dogs."<sup>15</sup> Experts on Chinese Philosophy remark that the worst thing we can do is to interpret this statement pessimistically.<sup>16</sup> It is neither hopeless nor hopeful: it is the way things are. It is a statement rather like "Why not?" in its duality--because it does not omit either resignation or hope. The statement can be seen as an index to David's opportunity to take command of his own future; to take responsibility for himself. Peckinpah claimed that The Ballad of Cable Hogue owed to Sartre's The Flies.<sup>17</sup> There is surely a similar debt in Straw Dogs in terms of man accepting responsibility for himself and his own actions. It is time for David, a twentieth century man, to forego nineteenth century codes of initiation--and build a home. It is time for Amy to do the same thing. The film's ending does not preclude the possibility, however pessimistically that ending may play, that they will succeed.

What the two clearly lack is the necessary relationship of amity to survive. The larger social orders in the film--the rough community of rowdies; the more staid aspects of

community as symbolized by church--have threatened them, and they have, temporarily, survived. But the threat has not been to the physical home; to Trencher's Farm, except in the most tangential way. After all, it isn't really their home. David's territorial home, like it or not, is this country--and Amy's home for some time has been with David. But their true home is with each other--that's the pledge that they have made--and thus we see once again that, in Peckinpah, home is a state of mind that is the natural consequence of accepting the responsibility of family. David may have proved his capacity for violence--but he has completed no successful rite-of-passage at all until he learns to realistically accept and love his wife--and she him. There is hope at film's end--but there is no real resolution. The director himself does not know what will happen to David, and says so: "I don't know whether they'll get together again. At least they'll have to deal with each other on a different plane. What I hope he does is keep going in that car at the end--not turn back. He obviously married the wrong dame....What I favor is marriage made in heaven, and that's the only place marriage ought to be performed."<sup>18</sup>

Peckinpah, of course, baits us in the last part of his statement: one only need review the words of the marriage ceremony in Ride the High Country to see what an earth-bound institution the director actually perceives marriage to be. But the earlier part of his statement is an indi-

cation of how clear he has been in his intentions to take a book which really is about the Territorial Imperative and turn it into a film which is about the problem of getting and keeping amity; of finding one's way home. And this writer, incidentally, has another hope for David: that he might return and try it again with the wife he has taken. The Amy of the film is a far richer individual than Peckinpah's above-quoted statement might indicate. And the David of the film, as, hopefully, has been demonstrated, is in no position, just like many other Peckinpah protagonists, to be making any judgments at all.



FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

- <sup>1</sup>Playboy interview, p. 72.
- <sup>2</sup>Pauline Kael, "Peckinpah's Obsession," as reprinted in Deeper into Movies (Boston, 1973), p. 399.
- <sup>3</sup>William S. Pechter, Movies Plus One: Seven Years of Film Reviewing (New York, 1982), p. 70.
- <sup>4</sup>As quoted in Pechter, p. 72.
- <sup>5</sup>Playboy interview, p. 66.
- <sup>6</sup>Gordon M. Williams, The Seige of Trencher's Farm (New York, 1972), p.p. 59-60.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 60.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 60.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 171.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 188.
- <sup>11</sup>See McKinney, p. 117: In fact, the book's author, whose real name is Anderson Black, actually condemned the film Straw Dogs--but on the basis of its sexual content.
- <sup>12</sup>See Rory Palmieri, "Straw Dogs: Sam Peckinpah and the Classical Western Narrative," Studies in the Literary Imagination, Vol. XVI, No. 1, (Spring, 1983), p.p. 37-40.
- <sup>13</sup>See, as examples, McKinney, p.p. 121-123, who also makes another common assumption: that "David is never made aware of the rape." David would have to be far more obtuse than Dustin Hoffman plays him to remain unaware that his wife has been raped.
- <sup>14</sup>Robert Ardrey, The Territorial Imperative (New York, 1971), p.p. 107-108.

<sup>15</sup>See Simmons, p.p. 124-125.

<sup>16</sup>See Wing-Tsit Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy (Princeton, 1963), p. 142. "...the Taoist idea here is not negative but positive, for it means that Heaven and Earth are impartial...To translate it as unkind...is grossly to misunderstand Taoist philosophy."

<sup>17</sup>As quoted in Tom Milne, Review of The Ballad of Cable Hogue, Sight and Sound, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter 1971-72), p. 50.

<sup>18</sup>Playboy interview, p. 70.

## CHAPTER FIVE: JUNIOR BONNER and THE GETAWAY

If The Wild Bunch spawned a much gentler film in The Ballad of Cable Hogue, Straw Dogs, Peckinpah's most violent exploration thus far, was destined to produce his most gentle film of them all: 1972's Junior Bonner. It is, in fact, not too much to say that if, by some strange star-cross, Peckinpah had wound up directing a television episode of The Waltons, this is what it might have looked like.<sup>1</sup>

Such a statement sounds condescending--and, in part, it is. Junior Bonner has not worn as well as most of Peckinpah's other films (although the director greatly admires it), and it was not successful with the public or the critical establishment at the time.<sup>2</sup> For the public, the trouble was that 1972 brought a spate of films which, like Junior Bonner, were centered around the modern-day rodeo. A James Coburn vehicle named The Honkers, directed by Steve Inhat, was perhaps forgettable enough, but another, J. W. Coop, produced and directed by and starring Cliff Robertson, got the most of the press--and, at the box office, audiences apparently had difficulty in telling the films apart. Critics, on the other hand, and particularly those who had been sympathetic

to Peckinpah in the past, greeted the film warmly enough--but clearly were let down. What was wanted from the auteur of The Wild Bunch and Straw Dogs in that year of Watergate and elections was relevance--and Junior Bonner just didn't seem to be very relevant to much of anything.

The director, of course, was following what might be called, by this time, a familiar strategy: "Sam wanted to do something in a more nonviolent vein,"<sup>3</sup> said Joe Wizan, producer of the film, and the Junior Bonner script, by Jeb Rosebrook, seemed to fill the bill. As Garner Simmons has put it: "...attitudes toward friends, family, and the attraction of the transitory life of the rodeo had been at the core of the Rosebrook script. Recognizing this, Peckinpah sought to bring them into sharp focus and point out their inherent conflict with the development of the American Dream in the twentieth century."<sup>4</sup>

And therein, of course, lies a point: though Peckinpah's reviewers may not have perceived Junior Bonner to be "relevant" to international and domestic concerns of 1972 in the ways, perhaps, that The Wild Bunch and Straw Dogs had been to their years and continued to be, that theme of family versus the twentieth century was central to the larger view of Peckinpah's work. There can be little doubt, therefore, that the director certainly perceived the picture to be relevant to the state-in-progress that he was making through his films.

Peckinpah also was anxious to work with the late Steve McQueen, arguably an ideal Peckinpah persona, particularly in his middle age. McQueen's combination of laconic resignation and resourceful existential cool was certainly well-known to audiences, and thus Peckinpah was once again able to use an actor who, like William Holden or Joel McCrea or Randolph Scott, brought a certain mythology to any part he played. Securing McQueen's high-priced services in 1972, when the actor was at his zenith, amounted to something of a casting coup, but Peckinpah took his customary pains with the supporting roles anyway: McQueen's Junior Bonner would be complemented by Robert Preston as Ace, his father; Ida Lupino as Ellie, his mother, and Joe Don Baker as his brother Curly. Peckinpah regular Ben Johnson was brought in for a cameo as a rodeo boss, and Lucien Ballard agreed to lens the picture.

Junior Bonner is Peckinpah's most up-front attempt to deal with the subject of family. The Bonners are natives of Prescott, Arizona, where all of them but Junior have chosen to remain, even though a way of life they once knew has, in present day, vanished in the dust of tractors which are plowing up the land to accomodate tract homes and trailer parks. The once-esteemed Bonner family has dispersed: Ace and Ellie are divorced; Curly, the twentieth-century survivor, has made his compromise: he now sells mobile homes, and has a prosperous-looking family of his own. Junior has been away,

going broke on the rodeo circuit, but has returned to Prescott for "Frontier Days," an actual annual celebration in that city.<sup>5</sup> Junior's worries are not only financial, however: he's overage, and it's showing--he has repeatedly tried unsuccessfully to ride a bull named Sunshine for the requisite rodeo time. In Prescott, he wants his chance again--and, if he fails this time, he'll fail in front of his family.

If it seems that Junior Bonner is thinly plotted for a Peckinpah vehicle, it must be remembered that both the scriptist, Rosebrook, and Peckinpah were looking for a story about character--and, indeed, in the three days which the film spans, not much actually happens. Junior and Curly, predictably at philosophical odds, reunite, fall out, make it up. "I'm workin' on my first million," Curly tells his brother, "and you're still workin' on eight seconds (of riding time)"--but, finally, Curly will grudgingly say: "You're my brother...and I guess I love you...We're family." Even so, Curly's maneuvering for financial control of his father and his attempts to ensconce his mother where he thinks she belongs, in a curio shop as proprietress, are the closest things to outright villainy in the film.

Similarly, Junior and his mother reunite, communicate briefly, and go their separate ways. The real communication, again predictably, in the film occurs in two other areas: between Junior and his father--who drink together, disrupt the Frontier Days parade, and play out an epiphany of a se-

quence in a deserted train depot; and between Ace and Ellie, who decide to spend one last afternoon of lovemaking together before they part once more. Peckinpah clearly warms especially to these sequences (and to McQueen, Preston, and Lupino, who perform like the professionals they were and are), and, because of that combination of inspired direction and inspired playing of parts, we get, in this rather undistinguished film, two of Peckinpah's most distinguished scenes.

The first is the afore-mentioned sequence in the train depot. Ace and Junior have found each other--Ace fresh from a stay in the hospital and Junior fresh from an altercation with Curly the night before which ended in violence, and the two make a forlorn pair indeed. Nonetheless, astride the same horse in the Frontier Days parade, they respond to the crowd which cheers them and their lost glory with dignity and charm. Junior has told Ace that he has a bottle and, at the right moment, Ace bolts the horse from the parade and the two are shown racing and careening through assorted back yards, getting hilariously entangled in a clothesline at one point, captured wonderfully by Lucien Ballard's camera and Peckinpah's slow-motion technique. At last they arrive at the train station, where they sit on the outside bench beside each other, taking pulls off the bottle. Ace, always the dreamer, tells Junior of his new plan to go to Australia in search of gold. He offers to cut Junior in, says that he is sure Junior is quite successful on the rodeo circuit, and

asks his son to grubstake him. Junior must reply that he is broke. Ace protests that he is only asking for a thousand dollars, and Junior tells him that it might as well be a million. "I'm busted, Ace," he tells his father. "Flatter than a tire."

Ace is angry, and takes a swipe at Junior, knocking his hat off. As the sound of an approaching train is heard in the distance, the wind sails Junior's hat across the tracks. Ace, realizing the pettiness of what he has done, goes to retrieve it, and, at that point, the train passes between father and son. The camera remains on Junior's side of the track, and he turns to it to compose himself: he is near tears. McQueen's typical underplaying carries the scene in heartbreaking fashion here: these are tough men, and they do not cry. As the train passes, Ace returns, carrying Junior's hat, which he returns to him. With unspoken communication, the two agree that his problem of the money will not be a problem between them, and Ace changes their direction by announcing that he has entered them as a father-son team in the wild-cow milking. They leave the station arm in arm.

The sequence is, of course, killed through explanation. Suffice it to say that it does what movies do best: it strikes a mythical chord; communicates in what Chaplin and Griffith would have called the universal language of film. Trite though it may seem to say it, for every son-grown-older who has disappointed his father and for every father who knows that,



in the eyes of his son, he is not what he might have been--and that's it's all right anyway because it has to be--this scene works. It's a pop-culture epiphany--yet another one which came, according to Jed Rosebrook, from Peckinpah's own past:

We were going to do the scene at the railroad station, and Sam told me that the way he wanted to end the scene was with Bob Preston knocking Steve's hat off. He said that when he was younger and had somehow either let his father down or gotten his father angry, Sam's dad had a way of leaning over and cuffing Sam in a way that knocked his hat off. It was then that I realized how much these two characters meant to Sam in a personal way."<sup>6</sup>

Later, in the afore-mentioned wild cow-milking sequence, Junior, who has by this time determined to give his father a brief lesson in the vanity of material wishes, deliberately drinks the milk they have extracted from a most uncooperative calf, even though they have plenty of time to get the bottle to the judges' stand. "Dammit, Junior," Ace says. "We couldn't have won." "We did, Ace," Junior tells his father--and, because of the authority of the two actors who utter these lines, they are not anything like as maudlin as they look on paper.

The other sequence concerns Ace and Ellie who, on the back stairs of the downtown Palace Hotel, decide to spend one last afternoon together, even though they know that they can never adapt--not to each other but to the times--enough to live together again. Their marriage has had a rough camaraderie which would become trivialized, unbearable for them,

in modern-day Prescott, and thus Ace prefers the veneer of over-the-hill loner; Ellie of self-sufficient matriarch of what is left of the Bonners. But here they are like Cable and Hildy on that night when Hildy, supposedly on her way to San Francisco, stopped off at Cable Springs--the night when, by candlelight, Cable told Hildy: "Lady--nobody's ever seen you before." Ace's picture of Ellie (and vice-versa) is much more familiar than Cable's of Hildy, but, like other Peckinpah protagonists before him, Ace has symbolically rubbed his eyes and looked anew: he is seeing his estranged wife, in her goodness and her beauty, for what seems like the first time. "Mexico lindo," Angel tells the Wild Bunch on the banks of the Rio Grande--and, when Tector Gorch cannot see that beauty, Angel replies: "You have no eyes." If there is a specific gesture which signifies deeper moral understanding in Peckinpah, it is that willingness to look at anything--particularly other human beings--anew, as if for the first time. Though the scene on the stairs between Ace and Ellie begins in recrimination, it ends, as Ida Lupino put it so nicely, with "the most important moment...where (they) stop hurting each other and go upstairs together."<sup>7</sup> It is such a moment, all right--a moment of looking at the familiar anew.

The rest of Junior Bonner frankly does not wear well, and plays, then or now, in trivial fashion. The necessary suspense element in regard to riding the bull is never really

built, although the rodeo cinematography by Lucien Ballard is quite exciting in and of itself. The payoff for that plot thread is equally limp: Junior rides his bull, and uses the prize money to stake his father to a plane ticket to Australia, which, if this writer has understood Ace's character correctly, he will never take: the gesture is symbolic, from one anachronism to another.

Similarly, a big sequence in the Palace Bar which reverberates with Peckinpah comparisons of family and country, a sequence which should have availed as a centerpiece of this study, is too thin to be used in such a way. The props are there: the Bonner family, along with what appear to be all the rodeoers in Prescott, have gathered for a post-rodeo day drink in the Palace Bar. The crowd is another Peckinpah melting pot: whites, Chicanos, Indians--and representatives of at least three generations. The Bonner family, uneasy in its reunion, has a toast--Ace, "top of the heap," as he puts it, gesturing to the two young (one of them played by Matthew Peckinpah, the director's son) sons of Curly and his wife, proclaiming: "To them as has their roads ahead." Then Ace is asked to dance by the woman who has been his hospital nurse, and Curly reminds his father that he has always saved the first dance for their mother. Ace and Ellie dance--and Junior and Curly have their confrontation which ends in peace between them. The Bonners are, however temporarily, a unit once more.

Then, on the dance floor, a fight breaks out (Junior is indirectly responsible), and the entire bar has at it in slapstick fashion. The fight is only quelled when the country-western band strikes up "The Star-Spangled Banner," and innate patriotism causes everyone to stop and salute. The intention is nice; the sequence unworthy of Peckinpah because it is unbelievable. These Bonners who admittedly stay out of the actual fighting, are a poetic lot--given to the nicest turns of phrase. Their earthy musings, from Junior's "Money's nobody's favorite" to Ace's "If this world's all about winners, then what's for the losers?" and Junior's reply: "Somebody's gotta hold the horses, Ace," get cheapened by cheap shots--and the barroom brawl is just that. It plays well enough for an audience, but, sadly, looks downright silly. Thus the essential point, that the larger town, compared to the Bonner family, has lost, in the twentieth century, its common meaning and can only be falsely united by the facade of patriotism, is also made silly. It is, in fact, hard to believe that the sequence in the train depot and the barroom brawl, though they come within an hour's film time of each other, came from the same director. This writer would not be so disappointed in Peckinpah again until he saw the incoherent kung-fu at the end of The Killer Elite--and what is especially disappointing is that the director had something like his most accessible chance, in terms of the mass audience, to here

make his reiterated point about amity and enmity; about family strength as potential strength of larger social order.

It is still sad that Junior Bonner failed financially, for, as Garner Simmons says, "(it) must be seen as an important film in Peckinpah's career, for it is the one his detractors claim he is incapable of making--a nonviolent statement on the human condition."<sup>8</sup> What constitutes a "nonviolent statement" is, of course, open to more conjecture--but Simmons is correct in feeling that a larger audience for Junior Bonner might have resulted in more future creative freedom for the director. And, for a variety of people, the picture seems to have communicated well enough--Casey Tibbs, the rodeo star who worked as a consultant on the film, claimed that it "wasn't outstanding" as a rodeo picture--but spoke highly of it on another count: "The thing I like about Junior Bonner was the fact that it was a story that could happen in any walk of life. It didn't have to be a rodeo family. It could have been a truck drivin' family or whatever. It was a good wholesome story. But it really wasn't tough enough in some respects."<sup>9</sup>

Though Tibbs is talking about the fact that even filmmakers who do their homework can't get fully inside any sport (he delightfully quotes Hemingway, who claimed that he wished he'd waited ten years to write Death in the Afternoon), his point is well-taken in another way: Junior Bonner, ironically, goes far softer during the barroom brawl than it goes at any

other point in its text, and it never gets tough enough to make its message stick again. In that sequence the film loses its conviction somewhere in the slapstick, and never gets it back. In Peckinpah, that conviction is perhaps more important than in most filmmakers: we believe his characters because they seem to speak with utter conviction. William Holden as Pike Bishop can say: "If they move--kill 'em," and make it stick well enough to carry the director's credit line on a freeze-frame, McQueen and Preston make the viewer believe that they are father and son: the anguish is real. And, when we call Peckinpah a "committed" filmmaker, this is really what we are talking about: he makes us believe it.

Tangentially, this may be, as well, what critics mean when they say that Peckinpah is lacking in a sense of humor.<sup>10</sup> His films depend upon many ironies, but he rarely seems to get the distance from his material that one who deals in comedy must have. These films are so deeply felt that comedy invariably becomes a matter of laughing to keep from crying in them: the empathy demanded of us allows almost no distance. Thus a slapstick sequence, which depends upon plenty of distance, must by its very nature seem false. Such a scene reflects a director playing loose with his audience--and this is incongruous from a director who has so recently played so close as to say, in regard to audience reaction to the violence of The Wild Bunch and Straw Dogs, "I want to rub their noses

in it." And when it comes to a film in which the director's most positive theme is articulated as clearly as it is in Curly's words, "We're family," that same kind of conviction is expected --and, on the evidence of Junior Bonner, needed very badly.

### THE GETAWAY

The jangle of styles which hurt Junior Bonner would also hurt Peckinpah's other release of 1972, The Getaway, but the styles which jangled would be a good deal different. In Junior Bonner, there was an uneasy mixture of the straight forwardly sentimental and the slapstick. In The Getaway, which Peckinpah calls "my first attempt at satire, badly done,"<sup>12</sup> the mixture is far more dense: the film is part gangster thriller, part morality play, part black comedy--and, as the director has indicated, partly satire. This is not a post-mortem for The Getaway before our discussion of the film has begun: The Getaway, after all, was tremendously successful at the box office and for that reason alone the source of its popular appeal would bear discussion: it is Peckinpah's last real financial hit. But The Getaway also contains, in its major plot line, a serious treatment of one aspect of our concern here: the family. The family of The Getaway is a married couple, Doc and Carol McCoy, and they are Peckinpah's vehicles for his most incisive treatment of this subject since Straw Dogs.

Peckinpah is working from a novel source once again here: The Getaway, written by Jim Thompson, first appeared as an original paperback in 1958. There is a tradition in the cinema that the pulpiest sources tend to make the best films: a good novel is usually right in its novel form, and doesn't come across comfortably in its transition.<sup>13</sup> Peckinpah does tend to go for the second-rate source when he uses a novel, but, by his own report, he had plenty of respect for Thompson as a writer--as well he might: Thompson had worked on scripts for several excellent films, including Stanley Kubrick's Paths of Glory (1960).

But Thompson's novel is a fairly straight-forward account of a bank robbery and its aftermath for the husband-wife team who pull the job, written with emphasis on the manner in which crime breeds distrust even in the marital situation: the novel ends with the two planning to kill each other. This wasn't the story Peckinpah wanted to tell: as he said, "I had always thought the original ending was wrong. Walter Hill wrote the screenplay and did a tremendous job."<sup>14</sup>

Hill is a name of no small repute in the film world himself, having since gone on to the role of director, in which he has been responsible for action features like The Warriors (1979), The Long Riders (1980), Southern Comfort (1982), and 48 Hours (1982). Hill's original script treatment set the film in the Texas of 1949 and dedicated itself



to the American director Raoul Walsh, whose credits include High Sierra (1941) and White Heat (1949). But Hill's game seemed to be homage rather than satire of the gangster genre which Walsh employed so well--and his plan changed quickly anyway, since Peckinpah wanted a modern-day time frame.

In addition, the influence of Steve McQueen on The Get-away in its present form cannot be underestimated. McQueen had final cut on the picture, since it was produced under the banner of his First Artists organization, and he took advantage of it in many ways, the most significant one, perhaps, being the complete rescoring of the film: Peckinpah had originally used the score of the late Jerry Fielding, who had served him so well on The Wild Bunch and Straw Dogs, but McQueen preferred a Quincy Jones score which was a good deal more "obvious," in associate producer Gordon Dawson's term. In addition, large chunks of the supporting performances of Sally Struthers and Al Lettieri, as, respectively, a housewife who becomes a gun moll and a vengeful gangster, were removed by McQueen in order to focus the film more squarely on the Doc-Carol relationship, the parts played by McQueen and Ali McGraw. Peckinpah was none too happy about any of this, but, clearly, he did not have artistic control.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, though, McQueen's impulse in regard to where the emphasis of the story should be turned out to have the effect of throwing Peckinpah's commentary on marriage into

sharp relief against the rest of the film. In The Getaway, we see Doc first in Huntsville prison, where he spends his days in deadly routine, thinking of Carol and anxious for parole. Benyon (Ben Johnson), an influential member of the parole board, is also a Texas syndicate man who could free Doc at any time--but refuses to unless Doc will steal for him. After the latest in a series of fruitless parole hearings, Doc tells Carol during a prison visit that she must get to Benyon and tell him that Doc is ready to do business --"his price"--and Carol does so, apparently sweetening the pot by sleeping with Benyon.

Out of prison, Doc and Carol renew their relationship briefly and then proceed to Beacon City, where Benyon wants them to rob a bank which his organization owns--and has been skimming money from. Benyon, who has already declared that he "runs the show," has sent two professionals to work with Doc and Carol: a psychopath named Rudy (Al Lettieri) and a young gunsel clearly lacking in experience named Jackson (Bo Hopkins).

Despite major misgivings, Doc goes ahead with the job, which is badly bungled by Jackson. They get the money anyway, but by this time Rudy has shot Jackson and is planning to kill Doc, and take the money for himself. Doc foils this scheme by shooting Rudy before he shoots him (though Rudy, wearing a bullet-proof vest, will emerge from this skirmish to pursue Doc and Carol on their flight to the border), and

Doc and Carol try to take the money to Benyon. But Benyon has never planned to let Doc leave his isolated ranch house alive, and a tautly-directed sequence ensues in which, as Benyon informs Doc of Carol's infidelity, Carol, who has ostensibly waited in the car, approaches Doc's back with a pistol in her hand. Since Benyon, sitting at his desk, can see her, the situation appears to be a prearranged one. But at the last moment, Carol shoots Benyon instead of Doc, and Doc, in this blur of action, draws his gun, also shoots Benyon, and turns on his wife. There is a frozen moment in which they stare at each other, pistols at the ready.

From this point on, this pair will have, obviously, great difficulty in trusting each other. The ambiguity of feelings registered in the sequence just described makes it the strongest (and most typically Peckinpah) one in the film to this point, and sets up one level of tension for the larger film: Doc and Carol, in their journey to Mexico, must learn to trust each other if they are to survive. Thus, at this point in The Getaway, Doc and Carol are in approximately the same situation in which David and Amy find themselves at the end of Straw Dogs.

There are, however, major differences between these two couples. David and Amy are really not much more than children--emotionally and in terms of their experience. Doc and Carol are down the road of life--and both are seasoned professionals at their job, which is robbing banks. Doc's

name, of course, denotes that he has achieved reputation in his work--a job that can be tough on marriage, to say the least. But Doc and Carol have survived for some time, and what we have seen of them to this point assures us that they care a great deal about each other. What arrangements were made between Carol and Benyon remain deliberately vague in the film: we are not really meant to know what Carol might have agreed to--only that she didn't go through with Benyon's plan. What we are meant to know is that Carol did what she did in Doc's behalf--or, even if she didn't, that's the way it came out. Doc must reconcile himself to this fact, should be professional enough to do so: Carol was acting, he should believe, in the line of duty.

The trouble is that he's not able to accept what Carol has done. In another excellent sequence which quickly follows, Doc, Carol, and the money are on the road--and Doc stops the car to slap Carol around by the roadside. He's angry and hurt--and all she can offer is "It was too hard to explain." McQueen and McGraw play this scene (and most of their ensuing ones, despite the harsh reviews McGraw drew for her performance) with excellent conviction: this couple has slain together, but it may well not stay together. Doc's code, after all, need not be that of Pike Bishop: earlier, his version of "siding and staying" has been articulated by Doc as a weak: "When you make a deal, it's best to hold

up your end. "But that was in reference to his business deal with Benyon. Clearly, his marriage exists on another level of loyalty, and he expected more from Carol in the way of fidelity, even if it meant that he would have to stay in prison.

And so the chase is on: Doc and Carol must get to Mexico before they either are arrested, killed by Benyon's syndicate, or (unbeknownst to them at this point) killed by Rudy, who is on their trail. Rudy has found, with appropriate irony, a country veterinarian, Harold Clinton (Jack Dodson), to tend the wound he has received from Doc--and Harold's wife, Fran (Sally Struthers), bored with her pastoral privation, has become Rudy's ingenue-moll. While Rudy and Fran cavort in the back seat, Harold does the driving--resigned to spend his motel nights in captivity, tied to a chair while Rudy and Fran make heavy sex in front of him. This subplot is every bit as noxious to watch as it sounds: Paul Seydor has called the love scenes in Major Dundee "some of the silliest scenes (Peckinpah) has ever laid his name on"<sup>16</sup>--but this writer would vote for the road sequences with Rudy, Fran, and Harold. The point here, of course, is dual: Rudy really is an animal, and so is Fran--and their "courtship" is to be taken in sharp contrast to that of Doc and Carol--just as the marriage of Harold and Fran is shown as "false" beside Doc and Carol's "real" marriage. It is not unlike

a device of Restoration comedy--Archer and Miranda opposed to Mr. and Mrs. Sullen in Farquhar's The Beaux' Stratagem (1707) would not be a bad comparison at all.<sup>17</sup> Second, Rudy, Fran, and Harold are meant to be the half-parody, half-homage characters of the film: they suggest "types" from forties film noir. The Swarthy Al Lettieri looks like a movie mobster; Sally Struthers suggests Gloria Grahame, or Joan Blondell, or many another moll without the inner strength those latter women tended to display. And thus we may see that Peckinpah does have satire on his mind, though it plays poorly.

Satire--which Northrop Frye has called "militant irony"<sup>18</sup>--has its basis in a moral objection: the satirist has his bone to pick. Since the study of crime--organized and disorganized--in the film is too outlandish to be meaningful to the larger movie, we may again profit by noting that Peckinpah's first text is the working out of the Doc-Carol marriage. Thus his real object of satire in the Rudy-Fran-Harold sequences is marriage gone bad: the perversion of amity. Fran goes willingly with Rudy, and enjoys Harold's stoic pain. When Harold finally hangs himself in a motel bathroom (a revivalist sermon is played on the radio), no love is lost: Fran, who has procured a cat, begins calling it "Poor Little Harold." She and Rudy continue to El Paso together, where Rudy knows that Doc and Carol may try to stay in the Laughlin Hotel before crossing into Mexico--

and Fran assimilates Rudy's way of life totally. Yes, these two relationships are false--and yes, Doc and Carol have something that makes them better. But Lettieri and Struthers are directed to badly overplay these sequences, so that the satiric comparison is lost, frankly, to grossness. One wonders what Peckinpah might have had in mind here, since Lettieri is quite ominously convincing in the earlier part of the film. And, we must remember, it is possible that the McQueen final cut did lose what Peckinpah wanted.

Even so, the point remains that the object of the film's satire is the marital state--an aspect of family. This is also true of the sequences involving Benyon's "family": once he is dead, his brother (John Bryson) assumes control of the organization, and he orders the mobsters to get Doc and Carol. When asked what should be done with his own brother's body, the Benyon brother replies: "Find a dry well and drop him in it." These mobsters are fine objects of visual satire for the rest of the film: at one point, on their way to the Laughlin hotel, they are shown crammed into a convertible, desperately holding their Texas businessman-hats against the wind as they roar down the road. Here, too, the object of satire is the false family: Benyon and his brother are bound only by money, and thus no amity exists.

There is yet one more "false" family relationship to consider: the Laughlin Hotel is propertied by Old Man

Laughlin (Dub Taylor) who is in the business of arranging illegal transport into Mexico for syndicate people on the run. Laughlin is, as Doc says, a "juicer," easily bought, hardly trustworthy. His family is in evidence in the hotel: Doc's tipoff, later in the film, that Rudy has set him up in the hotel is that Laughlin tells Doc he has let his family take the day off. And, because he drinks, Doc knows that they are around Laughlin all the time. This is not a satiric use of family so much as it is a symbolic use: when the family that runs the Laughlin Hotel is split, it's evidence that something is wrong.

And so, the unifying device of The Getaway is a study of various kinds of family: one bound by sexual perversion; one by greed; one that is split when it shouldn't be. Only Doc and Carol have a chance, here--and it appears for a while that even they won't. Doc cannot rid himself of the thought of Carol's infidelity, and thus he lets his most cynical nature come to the forefront. When asked what he trusts, he points to the robbery money, and claims: "In God I trust-- It says it on very bill." But Carol, who understands a bit more than Doc does how close they are to the edge, replies: "Keep talking like that, Doc, and we won't make it." She's right: Doc and Carol must learn to trust each other again--and, in order to do so, they are given an obstacle course between Benyon's ranch and El Paso that seems near-mythical in nature.



In the Houston railroad station, Carol allows (another irony) a con-man to switch keys to a safe deposit box with her, and the con-man winds up with their suitcase holding the money. Doc sees the trick immediately ("It's the oldest con-game in the world," he tells Carol), and is forced to pursue the thief on a lengthy train journey which forms a suspense set-piece in the larger film. If we did wish to follow a sort of helter-skelter mythical pattern, drawn from variant sources, here that actually has a justifiable payoff in this film, we could consider this encounter something close to Ulysses' duel with the Cyclops: Doc gets his suitcase back by beating the thief into submission--blacking one eye until it is swollen shut. Similarly, at another point, Doc and Carol are forced to hide from squad cars late at night in Dallas by jumping into a dumpster--which is almost immediately emptied by a garbage truck. Peckinpah pulls off a fine use of the literary grotesque here: this machine comes to infernal life as Doc and Carol, clutching their suitcase, desperately try to fend off being swallowed in its bowels. The garbage truck becomes a leviathon which spews them out, the next morning, in the garbage dump--and here, amongst piles of human refuse, they make their peace about the infidelity. "We leave it here," Doc says. "And we pick up and go on." "No more about Benyon," Carol tells him--and Doc agrees: "No more."

The nicest use of a mythological pattern comes at the end, though, when Doc and Carol must shoot their way into Mexico, caught by both Rudy and the syndicate in the Laughlin Hotel. They escape only because of a cowboy in a salvage truck (Slim Pickens) who is more than willing to be commandeered. The legend on the side of his truck reads; "Specialist--Our Business is Pickin' Up"--and that's exactly what he does for Doc and Carol: he is the one who takes them into Mexico.

The conversation the three of them have has already been elaborated in Chapter One of this study--but it is worth noting that this amiable Charon, who takes our couple, now unified, across a River Styx named the Rio Grande, has plenty of homilies to dispense on the subject of what makes a good marriage.<sup>19</sup> Doc and Carol already know--and thus, as they hand the cowboy \$30,000 on the other side of the Mexican border for his truck, it is quite appropriate that Doc says to him--instead of vice-versa--"I hope you find what you're looking for." Doc and Carol have already found, after all, what they're looking for--and the poor cowboy, though a good deal richer in worldly goods, must cross back into the United States--it's not his time to go to the only afterline this film provides--Mexico--yet.

There are other mythological plants: a sign in the Laughlin Hotel lobby which says: "Dog Racing"--could be taken as reference to Cerberus, for example. But, frankly,

they do not really enhance the larger reading of the film-- they almost seem to be a private text of Peckinpah's in case he becomes bored with the more obvious machinations of the chase plot.<sup>20</sup> No--the most coherent message in The Getaway is pretty well spelled out by Doug McKinney when he comments that: "Taken literally as a serious drama, The Getaway is a romance with an underpring that personal loyalty between a man and woman as well as between friends is something worth holding on to."<sup>21</sup> Peckinpah, after the fact, was a little more caustic about the final product: The Getaway was my first attempt at satire, badly done...Too many people took it too seriously. Five times in that picture I have people saying, 'It's just a game.' I was dealing with a little bit of High Sierra there and a couple of other things. It was a good story and I thought I had a good ending. It made my comment."<sup>22</sup>

And, as even Peckinpah himself suggests, there are, just as in Junior Bonner, clashing styles here. The satire does not really mix all that well with what McKinney calls the "serious drama"--and the result is part deeply-felt film; part comic book. But even so there are very nice things in the movie--several of them involved with Doc's attempts to re-establish amity with Carol. McQueen and McGraw play their married life like a hoodlum George and Martha: even in the heat of action, Doc can stop to do some husbandly

nagging, and vice-versa. These bits are welcome--as is the nice Peckinpah touch in a drive-in shootout, with Carol at the wheel and Doc blasting away with a shotgun--in which, aprospo of a new bit of chaos Doc has wrought, he suddenly lets out a guffaw of satisfaction with himself. He is, after all, doing his job well.

It is also significant that, in the police shootouts, nobody gets physically hurt: another sign that the comment of the film is elsewhere than in the plotline itself. At one point, in order to get them out of a tight spot on a city street, Doc walks into a gun shop, takes the aforementioned shotgun, and walks into the street where he blows a police car to smithereens in intercut slow motion. It is automobile homicide--and, predictably, it is a vicarious joy to watch. There are times when we all would like to shoot our cars.<sup>23</sup>

Then, on the gentler side, there is a swim in the park amongst children just after Doc gets out of prison; the loving walk after the two have reunited out of the garbage dump--the most unloving of places; and the jovial purity of the Slim Pickens cameo. There is also the fine Lucien Ballard cinematography, the last to grace a Peckinpah film to this time. The Getaway is not without its minor rewards--and it does represent a conclusion to a study of marriage that Peckinpah began with Straw Dogs: Doc and Carol learn to trust each

other; to depend on their ability to create amity again. In Mexico, there is little reason to doubt that they will enjoy "the glory of a good marriage": children are swimming at an outdoor pool as we see them drive by, in Mexico at last--and their earlier purification by water is recalled. Doc and Carol are home free: they never have been as professional as they think they are, but they have learned how to love. Yes--it's a happy ending--and it would be Peckinpah's last one in the cycle of films that we are considering. Now it would be time to turn from even partial satire to other modes, and perhaps the director's deepest personal involvement to date.

## FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

<sup>1</sup>In fact, Jeb Rosebrook, who did the original screenplay for Junior Bonner, has written for the CBS television series The Waltons.

<sup>2</sup>See Simmons, p. 151, especially the quote from Steve McQueen: "'...I think the film is a failure, at least financially, and in this business, that's what counts.'" See also the Playboy interview, p. 74, in which Peckinpah says: "'I think Junior Bonner, which I shot in 40 days, may possibly be my best picture. I'm delighted with it.'"

<sup>3</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>5</sup>See Ibid., p. 140. The short shooting schedule, according to Producer Joe Wizan, was necessitated by the fact that the time of the Prescott Frontier Days Rodeo, which only occurs once a year, was only five weeks away when the production pre-production began.

<sup>6</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 150.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>9</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 152.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, William S. Pechter, Movies Plus One: Seven Years of Film Reviewing (New York, 1982), p. 134. Pechter says: "(Peckinpah's) previous films (including his one comedy, The Ballad of Cable Hogue) haven't been noteworthy for their sense of humor."

<sup>11</sup>Playboy interview, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 157.

<sup>13</sup>See William Miller, p.p. 209-13, Screenwriting for Narrative Film and Television (New York, 1980), for a good

discussion for this problem.

<sup>14</sup>AS quoted in Simmons, p. 156.

<sup>15</sup>See Ibid., p.p. 165-67, especially Steve McQueen's quote: "'I know Sam wasn't happy with some of the changes, but I had my reasons.'"

<sup>16</sup>Seydor, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup>Nor would similar pairs of couples in Restoration comedy from Dryden's All for Love (1678) through Congreve's The Way of the World (1700) or even Steele's The Conscious Lovers (1722), generally recognized as the first sentimental English Comedy, which means, among other things, that the point of the play is openly didactic.

<sup>18</sup>Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (New York, 1957), p. 223.

<sup>19</sup>See Simmons, p.p. 165-65, especially the quote from Peckinpah: "'I said to Slim, 'You read the lines in the script?' And Slim says, 'Yeah, I read 'em.' And I said, 'Well, I want you to talk about marriage and love and morality.' And I gave him about three lines that weren't in the script and let him play it the way he felt it. I said: 'Turn these kids on. See what they can do.' And when Slim asked them if they were married, it really threw them badly. But they stayed with it, and it worked.'"

<sup>21</sup>This motif could also be a bit of holdover from the Jim Thompson novel, which is more explicit in its pop-mythology: In the book, Doc and Carol must make their way to Mexico through underground caves which Carol compares to "being in a coffin," and, later, beyond Mexico to the gangster Valhalla of a syndicate boss named El Rey, which Thompson describes as follows: "The tiny area where El Rey is uncrowned king appears on no maps and, for very practical reasons, it has no official existence. This has led to the rumor that the place actually does not exist, that it is only an illusory haven conjured up in the midst of the wicked. And since no one with a good reputation for truth and veracity has ever returned from it..." See Jim Thompson, The Getaway (New York, 1972), p. 144 and p. 169.

<sup>22</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup>Peckinpah gives McQueen full credit for suggesting this sequence, which was not in the original script. See Ibid., p.p. 161-62.

SIX: PAT GARRETT AND BILLY THE KID and BRING ME THE HEAD  
OF ALFREDO GARCIA

PAT GARRETT AND BILLY THE KID

Though The Getaway turned out to be a runaway financial success, in 1973 the end was in sight for Peckinpah as a director who could draw on the basis of his own name. Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, a project which, for Peckinpah, should have been a director-material marriage made in Heaven, turned out to be the film which bears the strongest marks of studio interference since Major Dundee--and also a film which did not make money. The reviews were respectable--far more respectable than those for The Getaway the year before--but, finally, nothing was going to save Pat and Billy from an even earlier grave than the one which claimed Billy the kid himself in 1881.

Both Garner Simmons and Paul Seydor have taken some pains to document Peckinpah's battles with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and, specifically, then-President James Aubrey over the shooting and the final edit of the picture:<sup>1</sup> producer Gordon Carroll put it succinctly when he said: "I would not say that the picture was anything but a battleground, from two to three weeks before we started shooting until thirteen weeks after



we finished."<sup>2</sup> The essential trouble seems to have erupted from the fact that MGM, with cash reserves low after the construction of the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, pushed all its in-production pictures viciously during that time--and that Peckinpah refused to knuckle. The tension between the cast and crew in Durango, Mexico, and the home office in Los Angeles very quickly became unbearable--and it is surprising how many of those involved in the film, because of the bitter memories it evokes, no longer wish to talk about it at all.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, one individual who has held forth at some length is Rudolph Wurlitzer, author of the original screenplay, had another quarrel: so he came to resent what Peckinpah had done to his work that he took the trouble to publish his own version of the Pat and Billy screenplay. In an introduction, he traces the crazy-quilt of starts and stops for the project briefly, and then levels a blast at Peckinpah. Since we are dealing with a mutilated film here, one of our problems is to get at what the director's intent was--and, whether Wurlitzer has read the situation correctly or not, his broadside is a good place to start:

A new director appeared, a director famous for one spectacular western and even more famous for his tantrums, rages, macho passions, and banal, highly embarrassing pronouncements. Everyone was elated. The project was revived. The project was actually on. The writer (Wurlitzer is referring, in coy manner, to himself here) went back to Hollywood to work with the director. He waited for six weeks to meet the

director. Finally they had two or three conversations about the director's past sexual exploits and about the savage, warlike rigors of the celluloid trail. The script was never discussed. The writer went...to Nova Scotia. Time passed. The writer was called back to Hollywood. Nothing, it seemed, had been done to the script; in fact, the director hadn't read it yet. The writer and director went to Mexico to scout locations and work on the script. The director, who by this time had skimmed the first few scenes, became suddenly thrilled by his own collaborative gifts. In the writer's version, Billy and Garrett never met until the final scene, when Garrett killed him. The director wanted their relationship in front, so that everyone would know they were old buddies. Rewriting was imposed with the added inspirational help of some of the director's old TV scripts. The beginning was changed completely. Extraordinary lines about male camaraderie made a soggy entrance into the body of the script. The writer suspected that the script (not to mention himself) had been reduced to its most simplistic components. He was also aware that the director had an unusual gift for a kind of reactionary theatricality...The story goes on, as the writer, by then semiparalyzed and strangely attracted to the process of reduction, as if by this experience he could leave such scenes behind forever, drifted into being a witness to the actual filming.<sup>4</sup>

Wurlitzer's principal objection is obviously one of conception: the theme of "camaraderie" between Garrett and Billy is one which he finds out of line with his understanding of the story. Earlier in his introduction, Wurlitzer has claimed that the story, for him, was about the way in which we all become Billy the Kid in our youth, and the more conservative, malleable Pat Garrett in our middle age. He compares himself to his characters, and closes with an interpretation of his concept which, in truth, sounds like the camaraderie he disdains and a little more: "If the writer had been Billy

as a youth, he was Garrett as a man. So the echo of Garrett's shooting of the Kid became the echo of the film, or, to be exact, of the script, the two men becoming entwined like lovers even beyond the last bullet which ended the breath of the younger."<sup>5</sup>

In what has survived MGM of Peckinpah's original film, strangely enough, there is actually precious little camaraderie. Nor, thankfully, do Pat and Billy become "entwined like lovers even beyond the last bullet." Peckinpah's reading of this familiar American story is, instead, an epitaph for the unsocialized bunch--the very surrogate family which had survived the twentieth century at least in myth in The Wild Bunch. However haphazard, if one accepts Wurlitzer's comments as more than sour grapes, Peckinpah's approach to the material might have been, the director's own concept is clear enough: Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid exist, for Peckinpah, at a moment of apotheosis in the American West--a moment when, irrefutably, a way of life was about to be lost. This way of life was filled with an ambiguity the director has found appealing before: it was possible, after all, to be an outlaw and a lawman several times apiece in one lifetime, if one lived. This was certainly the case for these two men: the New Mexico Territory where they played their stories out was, in 1881, undergoing a pacification program at the hands of both the United States government

(General Lew Wallace was the territorial governor), and the "Santa Fe Ring," made up of businessmen and politicians who apparently paid for the hunt for Billy the Kid. There were also the Lincoln County cattle wars, and, ever present, the shadowy figure of the rancher Chisum, for whom Billy once rode, but who now, after a wage dispute, is Billy's target for cattle rustling. Pat and Billy, too, have ridden together--as outlaws. But today, with Pat Garrett the newly elected sheriff of Lincoln County, they are at odds--and Garrett must hunt down his former friend. The situation, which sounds so much like the Pike Bishop-Deke Thornton conflict in The Wild Bunch, is factual--and its appeal for Peckinpah is obvious.

Peckinpah can rightfully lay some claim to a pre-existing claim for a "definitive" screen treatment of the story, as well. His draft of a script for Charles Neider's fictionalized account of Pat and Billy, The Authentic Life of Henry Jones (1956), would become Marlon Brando's film One-Eyed Jacks (1960), although Peckinpah was only involved in the earliest stages of that tortured project.<sup>6</sup> This early screenplay may well be what Wurlitzer is referring to when he says that Peckinpah imposed "old TV scripts" on him--it is research that the director had already done, and which, it seems reasonable to assume, he hoped to finally get to use someday. Pat Garrett's own book, of course, is called The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid--and both Peckinpah and

Wurlitzer used that, in addition to a large amount of other source material. The film is meant to be an accurate depiction of an actual event--What we need to determine is its philosophical stance.

In many ways, certainly, Pat and Billy have the same "bunch." Billy (Kris Kristofferson) still lives with the least of these outlaws--a small group of unattractive men that we see first at Old Fort Sumner, New Mexico, idling away their time shooting chickens off a wall as children look on. Pat (James Coburn), still rather stiff in his new role as sheriff, arrives to warn Billy that he will have to leave the territory. This is a pre-credits sequence, and it sets up Peckinpah's concerns in the film thoroughly. Pat and Billy greet each other like old friends, but the rest of the gang remains wary: these are not, after all, the men from the old days that the two of them rode with, but Billy's new hangers-on, some of them not much more than adolescents who are anxious to make reputations by riding with Billy the Kid. Even so, the relationship between Pat and Billy suggests that these men once meant something to each other. Billy has teasing things to say about Pat's new marriage (which seems to have pretty much come with the Sheriff's job), and Pat acts very much the role of the local boy who has made good: "Jesus, Bill--don't you get stale around here?" And, in deference to his rowdier past, Garrett even has indulged in some marksmanship with the

chickens. But here is the exchange that counts:

PAT: The electorate wants you gone, out of the country.  
 BILLY: Well, are they telling me or are they asking me?  
 PAT: I'm asking you, but in five days I'm making you, when I take over as Sheriff of Lincoln County.  
 BILLY: Old Pat...Sheriff Pat Garrett. Sold out to the Santa Fe Ring. How does it feel?  
 PAT: It feels...like times have changed.  
 BILLY: Times, maybe, but not me.

And thus the familiar stand-off between the protagonist who must change with the times (Deke Thornton in The Wild Bunch; Preacher Josh in The Ballad of Cable Hogue) and the protagonist who can't (Pike Bishop in The Wild Bunch; Cable in Cable Hogue) is now established. Pat and Billy once enjoyed a kind of rough frontier amity--hardly the kind the men of the Wild Bunch know when we meet them for they, after all, with the exception of Angel, are middle-aged or beyond: in this year of 1881, Pat Garrett would have been 32 and Billy a mere 21, and thus we can grant them less chronological experience; less time to have learned their lessons. Pat as played by James Coburn is certainly old beyond his years (as, inevitably, is Billy, since Kris Kristofferson was 36 when he did the part), but we must call their "family" a much more tentative one than that of Pike and his men. In short, we do not believe, from the start, that these men would die together. We find them infinitely susceptible to being bought in all its forms--even Billy, who seems too cocky in his role as folk-hero; too distant from the rest

of the men.

But that outlaw family they had was , clearly, the only one they will ever know. Their lives in current day are filled with potential family situations, but none is shown as in any way a worthy substitute: Billy's current gang is reminiscent of Deke Thornton's bounty hunters' Garrett's "family" of deputies and fellow lawmen that we will meet is, certainly, no family at all. And then there is Pat's wife, Ida. If one sees the theatrical print of the film, she won't be seen at all--but one of the great ironies of Peckinpah's career is that a large part of his lost footage has been restored to the print of the film originally sold to television (in order to pad after violent sequences had been excised), and so it is possible, after all, by seeing the two films to get some idea of what the director really wanted.<sup>7</sup> Ida is Mexican, and thus Garrett's new nature as political animal is pointed up even more strongly: he has won his election partly by Mexican support, and he has taken a convenient bride, to say the least. Garrett's exchange with Ida (Auroro Clavell) after Billy has broken out of the Lincoln County jail (Garrett has been away at the time dutifully collecting taxes) is indicative of what Pat's "marital" family is all about:

IDA: I'm alone all the time. My people don't talk to me. They say you're getting to be too much of a gringo since you been sheriff. That you make deals with Chisum. You don't touch--

PAT: Not now.

IDA: Yes, now. Or I won't be here when you  
get back.  
PAT: When this is over. Then we'll deal with  
it.  
IDA: I hope he gets away.  
PAT: He won't. There's too much play in him.  
IDA: And not enough in you.

Marriage, for Pat, is sterility. It will never compare with what once was, but it is what must be. As Pat says: "There comes a time in a man's life...when he don't want to spend time figuring what comes next."

And, as noted, Pat's life with his fellow lawmen is not any warmer. He will tell the representatives of the Santa Fe Ring who offer him additional money beyond his salary to "shove it up your ass and set fire to it," and John W. Poe, a bounty hunter from a neighboring county who rides with Garrett, becomes a particular object of Pat's disdain. Poe, after all, states nothing more than Pat's official position when he says: "The way I see it is that Mr. Chisum and men like him can't afford to give any kind of play to the Kid or anyone like him. This country's got to decide which way it's goin' to go. The time is over for drifters and outlaws and them that's got no backbone." But Garrett gives his only real declarative speech of the film when he slowly and levelly replies:

I'm going' to tell you this once, and don't make me do it again. The country's gettin' old, and I aim to git old with it. The Kid don't want that, and he might be a better man for it. I ain't judgin'....I don't want you explainin' nothin' to me, and I don't want you talkin' about the Kid or nobody else in my goddamn territory.



The families, real and surrogate, which are associated with this side of changing country are, uniformly, false. But there is a true family out there for both Pat and Billy: a rogue's gallery of old outlaw friends who have now become eroded by time. They are sometimes local law now, like Sheriff Kip McKinney (Richard Jaeckel), alcoholic and worthless at his job; Baker and his wife (Slim Pickens and Katy Jurado), wary, anxious to move on, unwilling, as Baker says, to do "nothin' no more lessen there's a piece of gold attached." They can be crippled by age, like Lemuel, who must sit helplessly and watch his store turned into Pat's interrogation room, and who says of Pat: "Crazier than a goat-humpin' mule. All that tight-assed law he done put inside himself all these years bustin' out. I don't give a sweet jerk in hell if'n the Kid lays him out. An' him damn near a Daddy to the Kid,"; or Pete Maxwell, in whose house at Old Fort Sumter Billy will finally be shot, who is blind, and who spends his time in idle remination on the past, telling the same old stories over and over to himself. They can be whores like Ruthie Lee, who demands that Garrett strike her more than once if she is to divulge Billy's location, because "I owe the kid that much"; and, most tellingly, they can be desperadoes whose time has run out, like Black Harris, who, shortly before he is shot by Pat, says: "Us old boys oughtn't to be a-doin' each other this way." The film, which

is a journey, is filled with these ghosts, each of whom figures in the true "family" of Pat and Billy. But that family has been lost, to time and to location: these people are spread across the territory. Their amity is lost; enmity is all--and this is why Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid is not a film about camaraderie. It is a film about loss; the loss of even that unsocialized bunch--unsatisfactory, but, at least something--that Peckinpah grounds in the nineteenth century. And, as such, it is hardly surprising that it failed to find a commercial audience: it is, after all, the first Peckinpah film that is without hope.

Jim Kitses, who gave Peckinpah the first intelligent lengthy criticism that he received in his 1969 study of three directors named Horizons West, has some material here which is pertinent, but which must be updated. Spinning off Northrop Frye, Kitses writes:

Northrop Frye has described myth as stories about Gods; romance as a world in which men are superior both to other men and to their environment; high mimetic where the hero is a leader but subject to social criticism and natural law; low mimetic where the hero is one of us; and ironic where the hero is inferior to ourselves and we look down on the absurdity of his plight. If we borrow this scale, it quickly becomes apparent that if the western was originally rooted between romance and high mimetic (characteristic forms of which are epic and tragedy), it rapidly became open to inflection in any direction. Surely the only definition we can advance of the western hero, for example, is that he is both complete and incomplete, serene and growing, vulnerable and invulnerable, a man and a God. If at juvenile levels the action

approaches the near-divine, for serious artists who understand the tensions within the genre the focus can be anywhere along the scale...in Sam Peckinpah there is a rich<sup>8</sup> creative play with the romantic potential...

The Kitzes study followed close behind The Wild Bunch (although he does discuss), and he therefore could not have commented upon what the impact of that film would be--but, even there, using the Northrop Frye scale, we are more likely to see Peckinpah working in the low mimetic mode--and that sort of thing can be fatal for a popular genre. In fact, it could be argued that The Wild Bunch was fatal for the western genre as we had known it until that time, because, with very few exceptions, westerns just haven't made money since The Wild Bunch, and the ones that have tend toward satire, as in Blazing Saddles (1977). Peckinpah may well have killed off the popularity of the western by giving us The Wild Bunch, so irrefutably low mimetic that the more comfortable mode for westerns, the romantic, would look silly to us for a long time to come.<sup>9</sup> And if there is an argument here, the box-office fate of Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, the final cut problem aside, should have been foreordained: Peckinpah is not doing anything as simple as debunking an old west legend which had heretofore gotten the romantic treatment--he is working out his own apocalyptic vision. Late in the film, as Pat Garrett, fading in and out of the night fog, advances on Pete Maxwell's house at Old Fort Sum-

ter to kill Billy, he stops beside the stand of a carpenter, named Will, who is working on a child's coffin. The carpenter is played by Sam Peckinpah. In the theatrical version, the exchange between the two is terse. Pat acknowledges Peckinpah, and Peckinpah says: "So you finally figured it out. Well, go on--get it over with." But in the television version, Peckinpah goes on somewhat longer:

You know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna take everything I own, put it in right here (leaning over the coffin), and bury it. (Then) I'm gonna leave this territory...When are you gonna realize you can't trust anybody, not even yourself, Garrett?

Hitchcock was fond of his omniscient appearances, and Peckinpah's mentor, Don Siegel, has chosen to make at least two. But Peckinpah's first (there is one more, in Convoy) comes here--and its effect is to heighten the already omnipresent feeling of claustrophobic predestination that the film has. Is Peckinpah telling us that the accommodations to the social order of middle age always, symbolically, kill youth? Do we really need the director himself for such a trite announcement? Or is he telling us that this is the end of something--that these petty, low-mimetic mirrors of our own greedy concerns are the truth; the dream of Agua Verde or Cable Springs a lie? Does he even know at this point--or, like Garrett, can he not even trust himself?

Peckinpah's casting of Kris Kristofferson as Billy, the soon-to-be Mrs. Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge, as Maria,

his girlfriend, and Bob Dylan as Alias, a member of Billy's gang, was another attempt to bring persona to character; to see the then-well-publicized self-destructive lifestyle of Kristofferson as a modern equivalent of Billy's nineteenth-century one, or the enigmatic nature of Dylan as appropriate to Alias, shown as an interloper throughout. It doesn't work here: Kristofferson is convincing because of the easy self-confidence he brings to Billy; Coolidge (most of whose footage is gone) and Dylan appear to be rock stars doing cameos. The rest of the cast, though, is quite appropriate for the wake this film turns out to be: from Coburn to such perennials as R.G. Armstrong as Deputy Bob Ollinger, L.Q. Jones as Black Harris, and the durable Emilio Fernandez as Paco, a Mexican sheepherder, these are people who have been with Peckinpah most of the way; who have, in another irony, sided and stayed. They play the film with a quiet intensity which adds to the afore-mentioned fated quality of the proceedings: Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, in tone if not in subject matter, must be described as stately.

It is in some ways unfortunate that John Coquillon, who shot Straw Dogs, photographed this picture as opposed to Lucien Ballard: the masterful Ballard use of horizontal space; the vastness of the panavision frame that we remember from the westerns he photographed might have made Pat and Billy a less claustrophobic enterprise. And, though Jerry

Fielding was once again asked to work on the film, what we have is a Bob Dylan soundtrack which depends on, essentially, two refrains--hardly a varied approach to movie scoring. But what is good, as always, has an integrity of its own: a shot of the scaffold which has been erected for Billy's hanging day, with town children swinging on the noose; Billy's killing of the Bible-beating Deputy Ollinger with a shotgun full of dimes ("How's Jesus look to you now, Bob?" Billy remarks before he pulls the trigger--and we know, yes, that he is a killer); a tense sequence--though still fore-ordained--in which Billy must eat dinner around a family table with a deputy (Jack Elam) who will try to outdraw him immediately after the meal.

James Coburn, too, has a fine performance in whichever version of the film is seen: he plays Garrett with a world-weary blend of authority and self-loathing that makes us feel that, in better times, he might have been a better man. Whether he ever was a "Daddy" to Billy, as Lemuel suggests, is left in doubt: the real Garrett, after all, was shot from ambush in 1908, perhaps also by Chisum ranching interests, after having made quite a career out of being the man who shot Billy the Kid--and it's hard, therefore, to think that he might ever have really cared about Billy. But even so, when Garrett, immediately after having shot Billy dead, turns, as Pike Bishop also did, and shoots the mirror where he sees

his reflection, the remorse is genuine.

Genuine, too, is the sequence that Peckinpah fought hardest for, and finally saved:<sup>10</sup> an apparent throwaway in which Garrett, camped along the river at dusk, watches a raft bearing a family pass by, and sees that the patriarch of the family is shooting at a bottle in the water while his wife and children watch. Garrett takes aim with his rifle, in the spirit of entering into a friendly marksmanship competition, and fires. But then the father on the raft fires back--at Pat. The women watch each other in silence as the raft floats on. It is a chilling moment--one in which Pat Garrett's utter alienation from anything that can be called family is made complete. Something has died here--underscored by the fact that even Mexico offers no escape: Billy goes there, but comes back--and has earlier told Garrett that another of their mutual friends--their lost "bunch"--has been killed trying to get there: "You know about Eben?" Billy says. "He drowned...in the Rio Grande, trying to get back to that old Mex you're talking about. Took two of the posse with him."

To this, Pat Garrett can only reply; "At least he knew when it was the right time to leave." And, in a film as apocalyptic as this one in terms of an artist's personal vision, it could be argued that it was time, too, for Peckinpah to pack it in. But there was one even darker film

to be made--one which actually returns us to the high mimetic (and near romantic) mode of tragedy, because our last protagonist definitely falls by his own hand. That film, Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, will bring our cycle most appropriately--if grimly--to a close.



BRING ME THE HEAD OF ALFREDO GARCIA

It now seems clear, in view of Sam Peckinpah's apocalyptic succession of battles with producers, studios, and cuttings rooms, that any consideration of his 1974 film, Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, must begin with reference to his own statement: "That film (Alfredo Garcia) was mine. For good or bad, like it or not, I did that one the way I wanted it."<sup>11</sup> Thus it becomes clear that there is not much to rehash this time in terms of lost footage or studio cuts. Alfredo Garcia may be taken as the director's example of a personal auteurist creation.

Certainly it did not make money. In this country, reactions to the film were almost unanimously hostile, even among long-time Peckinpah defenders like John Simon, who said: "Clearly Mr. Peckinpah does not lack talent. What he lacks is brains."<sup>12</sup> In a way, Simon summed up critical reaction: the consensus on Alfredo Garcia was that the director had chosen his material unwisely.<sup>13</sup>

British critics, by contrast, rather liked the film.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that they were more quick to see that Alfredo Garcia announces the end of a cycle; perhaps the end of a career. It is still quite possible, even though the director has now completed four other films, to see Alfredo as the culmination of the director's mature period. What was begun with The Wild Bunch in many ways ends here--and perhaps this

is what the English critics were more sympathetic toward.

By no stretch of the imagination, of course, could the subject matter be deemed pleasant. As is often true in Peckinpah, the pastoral opening of the film belies its bloody contents. We see first a young girl, pregnant, apparently happy, sitting beside a lake. The setting is Spanish; the time frame unclear. We could be in the world of The Wild Bunch once more; we could, in fact, be almost anywhere. The surroundings are so idyllic that even fairy-tale connotations are called up: it occurs that this might even be the director's idea of Heaven.

That concept is quickly shattered. First a maid-in-waiting, and then guards, dressed like vaqueros, present themselves, and the young woman is escorted to a great ceremonial hall. People are gathered: family; servants. Behind a great desk, reading a Bible, sits El Hefe. The girl is brought before him and he inquires, pleasantly enough at first, as to who the father of her child is. She refuses to tell him. He insists. With increasing uneasiness, the viewer becomes aware that these two are father and daughter--and that El Hefe will get his information.

He orders the guards to tear open the girl's blouse, and then to bend her arms behind her. She still refuses to give up the name. Cut to an exterior of the massive house. We hear the sound of the girl's arm breaking--and then we

hear her cry out the name: "Alfredo Garcia." Close-up on El Hefe's face, who exclaims: "He was like a son to me."

El Hefe demands that a locket be taken from his daughter's neck--a locket which contains a picture--shown several times, of a grinning Alfredo. El Hefe declares that he will pay a million dollars for the head of Alfredo Garcia--and the film moves irrevocably into the twentieth century: cars of various descriptions roar out of El Hefe's fortress; we see airlines--and then we are in Mexico City airport.

It should be noted here that though El Hefe's location is never specified, it will later be at least identified, in a title, as "Central America." Thus the film does not begin in Mexico, as we might otherwise be led to believe. Alfredo Garcia is an international figure--one who has seduced El Hefe's daughter and earned his loyalty in one country ("He was like a son to me"), and then fled to another. Since we will never directly meet this shadowy figure, the effect is that Alfredo is given a supernatural presence from the beginning--and an ambiguous one. He is impregnator; life-giver--and the daughter of El Hefe is certainly very much in love with him. But he is also despoiler--and corrupter of the concept of family, because he deserts the girl he has impregnated and because he has cheated on the bond between her father and himself. But let us immediately note that this second aspect is largely suffused because of the

cruelty of El Hefe: his torture of his own daughter makes other sins against family pale by comparison.

Though El Hefe is a family man, he is also a Latin Mafioso: his organization is large, and awesome. His first lieutenant is Max, a dapper type who gives the initial commands which set the quest for Alfredo in motion. Max is also there at the Mexico City airport, giving orders to a pair of gunsels named Sappensley and Quill who are a small but vital family unto themselves: they're lovers, a 20th century equivalent of Taggart and Bowen in Cable Hogue. Peckinpah suggests this none too obscurely when we see, a short time later, these two in action as they make inquiries about Alfredo's whereabouts. While they are sitting at a bar, a puta attempts to put her hand on Sappensley's thigh. Without missing a beat, he hits her with his elbow, knocking her to the floor. Sappensley and Quill are insulated; a unit unto themselves. They are being paid to find Alfredo Garcia, and they need information. Beyond that they are self-sufficient--for everything but salary, they depend only upon each other. Max, Sappensley, and Quill: they are efficient professionals who represent the well-oiled machinery of El Hefe's vast organization. There are, however, aspects to this organization which are not so efficient.

When El Hefe's offer goes forth, other elements answer as well--and some of these elements are far from professional. There is another pair of bounty hunters, for example, who

consistently thrown in sharp relief against Sappensley and Quill. They are Mexican--two booze-guzzling flunkies who, amazingly, are rather successful in their search. The implication behind this gallery of vultures is clear: greed does not know cultural boundaries. Every stratum of Mexican society--or, for that matter, of any society--offers the kinds of people who will respond to El Hefe's grisly demand.

And this brings us to our protagonist, who gets just one name: Benny. Co-proprietor of a seedy bar in which he also plays piano, Benny is one of life's losers...at least on the surface. Though the film is just a few minutes along at this point, Peckinpah has already presumed upon our knowledge of his other films twice: El Hefe is played by Emilio Fernandez, the malevolent General Mapache of The Wild Bunch. And Benny is Warren Oates, of Ride the High Country, and Major Dundee--and, most significantly, also of The Wild Bunch, in which he created the character Lyle Gorch, perhaps the most comically endearing of the four who take that walk to get Angel. As we have noted, Peckinpah consistently casts players who are able to bring personas to their parts. Thus, from the beginning, El Hefe's evil is all-encompassing for a significant part of the audience because it manifests, by implication, the evil of Mapache. And Benny, for the same part of that audience, is sympathetic in spite of himself: though he will first be motivated

by greed, he will, from the start, be a beautiful loser--a figure who invites empathy.

Benny is accosted by Sappensley and Quill in his bar, who show him their copy of the photograph of Alfredo Garcia. Benny recognizes these fellows as a bit classy for his establishment, but he tries to put on a good show, talking basketball; shifting to "I Remember April" on the piano instead of "Guantanamera," which he had been pounding out for the tourist trade when they arrived. But when he sees the picture of Alfredo, Peckinpah adds one of those touches which make him among the most careful of filmmakers: Benny obviously recognizes Alfredo when he sees him--though he will deny it--and Peckinpah accompanies his recognition with the sound, from somewhere distant from the bar, of a car crash: we hear the collision and the tinkle of glass. It is a fine bit of foreshadowing: the sense of dread is there in the abstract, and the element of car crash also, as it turns out, makes specific reference to Benny's death at the end of the film.

There's another nice foreshadowing device in this sequence, as well: Sappensley and Quill let Benny know where he can get in touch should some other patron of the bar know anything about Alfredo and then, as they exit, Benny asks Quill for his name. Quill's reply is: "Dobbs. Fred C. Dobbs." This reference, which Quill deadpans, presumes

more on the part of a '70's audience than it might be wise to expect: Fred C. Dobbs in the name of the character which Humphrey Bogart played in John Huston's 1948 classic film, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre. It's not a hard allusion to grasp: Huston's characters were marked by a lust for gold which was all consuming--especially in the case of Dobbs, who dies for his elusive stake in the mountains of Mexico. Thus, we are being told that this film, too, will demonstrate, on one level, the killing nature of greed. It goes without saying that it would be a mistake, in a Peckinpah film, to presume that the meaning of the film can be restricted to just this one level, however.

Benny knows very well who Alfredo Garcia is: he's Benny's rival in his sometime affair with a prostitute named Elita. The fact that Elita is a working girl in no way is meant to diminish her: she's a twentieth century equivalent of Hildy from The Ballad of Cable Hogue, and this film treats her with equal respect. We meet her first as Benny questions her about her recent liaison with Alfredo: she's been with him for three days. "We were saying goodbye," she informs Benny, "It took some time." Elita leaves no doubt that what she and Alfredo have been doing, to borrow Hawthorne's term, had a consecration of its own: Elita is forthright and truthful in a way which indicates that Benny--and we--can believe what she says. She's a very attractive

woman: not young, but very alive--sensuous, but hardly vulgar. Doug McKinney describes her rather well:

She is a woman whom Peckinpah respects and urges us to respect honestly. Her background is barely suggested; when we meet her she appears to be a kind of Mexican geisha-hostess; she may or may not have been a "whore," and the indication is that while she may have been capable of prostitution, she is not now a woman to be dominated against her will. Moreover, she is a romantic, finding simple joy and hope in the honest, companionate love she shares with Bennie--even if Bennie doesn't consciously realize the nature of that relationship yet. She tolerates his pose of macho toughness with her, seeing deeper into him than he does. She is an attractive, mature woman, looking forward to settling down simply with Bennie!<sup>15</sup>

McKinney is naive about Elita's background, but correct about her outlook. To put things even more simply, Elita loves Bennie, and there is no reason to doubt that love. She has loved others--perhaps even with an equal force of commitment. Alfredo Garcia may have been one of those--or, more likely, she may have seen Alfredo for what he was in much the same way that she sees Bennie for what he is, and dealt with him on his terms. The point is that she plans to stay with Bennie, whereas the relationship she had with Alfredo Garcia is defined by "saying goodbye."

Bennie is distrustful of Elita: life has taught him to be distrustful of everything except money. In his single-mindedness on this subject, he recalls Peckinpah's other cynics who have convinced themselves--although they know better or will come to know better--that they trust only



money--Gil Westrum of Ride the High Country comes to mind--as does Cable Hogue, and Doc McCoy of The Getaway. And thus it is ironic that Bennie's quest for money is going to force him to trust Elita: it is she who tells Bennie that Alfredo Garcia has, in fact, been dead for some time, and Bennie will need Elita to lead him to the gravesite. El Hefe's organization has, by this time, offered Bennie \$10,000 for the head of Alfredo Garcia. Max, Sappensley, and Quill have little faith that he will get it: in his interview with them, Bennie is pointedly called a "loser." But, though even we are likely to doubt him at this point, Bennie hotly retorts: "Nobody loses at the time"--and he really does appear almost cocky as he leaves their hotel suite, his \$200 advance in hand, smiling to himself in the corridor in a manner reminiscent of Bogart's Sam Spade in yet another John Huston film: The Maltese Falcon (1941). Both Spade and Bennie, at similar junctures, have taken on the power structure and run good bluffs. They have every right to be a bit smug.

Bennie abandons the piano bar, and he and Elita, armed with a picnic lunch, a machete which Bennie has purchased, Bennie's service pistol, and each other, take to Bennie's rattletrap Impala convertible--and to the road. Their journey away from the city, toward Alfredo's grave in the provinces, is the most idyllic part of the film, wonderfully conceived

by the director, utterly involving. Bennie and Elita really are in love, and, once they are in the open air, they become innocent; fresh and open in their perceptions of life and each other.<sup>16</sup> They reminisce; they speak about the future. Elita even gets Bennie to ask her to marry him--something she has hoped for, it is revealed, a very long time. Though we may have already tacitly agreed with El Hefe's men in judging Bennie a "loser," Elita would not agree with us. Her love for Bennie is clear-eyed but complete anyway, and thus it can truly be said that Bennie, who appears as the least of us, begins with more than any Peckinpah protagonist has ever been allotted at his journey's start. Bennie is loved, unselfishly and fully. He is not one of Peckinpah's disenfranchised like Pike and the Bunch or Cable Hogue or Junior Bonner; he is not involved in a troubled marriage which may or may not work out like David Sumner or Doc McCoy. Bennie is rich--but, even so, he is tragic, for Bennie's tragedy is that he cannot see that he is rich.

Wealth, for Bennie, is money--the kind of money that Alfredo's head can supposedly bring him and Elita. "We're Going to find the Golden Fleece," he tells her at the beginning of their journey--and, later, when Elita tries to convince Bennie of the folly of his quest, Bennie retorts:

I've got a chance! A ticket! I could've died in Mexico City, or T.J.--and never known what it was all about. But now I've got a chance, and I'm takin' it. Now, get in this

car and take me to him...There ain't  
no more chances!

That's the sort of thinking that will do Bennie in. And, in this way, Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia does function quite well about as a preachment against greed. Bennie is the only Peckinpah protagonist who starts with true riches, and he's too blind to recognize them. Bennie's ever-present sunglasses help the allegorical elements of this level of the film: he wears them to hide himself, but ends up blinding himself to life's finest message.<sup>17</sup> But, as might be surmised already, this film is dark--if it is a preachment, it's filled with a darkness worthy of Jonathan Edwards.

Because of the importance of the marriage proposal, Bennie's sin, like El Hefe's, is also a sin against family. And Bennie will pay for it: the two Mexican thugs follow closely behind the lovers, watching and waiting in the hope that they will lead them exactly where they finally do--to the grave of Alfredo Garcia. Peckinpah cuts back and forth between Bennie and Elita and the thugs in ironic counterpoint: though the former two are in love and sympathetic and the latter two are drunk and reprehensible, they are, after all, alike in their purpose because they are pursuing the same destination. In some ways, the thugs can be said to represent Bennie without Elita: men of profane purpose without the redemptive grace of love. And it is therefore

appropriate that, at the gravesite, it is Bennie's darker nature which ambushes him--and which costs him Elita.

Bennie and Elita have come a long way, in more than miles, to get to this lonely gravesite. The night before, stalled on the road with a flat tire, determined to make the best of it, Elita cooks dinner for Bennie and they prepare to "sleep under the stars," as Elita has said. But that is not to be: two bikers arrive, with pistols, to end their hopes for the night that they wanted. While one holds a gun on Bennie, the other, Paco, takes Elita into the countryside to rape her. As Bennie protests, Elita remains in control: "I've been here before, Bennie," she tells him. "And you don't know the way."

Though Paco's intentions are simple enough, Elita frustrates them: he may possess her if it will save Bennie's life, but only on her terms. If, as McKinney suggests, she "is not a woman to be dominated against her will," this sequence offers proof: she will confront Paco on an equal basis. Compare Elita here with Amy in Straw Dogs, under similar circumstances to see how strong Elita really is. This sequence is rich in ambiguity, but it does indicate that Elita is prepared to do what is required of her skillfully and successfully--until Bennie manages to get possession of the other biker's gun, seek out Paco and Elita, and--with the words "Hey!' You're dead!"--shoot Paco. It means

a good deal more to Bennie than it does to Elita: what Paco wanted was, after all, in her line of work. But as Bennie kills he feels a surge of control; of manhood--of macho. And this is sustained when the two of them reach a hotel and are told that the establishment will not allow a woman like Elita to stay there. Bennie pushes behind the counter and demands a room key with such assurance that even Elita echoes: "Best room in the house, please." And their union is preserved through these trials: shortly afterward, as Elita sits forlornly in the purifying water of the shower, Bennie, still dressed, slumps beside her. "I love you" is all he can say--but it is more than enough.

And there they should have stayed--in their shower embrace. At Alfredo's grave they meet some of the Garcia family, including Alfredo's mother. She speaks in Spanish, telling them to go away--but they return by night, Elita by this time resigned, hopeless. As Bennie completes his digging and readies his machete, he is hit from behind, ambushed by the drunken pair of Mexican bounty hunters, and the screen plunges into blackness. This is quite appropriate, because, in the fade-in, we find ourselves very much with Bennie, who has been buried in the grave, left for dead. With him is Elita--who really is dead.

Bennie never really gets, emotionally, beyond this point in the film. Warren Oates plays Bennie's sense of

loss very well, and we are able to feel acutely Bennie's pain as he realizes that he has, indeed, lost the richest part of his life--something that Alfredo Garcia, in a sense, really did bequeath him: Elita. Bennie is broken, but he is also reborn--reborn as a dark angel of death who will know the why of what has happened, who will kill--and kill repeatedly to know it.

Bennie's quest for the why is the focus of the second half of the film. As might be predicted, it is a quest which will lead him to himself: he ends up standing before the desk in El Hefe's study, staring at a man whose sin against the family has put this bloody story into motion. El Hefe, in order to assuage his pride, has substituted an offer of money for love of family: he, too, has what he wants by film's end: a grandson. But as Bennie stands before him, gun at the ready, his sin comes home to him as his own daughter directs Bennie to kill him. Bennie does--and starts to leave with the daughter, and with the head of Alfredo Garcia--but stops to pick up the briefcase El Hefe has proffered forth, filled with a million dollars. This is Bennie's final mistake; perhaps his suicide wish, since he's been spiritually dead for some time. The concept of sealing his fate plays well in light of the self-understanding which Bennie demonstrates in his last two lines: in seizing the head, now contained in Elita's picnic basket, he says: "C'mon, Al, we're going

home"--and his last statement to El Hefe's daughter, as he gives her the locket with Alfredo's picture, is: "Here: take this. You take care of the boy, and I'll take care of the father." With that, Bennie goes to his death--shot down by El Hefe's vaquero-guards.

Along the way, Bennie has killed the Mexican thugs who took the head in the first place (thus claiming the bloody prize); he has killed Sappensley and Quill, and he has killed Max and his lieutenants back at the hotel in Mexico City. His journey is certainly a journey backward in time: the film even begins in April and ends on March 1.<sup>18</sup> But he cannot reclaim Elita and the love he has lost. He cannot reclaim the lost family. This is particularly pointed up in the sequence in which Bennie is caught by the Garcia family, wanting to set the grave-desecration right. Sappensley and Quill arrive at the lonely roadside scene, and these two shoot it out with the Garcias. The family is mowed down; only the patriarch left standing. Sappensley and Quill sustain their casualties, too: Quill is fatally wounded. Before Sappensley knows that Quill has been hit, he demands to know who these people were, to which Bennie replies with appropriate self-loathing: "Just the family." Sappensley is uninterested, staring instead into the burlap sack which contains the head. "Jesus, Bennie," he says, "You sure have a nose for shit." But Sappensley's joviality will not last:

his family has also been destroyed, his union with Quill, and, as he sees this and turns on Bennie in his blind pain, Bennie guns him down. In truth, by film's end, only one family remains even partially intact: that of El Hefe's daughter, for she has her infant son.

Many American artists have turned to cynicism in their later works. The darkness of The Marble Faun is uncharacteristic even beside the rest of Hawthorne's canon.<sup>19</sup> The Confidence Man and Billy Budd display some of Melville's loss of faith, particularly Billy Budd, perhaps, which reflects the perversion of Melville's "buddy" theme in its treatment of Claggart's homosexual desire for Billy.<sup>20</sup> This is a good comparison, for such a treatment must have been hurting to Melville--just as it must have been hurting to Peckinpah to work so cynically with the theme of family. Bennie's big score is made for him--and he learns this only too late. Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia shows us a greed-oriented world that's death to families: a world where even less worth keeping survives than it does in The Wild Bunch, in which at least the mystique of Angel's village abides. Hope resides at the end of Straw Dogs; marriage triumphs in The Getaway. Perhaps only Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, inappropriately close chronology, reflects a similarly despairing vision. The closest Peckinpah comes to relief from this grim vision is another bit of clever casting: the old



patriarch of the Garcia family who is left alive is played by Chano Ureata, who also was the old man of Angel's village in The Wild Bunch, the one who so thoroughly understands our desire to be a child again--and who rides out with Deke Thornton and Old Sykes at the end of that film. Are we being told here that the wisdom of the ages prevails--that there is a spirit of justness that nothing can kill? Suffice it to say that, if this is what we are being told, it is articulated mildly indeed. Ureata has no dialogue in the one sequence in which he does appear, and appears ineffectually.

Sam Peckinpah, stifled by studios and producers who, allegorically, may find their shadows in El Hefe's henchmen, had every right to feel cynical in 1974. His clear manifestations of love, like films named The Ballad of Cable Hogue or Junior Bonner, had been buried in cutting room violence and box office bloodlust--just as Elita is buried. These parallels are too neat, although many have noticed them--but they can be offered as mitigation for such darkness. Or perhaps no mitigation is needed: perhaps, instead, all the votes were in: all the information had been tabulated--and the darkness of Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia did, for the director, stand as a final comment: an appropriate theme for a film that was, at least, all his. If this is true, it must be remembered, as we do sometimes in reading Beckett and other absurdist, or Dreiser and the

naturalists, that the art with which a hopeless statement is made is often the justification for making the statement. And perhaps this is why Bennie's voice rings with such conviction when, while pumping an extra slug into one of the Mexican bounty hunters, he says: "Why? Because it feels so god-damned good."

Perhaps the saddest aspect of Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, in the end, comes in reference to The Wild Bunch in another way, however. After Bennie loses Elita, he gains a poor substitute: Alfredo's head. But in that dusty car, rattling down the backroads of Mexico, Bennie, in his crazed condition, strikes up quite a relationship with that head: a sort of friendship. After he can finally say to Alfredo: "I know it's not your fault," he uses the grisly, fly-swarmed cadaver as confidante; even as friend. Their conversations, while one-sided, seem filled with the communication which death and remorse often bring forth. And Bennie takes care of Alfredo: right down to his final "C'mon, Al. We're goin' home." <sup>21</sup>

Bennie's walk, with picnic basket, into El Hefe's headquarters is the precise walk the Wild Bunch took into Mapache's headquarters--a walk that actor Warren Oates also took--to confront actor Emilio Fernandez. These touches are far from accidental. Are Bennie and Alfredo's severed head all that are left of the Wild Bunch and the fragile code of loyalty

that bunch represented--a code which, however fragile, in the end was good enough? Let us not pursue this: there are some interpretations, after all, that may be too dark to record. Suffice it to say that Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia is brilliant, remorseless, and extremely personal: it is the kind of film that usually comes our way in the form of a novel. This personal a statement is not box office and will not be in a foreseeable future. By 1974, Sam Peckinpah was still making movies which contained things for all of us--but, finally, movies which played most brilliantly--and sadly--on the film of his own memory. Bennie's failure to preserve the amity which came to him so easily--so downright providentially--in this film has truly allowed the corruption of the larger order to triumph. Is this partially self-confession on the director's part? Is it logical to continue the artist's allegory here by assuming that his three future films before calling it quits in 1978 would be compromises of one kind or another with studio corruption? They have been, by his own admission. As stated before, this line of inquiry is the point at which biographical criticism becomes something close to prying. But there is, certainly, no going back from the point at which Alfredo Garcia becomes, as befits an end-of-a-cycle work, the director's fullest and most tortured self-expression. "I did that one the way I wanted it," he said--and there is no reason, on the evidence, to doubt him.

## FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

<sup>1</sup>See Simmons, p.p. 169-88; and Seydor, p.p. 183-226.

<sup>2</sup>As quoted in Seydor, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Simmons, p. 177: art director Ted Haworth's comment: "'It is difficult to discuss Pat Garrett because there were so many problems connected with it,'" or p. 187 for editor Garth Craven's comment: "'It was more than a little heartbreaking.'"

<sup>4</sup>Rudolph Wurlitzer, Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (New York, 1973), p.p. vii-viii.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. vi.

<sup>6</sup>See the Playboy interview, p. 73: Peckinpah, commenting on his participation in the film that would become One-Eyed Jacks, says: "'I had adapted the thing from a novel by Charles Neider called The Authentic Death of Hendry Jones, based on the true story of Billy the Kid. It was the definitive work on the subject, but Marlon (Brando) screwed it up. He's a hell of an actor, but in those days he had to end up as a hero and that's not the point of the story. Billy the Kid was no hero. He was a gunfighter, a real killer.'"

<sup>7</sup>In the television version it is even possible to see a brief sequence with Barry Sullivan as the rancher Chisum, in which it is made clear that Garrett is already very much Chisum's man, due to the fact that the sheriff is financially indebted to the rancher. There is, however, other footage that has never been restored in any version, perhaps most important of which is Peckinpah's framing device: his version begins with the assassination of Garrett in 1908, which Peckinpah suggests was done by Chisum's men. The rest of the film then becomes flashback which ends with another reference to present-day, 1908. See Seydor, p.p. 189-90.

The loss of the framing device for this film is also interesting in that it would have followed a pattern of a significant number of other Peckinpah films: as we have noted, The Ballad of Cable Hogue, on a surreal level, may begin with

death of the protagonist; and The Getaway, Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, The Killer Elite, Cross of Iron, and Convoy all give us protagonists who, at one point or another, return from the dead. Since Peckinpah generally uses that device to indicate the continuing presence of older values in a more modern world, it would be instructive to see the technique work in the opposite way: Garrett, very much a prisoner of twentieth century values, takes a journey into his past in the film--quite literally, if the framing story had been left in--to the nineteenth century. I am indebted to an unpublished paper by James Lumpkin for part of this concept.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Kitses, Horizons West (London, 1969), p.p. 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> The decline of what is perhaps this country's most identifiable genre has, over the past fourteen years, been virtually chartable: titles like Will Penny (1971), The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid (1972), Monte Walsh (1971), The Culpepper Cattle Company (1972), Bad Company (1972), Comes a Horseman (1978), The Long Riders (1981)--and even John Wayne's last film, The Shootist (1977), did not enter the ranks of top grossers of the decade-plus just passed: in fact, they did little business. And part of the failure of Heaven's Gate, Michael Cimino's 1981 flop which cost over \$40 million to make, was blamed on the fact that no western had made money for years.

<sup>10</sup> See Seydor, p.p. 187-88: "...Aubrey and his associates took a closer look at the screenplay to see what might be expendable. Among other scenes, they decided the raft episode could go. While this scene, one of the most hauntingly beautiful in all Peckinpah's work, is not strictly necessary to the plot, it is important...both to story and to theme. Aubrey, however, could see in it only a digression, and he absolutely forbade Peckinpah to film it. As a consequence, it became, according to one crew member, 'the big test of will,' not only between the studio head and the director but also between the studio head and the entire cast and crew, who were prepared to quit en masse if it were eliminated. Although Aubrey remained intractable, Peckinpah, in what must have been a virtuoso display of sheer directorship, managed to get the things shot in a single afternoon as the cast and crew were in transit from one location to another. At the time, of course, few of them believed MGM would allow it into the completed film, but at least they had it on film." See also Seydor, p. 198: Peckinpah was finally able to hold on to the raft episode in any version of the final print by agreeing to trade off the framing story of Garrett's assassination in 1908 for it. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that the

director considered that sequence, with its explicit use of the image of traditional family, to be among the most important in the film.

<sup>11</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 208.

<sup>12</sup>John Simon, Reverse Angle (New York, 1982), p. 164.

<sup>13</sup>See also Michael Sragow, Review of Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, New York (August 12, 1974) as quoted in Simmons, p. 207: Sragow calls the film "'A catastrophe so huge that those who once ranked Peckinpah with Hemingway may now invoke Mickey Spillane'"; or Joseph Gelmis, syndicated reviewer for Newsday, who used the occasion of the release of Alfredo Garcia to intone: "But the problem posed by Sam Peckinpah and his movies to the conscience of all of us is this: Where does education or vicarious catharsis end and pornographic exploitation begin?"

<sup>14</sup>See Simmons, p. 207: "Only in England...did the film find acclaim. There, when the nine critics for Sight and Sound, the journal of the British Film Institute, listed their selections for the ten best films of 1975, Alfredo Garcia was included by four of the nine." This is perhaps especially interesting in view of the fact, also recalled by Simmons on the same page, that Straw Dogs met with a poor reception in that country. Peckinpah's themes may always be easier to take when they are displaced from the home turf--just as, for that matter, Robert Ardrey's may be.

<sup>15</sup>McKinney, p.p. 180-81. McKinney misses (though it is certainly explicit enough) the point that Elita is a working prostitute who distinguishes clearly between her love life and her profession: When she is later nearly refused a room because the desk clerk identifies her as a whore, Elita's demand for the "best room in the house" becomes her way of affirming that Bennie's promise of marriage has allowed her to leave that way of life behind.

<sup>16</sup>This is the point at which Peckinpah allows Elita to create for Bennie her version of Angel's village: Bennie has told Elita that there is no place that he has been that he would like to go back to--but Elita has a different story: she remembers a beautiful Mexican village whose architecture reflects "sixteenth or seventeenth century...I get mixed up on the centuries," she tells Bennie, which sounds like a storybook city of perfect order. Even so, as Elita quickly says, her true concept of home is a state of mind: "The most important thing, Bennie, at least to me, is: we're together."

<sup>17</sup>There are good comparisons here with Angel's "You have no eyes" in reference to the inability of the Gorch brothers to see the beauty in their first sight of Mexico; and with Cable Hogue's "Lady: Nobody's ever seen you before" when he sees the vision that is Hildy by candlelight.

<sup>18</sup>This is, of course, March 1 of the following year--and yet Peckinpah makes a point of specifying this date in a caption as Bennie flies to El Hefe's Central American location. Bennie, of course, is not the first Peckinpah protagonist who tries to recapture time: there is also Steve Judd of Ride the High Country, and, as already discussed in this chapter, Pat Garrett of Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid--and others already noted.

<sup>19</sup>See Seydor, p.p. 251-81, for his discussion of "An American Artist and His Traditions": Although Seydor does not discuss Alfredo Garcia, he does make this comment which helps our comparison: "Hawthorne's obsession with individuals who are themselves obsessed with guilt, vengeance, or any other kind of all-consuming, self-destructive passion is mirrored in many of Peckinpah's characters, who are similarly afflicted, sometimes in the form of...(a kind of) paranoia (which the director gave his grimmest, it might even be said almost Hawthornesque, treatment in...Alfredo Garcia.)"

<sup>20</sup>The strongest point of the Melville comparison is that Melville does, in Billy Budd, quite specifically pervert a relationship that had worked as a positive and vital force in his early books--up to and including Moby-Dick in 1851. And just as surely, in Alfredo Garcia, Peckinpah puts us through a sequence in which a blood family (and a Mexican family at that!) is violently destroyed--and also presents us with Warren Oates, a figure Peckinpah has long cast in his unsocialized bunches, left to take his gunman's walk alone at the film's end.

<sup>21</sup>See The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text, ed., Robert Con Davis, (Amherst, Mass., 1981), p. 180: In this book of essays which apply the Freudian theories of Jacques Lacan on the symbolic father to various British and American writers, Davis notes the traditional function of the father in novels has been that he "must be lost so that, in his absence, his function can be known." The use of this traditional approach may bring a ray of hope to the proceedings in Alfredo Garcia: Bennie's realization of a kinship with Alfredo is his realization that he must perform the function of the absent father: he must take care of Alfredo Garcia's child and the mother of that child in order to atone for the sin of pride which cost him Elita.

## SEVEN: THE OSTERMAN WEEKEND

Sam Peckinpah is working again. His new film, The Osterman Weekend, is scheduled for release in November of 1983, thus ending for him a professional hiatus of five years. During that time he experienced a heart attack, necessitating that he wear a pacemaker--but this setback seems to have cooled his need to direct not at all. During these five years, by his own account, he has "kept writing," happily worked second unit for his old friend Don Siegel on the 1982 film Jinxed--and kept alive a long-time dream to film James Gould Cozzens' Castaway, which he bought on terms over a long period of time, beginning when he was a stagehand at KLAC-TV in Los Angeles and continuing up to his first fame.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, The Osterman Weekend, taken from a Robert Ludlum thriller, is job-work--the director's shot at working steadily again. In its early review, Variety said: "It's no secret that Peckinpah took the reins on 'Osterman' as the first step in a comeback, to prove he could still do the job, and aficionados can hope that the film serves its purpose in that regard."<sup>2</sup> And Michael Sragow, who spent



time on the Osterman set, observed: "Though Peckinpah helped revise Alan Sharp's script, he was hired primarily to shoot what Sharp had written. He was also denied final cut."<sup>3</sup>

At 57, Peckinpah reasonably has more than a few working years left, and future films of his may well become as personal as the ones we have considered in this study. The Osterman Weekend, although it does comment upon familiar Peckinpah themes and even makes a strong statement on the subject of family, is not a film of the stature of any of those we have considered here--not even Junior Bonner. There's no mistaking the look of it: dialogue director Walter Kelley says that "It looks rich and it looks weird"<sup>4</sup>--and, since Kelley is an old Peckinpah friend, this can probably be taken to mean that it looks like classic Peckinpah: much-imitated, but never duplicated. Even so, if the difference between 1978's Convoy and Osterman was to be the difference between Major Dundee and The Wild Bunch, in between which a similar five-year period elapsed, history has not repeated itself.

The Ludlum novel certainly provides the pulp source that Peckinpah transcended--and transformed--so well in The Getaway. The story is about four affluent couples in suburban New Jersey who get caught up in espionage over one deadly weekend, and Peckinpah's film keeps that premise, moving the locale to Malibu. The protagonist is a television news commentator, John Tanner (Rutger Hauer), who is

approached by Maxwell Danforth, the head of the CIA (Burt Lancaster) and his top agent, Lawrence Fasset (John Hurt) in the hope of getting Tanner to spy upon three couples who are coming to spend their annual weekend with Tanner and his wife and son. The other couples, Tanner is told, are agents of a Soviet spy ring named Omega. Tanner agrees to do so, partly because this pair is willing to blackmail him and partly because he wants Danforth on his television program.

Tanner's home is bugged with electronic surveillance equipment, Fasset presiding over all with obsessive cheeriness. Tanner's wife, Ali (Meg Foster), and his son, Steve (Christopher Starr), are predictably rattled by all these goings-on, and even more irritated when they are told that they are not to know what's transpiring, get some ambivalent feelings about Tanner which they keep until the film's end--and with good reasons. Tanner doesn't emerge as much of a hero as he fences with his guests, or takes orders from Fasset, who is more than a felt presence as his face literally fills television sets from time to time to give Tanner new orders after his guests and family have left the room. Tanner is a puppet, and he's manipulated throughout the film.

This sense of manipulation becomes especially clear about two-thirds of the way into the film: the other three couples, as it turns out, though guilty of some mild cheating on their taxes, are agents of nothing. The entire

scheme has been concocted by Fassett in order to get Danforth, who was responsible for the murder of Fassett's wife some time before. The last part of the film is taken up with the attempt to defend the Tanner house from an all-out attack by Fassett and his men (very reminiscent of the Straw Dogs finale)--and, at the end, an attempt to expose Danforth on live television.

The foregoing plot summary should be enough to demonstrate that the bare vehicle here is a pretty creaky enterprise. Ludlum novels turn on cross-and-double-cross: they're games with the Ludlum audience, which is a big one. But it's difficult to properly pace a film whose story depends upon revelation after revelation: anyone who has suffered through a particularly stilted denouement of a drawing-room detective film has experienced something like this before. Thus there is, unfortunately, little to be gotten from the unraveling of Osterman. The rewards are in the flourishes.

In regard to Peckinpah's abiding theme of family, there's much to be said. It is interesting that, during Peckinpah's absence from the screen, even more attention has been given to this subject by the popular arts than, perhaps, was during his period of greatest popularity. In fact, one need not even cite only the popular culture level--although, with the excessive success of Kramer Versus Kramer (1979) and Ordinary People (1980), it would be easy enough to find proof

there. Interest in the subject of family in its literary ramifications is at an all-time high in scholarly periodicals. One such recently called attention to the large number of scholars currently "concerned with the broad topic of the family as an informing principle and as a central metaphor in literature,"<sup>5</sup> and went ahead to devote the entire issue outlining various Freudian, Marxist, and mythic approaches to the subject. Such criticism might well be overly esoteric for the intents of a film director like Sam Peckinpah, but, as we have already seen at various stages in this study, its elements can be constructively applied. It has, for example, been quite easy to use Peckinpah biography to illuminate these films that we have considered, and the myth criticism of Northrop Frye has come in handy several times as well. The retreat from maternal figure and the move toward "territory," toward the childish experience of male bonding, which Leslie Fiedler describes has also been informative--in a contradictory way. The one Peckinpah film we have considered with employs this myth is The Wild Bunch, and the pitiful camaraderie of that group comes in for as much criticism in the film as it does praise, even though the director ultimately dignifies that surrogate family for possessing a loyalty that is preferable to no loyalty at all. But, from The Ballad of Cable Hogue forward, Peckinpah's films are concerned, as we also have seen, with man-woman bonding,

with marriage, and with traditional family. It is probably significant as well that his three films since Alfredo Garcia, films done with a bare minimum of directorial freedom, also entertain these themes in a prominent way: the efforts of CIA agent Mike Locken, in The Killer Elite to save a Chinese political activist and his family from assassination serve to point up to Locken the loneliness of his own life as a hired gun-isolate; Sgt. Steiner, in Cross of Iron, goes against the German command in World War II in order to try to save his family of squad-members, whose lives have been sacrificed in a battlefield ploy; and the family of male and female truckers in Convoy survives only in its willingness to stick together.

Thus the director is able to inject past themes even when he is working as the hired help, which was certainly the case with The Osterman Weekend. Here he is able to develop the theme of family by working with characterization rather than plot. Fassett has gone quite mad as the result of the murder of his wife, and this, of course, is what sets up the story. By contrast, John Tanner is happily married: indeed, his marital state is his saving grace. Described early in the film as a "liberal-cause, civil rights bigot," he is smug, overly confident of his power to use television, and very much a prisoner of his own technology. But his union with wife and son shows him to be luckier than Fassett--and far preferable to the other members of the group

that will spend the weekend together. Dick Tremayne (Dennis Hopper) is a successful-but-harried plastic surgeon, and his wife, Ginnie (Helen Shaver), a cocaine-snorting albatross. Lawyer Joe Cardone (Chris Sarandon) and his wife, Betty (Cassie Yates), have become upwardly mobile too fast and are thus money-obsessed: their relationship, too, is basically ugly. Only Bernie Osterman (Craig T. Nelson), for whom the annual weekend is named, seems to have much personal strength, but Bernie is nonetheless unmarried television writer who, despite his solid demeanor, has more than a little envy of Tanner's family situation.

As the weekend progresses and it becomes clear that these couples--and Bernie--are going to be set against each other, it also becomes clear that only the Tanners have the unity within themselves to survive. The fact that their unity becomes rich enough to include Bernie accounts for his survival, as well. In fact, when Fassett puts the house under this film's climactic siege, it is Ali's prowess with bow-and-arrow which saves both Tanner and Bernie: she is able to shoot and kill two of Fassett's men who have forced Tanner and Bernie into Tanner's swimming pool and then set fire to its surface.

This is material which sounds as if it plays on the B-movie level and, like much of The Getaway, it does. But Peckinpah, quite typically, manages to give sequences like the shoot-out at the swimming pool more dignity than they

deserve: he has established the fact that the Tanners actually care about each other. We believe it, and thus we at least make the effort to suspend disbelief during the obligatory violent action. Though it seems preposterous that Ali, a California housewife, could coolly draw down on professional killers, Peckinpah has taken some pains to show us that Ali is an unusual woman. For example, while everyone else we see is debilitatingly affected by technology and specifically television, Ali isn't: she's been able to avoid it. When we see Tanner's first arrival at home, he is flush with a new television conquest: he's crucified a Pentagon figure on the air, 60 Minutes-fashion. But neither Ali nor the Tanners' son Steve has seen this triumph as it occurred. When we meet them, they're just coming down from camping overnight in the hills around the Tanner house. Ali, especially as embodied in the cool presence and self-sufficient demeanor of the excellent actress Meg Foster, is the anchor of the film, and certainly the strongest link in the Tanner marriage. She has a disdain for technology and all things twentieth century; she has clear loyalties and an overriding sense of family. And by the time we get to the sequence in which she kills quickly and expertly, we are nearly willing to believe that, in the cause of family, she would.

But it is the technology that Ali so despises which serves as the cause for Peckinpah's other area of personal comment in The Osterman Weekend. In some ways, the film

almost plays as anachronism (hardly unusual in Peckinpah!), for, if one imagined the most paranoid rant that feature films could ever have made about the dangers of television long ago before the days of Home Box Office and other hand-in-hand conglomerates, The Osterman Weekend would have to come close. The argument here is that soon we will be--if we aren't already--a nation of watchers and watched. that Big Brother is here, and his name is network television. Using the very techniques of the medium (the film opens with the murder of Fassett's wife being rerun on videotape for Maxwell Danforth), Peckinpah builds an argument about the enslaving nature of television, and then clinches it with a face-forward sermon delivered by John Tanner, who by this time has learned much about the treachery of his own profession. Tanner tells his audience of television watchers: "Just turn your sets off. It's easy. Just turn them off."

Peckinpah keeps his espionage motif by consistently linking (sometimes rather illogically) commercialism television and spying, but the aforementioned sermon of the film is directed toward the casual television-watcher who is in danger of succumbing to the drug-nature of the medium.

It's not a new soapbox for the director: in 1972, he warned:

This country has no attention span. We're television oriented now. We'd better all wake up to the fact that Big Brother is here. And now, with Cable TV and video cassetts coming in, no one will ever have to get up



off his ass, even to go to the corner for a movie. It's awful. One of the great things about going to a movie or the theater is the act itself--the getting out, the buying of the tickets, the sharing of the experience with a lot of other people. Eighty percent of the people who watch television watch it in groups of three or less, and one of those three is half stoned. Most people come home at night after work, have a couple of knocks before dinner and settle down in their living-death rooms. The way our society is evolving...has been very carefully thought out. It's not accidental. We're all being programed, and I bitterly resent it.

As usual, the director's paranoia is tinged with a touching naivete when he rolls out this call-to-action in The Osterman Weekend: Does Peckinpah not realize that Twentieth Century Fox, which released the film, is so deeply involved in sales to television that it depends on hit series like M.A.S.H. to sustain it? Doesn't he realize that what he is warning against has already come to pass, and there is no potential audience left to hear his message?

Of course he does--and he's even willing to be quite cynical about it. When Rocky Mountain Magazine interviewed him in 1982 at his Montan ranch retreat, he commented that in the wake of his heart attack, he'd personally been watching a lot of television" "I can watch it for a month straight. ..The Price is Right can really get me going."<sup>7</sup> But Sam Peckinpah is, of course, his own best protagonist, and that, for him, makes the sermon always worth giving. About those personal themes like family, the danger of technology, and

the loss of individuality in the twentieth century, he's willing to play his string out to the end--and if The Osterman Weekend plays as a philosophical last stand, it's that very urgency that makes it likeable in spite of its creaky machinery. Peckinpah's new film is a Sam Peckinpah film--even though that once-familiar legend before the title is now, in the face of his current demoted status, missing. The personal stamp is there.

It's there in the touches, too. Osterman has a slow opening which, for a viewer who knows Peckinpah, is inevitably going to have the effect of causing wonder about when: When is that virtuoso film editing; the blur of flash-cuts and intermittent slow-motion, going to show up? It does--and the tip-off is wonderfully handled. In a film which is quite noticeably without members of the Peckinpah "family" of actors, who should turn up, driving a beaten pick-up, as Tanner tries to take his wife and son to the airport to get them away from the house of the weekend, but John Bryson, the former Life photographer who has been following Peckinpah around since The Getaway. Bryson's appearance in this small bit (he asks Tanner for directions in the airport parking lot) works as a signature: the next moment, in trite-but-true terms, the screen explodes as Fassett's men try to kidnap Ali and Steve. Tanner commandeers Bryson's pickup to give chase to his own stolen car, and the mayhem in the parking lot and beyond is captured in that now familiar rhythm and

flow by that much imitated technique which so many other people tried during the years between Convoy and Osterman, but which nobody ever got quite right. Perhaps the difference comes from something Peckinpah once told Walter Hill: "Action, if it's to work, must be rooted ruthlessly in character."<sup>8</sup> By the time Peckinpah pulls his technical fireworks in Osterman, he's taken the trouble to solidly establish the Tanners as people.

There's a fine, funny sequence in which Fassett, trapped as an image on his own surveillance television because Tanner can't turn it off, is forced to ad-lib a performance as a TV weatherman so that Tanner's guests won't notice him. And there is also the clever sequence in which, later at night, Tanner himself savors the power of the bugging equipment which has been put in his house, flipping his channels from guest room to guest room, taking in the private lives of the others, before he finally catches himself, realizing that he is in danger of becoming Fassett, the watcher instead of the watched. The swimming pool sequence, too, though, as noted, it strains credulity, is rivetingly edited and paced.

In sum, The Osterman Weekend is a proficient film with a far more personal touch than most recent American cinema. It's a movie worth "the getting out, the buying of the tickets, the sharing of the experience with a lot of other people"-

-the very thing that originally made feature films "hot" rather than "cool," like television. The best broadside Osterman launches at its target of television as its own technique, one which demands involvement, demands attention--even when that which is going on isn't saying that much. It is doubtful whether the film will do the box office necessary to restore Peckinpah to the creative freedom he once had: Osterman, even in its excesses, is a film directed at adults, full of political references; scripted in a literate manner--and hit films today are still directed at very young audiences. But a reasonable advertising campaign might give the film initial business, and those that do see it will have an experience which is becoming increasingly rare these days: they'll know they've seen a movie that just doesn't look or feel like any other current product. As Walter Kelley said, "It looks rich, and it looks weird." On its comparative level, that's probably a strong indication that Osterman will at least get some reviewers' controversies going and, at last accounts, such controversies could be at least a little good for business. The film may, after all attract some notice.

When one comes to the end of a long study, it is perhaps inevitable to stop and ask whether the journey has been

worth it. On reflection, I would continue to argue that, if we are going to accept the literature of cinema, we must rank, to date, Sam Peckinpah as a major author, significant for his use of the form and significant as an American artist. The Special Effects coordinator of The Wild Bunch, Bud Hulburd, said of the bridge-blowing sequence in that film: "I've just had the opportunity to hang a Rembrandt! It will probably never happen to me again."<sup>9</sup> If truth were known, many other individuals associated with Peckinpah pictures (surely cinematographers Ballard and Coquillon and not a few actors and actresses) might be inclined to say the same thing about their contributions to these films. Certainly, in that fact there exists a sense of the positive aspects of democracy about the art of filmmaking--and, of course, about working with Sam Peckinpah.

That sense of complicity extends to the audience, too. I decided to write about Sam Peckinpah because, as I surveyed those critical years of filmmaking in America between 1967 and 1974, those years in which a very personal brand of film artistry was possible, it seemed to me that Sam Peckinpah's name was connected with the hanging of more Rembrandts than anyone else's. And now, in my research, I find myself joined in complicity with many others who have been affected by the same sequences in Peckinpah films enough to write about them--and by extension, the many who were similarly moved without ever saying so.

It is significant to this study that most of those

sequences dealt with the concept of family--family perceived in many definitions. I have tried to offer information from a biographical, a mythic, and even occasionally an historical standpoint about why this image abides for Peckinpah and what it might tell us about ourselves, but I must now also indicate, without diminishing his relevance in the least, that his ultimate importance to later twentieth-century filmmaking may lie in his proven abilities as icon-maker. The icons of film are often defined to be those properties of a movie which indicate its genre: Jim Kitses has instructively pointed to icons as various as the wagon train or the ritual of barbering and bathing as indicative of the western film.<sup>10</sup> But Sam Peckinpah's icons transcend genre: they are icons of family, and they apply widely. Certainly, in future, when the concerns of American film at this time are investigated, researchers will find themselves inundated with images of family--families like the Barrow gang posing beside a Model-T in Bonnie and Clyde, or families like the Corleones, gathered for a wedding in The Godfather, Part One.

And they will find Hildy and Cable, celebrating their "Butterfly Mornings" in The Ballad of Cable Hogue; David and Amy, in mortal combat with yet another family in Straw Dogs; Ace and Junior Bonner, walking from the railroad station arm in arm in Junior Bonner--or Ace and Ellie,

looking at each other in sweet regret; Doc and Carol, negotiating a roadblock in The Getaway while "Just An Old-Fashioned Love Song" plays on the car radio; Pat Garrett and his wife, paced off across a kitchen in Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, as deadly enemies as any who ever went against each other in a gunfight; Bennie and Elita picnicking--or Bennie alone, telling the young mother of Alfredo Garcia's son: "You take care of the boy...and I'll take care of the father." And, surely, there will be Pike and Dutch and the Gorch brothers and Angel, leaving the village that was the only home that they, however, briefly, would ever know--save with each other..

These striking, unforgettable compositions from one of our most visual storytellers are images of family, in many guises. Having entered our filmic past, they will continue to serve as examples of what we were at this point in time. Because the director is concerned with human beings and because he has a vision filled with equal parts of compassion, loss, and understanding, these compositions speak well for us. There is, in truth, every reason to feel, on par, proud of what we were at this time when judged by the family compositions of Sam Peckinpah, and proud to count these compositions among our icons, our sacred pictures.

#### FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER SEVEN

<sup>1</sup>As quoted in Michael Sragow, "Sam Peckinpah Rides Again," The Movies, Vol. 1, No. 4 (October, 1983), p. 35. Hereafter cited as "Sragow."

<sup>2</sup>"The Osterman Weekend review, Variety, Vol. 312, No. 10 (Oct. 5, 1973), p. 20. Variety calls Osterman a "good-looking, well-made Peckinpah 'comeback' film" with "Okay chances," but goes ahead to scramble two cast names and, more damagingly, misses a key point: the review comments: "As for the women, each has her moments, but it may be noted by the director's longtime feminist adversaries that nary an opportunity is lost for them to disrobe and act vulgar." In addition to being flatly wrong, this observation buries the clear point that, in Osterman as well as in most other Peckinpah films, it is a central female figure who supplies strength and the road to self-knowledge for a far more nebulous male figure. Reviews like this one are what helped shoot down Peckinpah's chances to direct a preferred project, the film version of Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays, even though Didion had personally selected him.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Con Davis, "Critical Introduction: The Family in Literature," Arizona Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 1980), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Playboy interview, p. 192.

<sup>7</sup>E. Jean Carroll, "Last of the Desperadoes: Dueling with Sam Peckinpah," Rocky Mountain Magazine, Vol. 4, No. 2 (March, 1982), p. 42.

<sup>8</sup>As quoted in Sragow, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup>As quoted in Simmons, p. 100.

<sup>10</sup>Kitses, p. 25.



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