

# CINEMA

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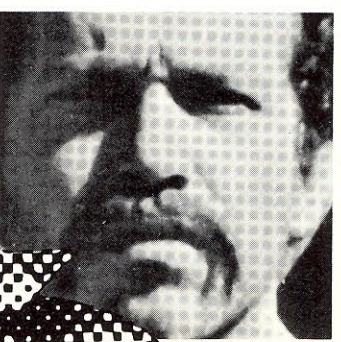
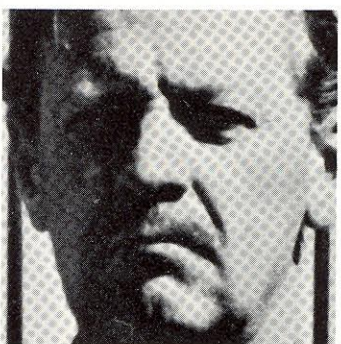
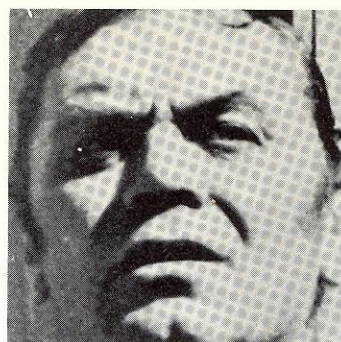
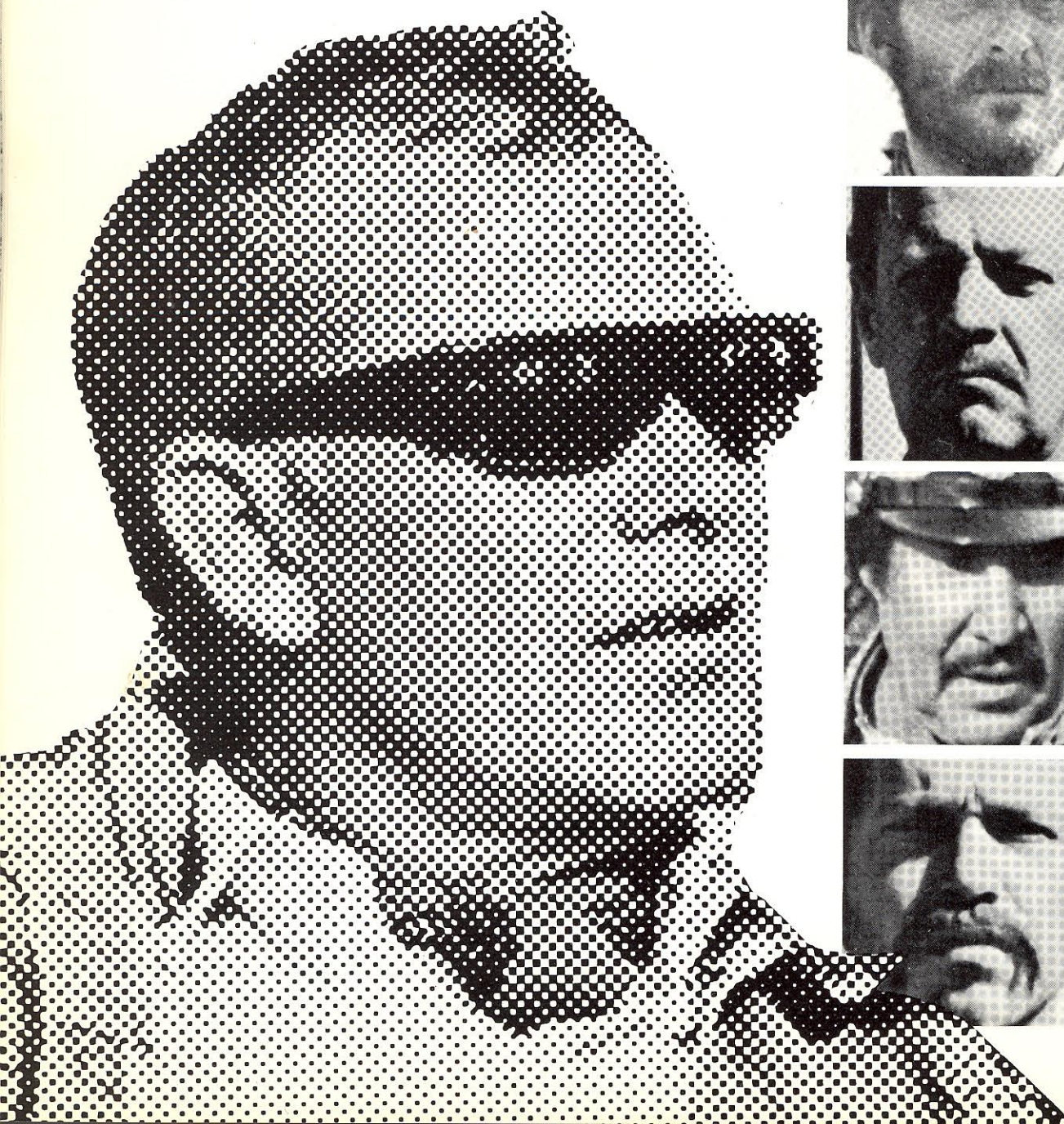
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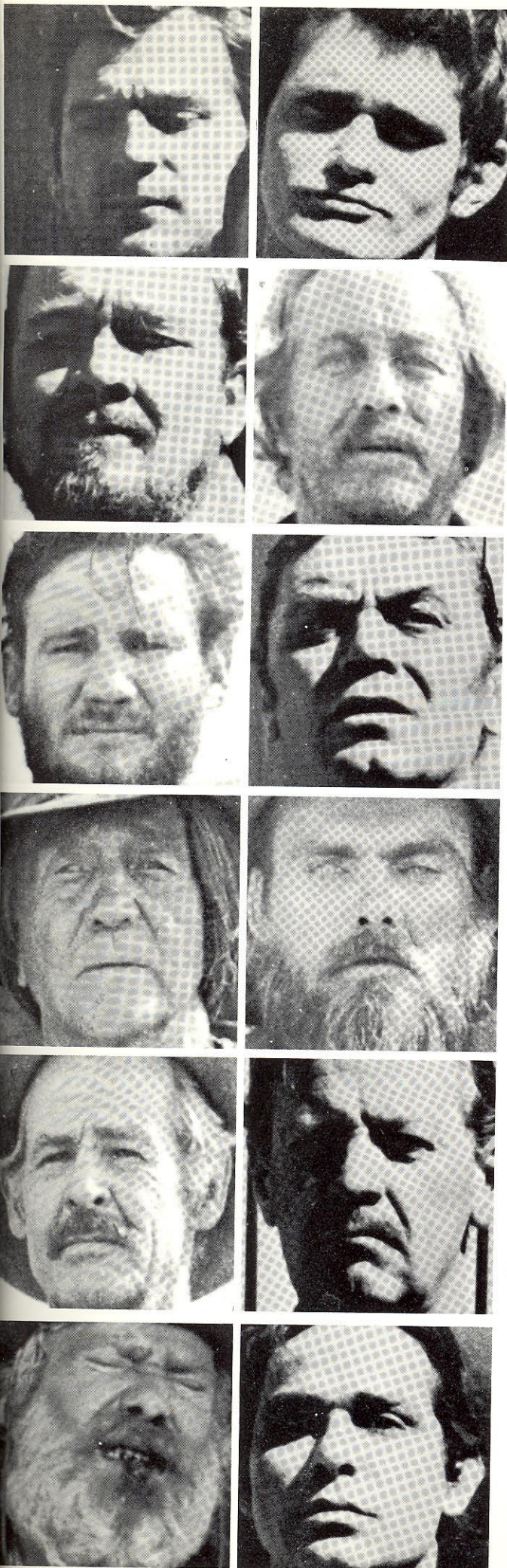


# Sam Peckinpah going to Mexico

by Paul Schrader







"*The Wild Bunch* is simply," says director Sam Peckinpah, "what happens when killers go to Mexico." And in the beleaguered career of Sam Peckinpah Mexico has become increasingly the place to go. It is a land perhaps more savage, simple, or desolate, but definitely more expressive. Sam Peckinpah's Mexico is a spiritual country similar to Ernest Hemingway's Spain, John London's Alaska, and Robert Louis Stevenson's South Seas. It is a place where you go "to get yourself straightened out."

*The Wild Bunch* is Peckinpah's first unhampered directorial effort since *Ride the High Country* in 1962. The intervening seven years had brought personal bickerings, thwarted projects, blacklisting—and belated critical acclaim. Critics called *Ride the High Country* an "American classic," and Peckinpah wrangled for TV writing assignments. When Peckinpah finally regained his voice he found it had changed. The violence had lost its code, becoming instead something deeper and more deadly. The new violence responded to the years fresh in Peckinpah's memory, the new mood of the country, but, more importantly, to a feature of his personality which had previously worn more polite guises.

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After working for director Don Siegel and on "The Westerner" TV series, Peckinpah's first film was a small-budget Western, *Deadly Companions* (later called *Trigger Happy*), which he now describes as "unmanageable" and a "failure." But it did catch the attention of Richard Lyon who brought Peckinpah to MGM and produced *High Country* that same year. A year later, in the Winter 1963 issue of *Film Quarterly*, editor Ernest Callenbach wrote about *High Country*: "When it appeared, no one took it terribly seriously. But as time wore on, its unobtrusive virtues began to seem more appealing, and by now it is hard to see what American picture of 1962 could be rated above it." But in 1962 MGM, like the daily reviewers, was unprepared for this leisurely moral fable; *High Country* filled out the second half of double bills in neighborhood theaters and drive-ins.

*Ride the High Country* was painfully an old man's picture, all the more painful because its director was only 37 years old. Two old gunfighters, Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott, are reduced to guarding a \$20,000 gold shipment from a small mining town. In an extension of their earlier roles McCrea extols the virtues of the classic Western code of honor and Scott tempts him to run off with the gold they both admit they well deserve for their selfless past of gunfights and wound-mending. After a scuffle Scott becomes reconciled to McCrea's code, not because the code is particularly appropriate, but simply because they are old Westerners. Together they stand off three coarse, half-crazed brothers. In the fusillade McCrea is killed and dies a hero's death saying, "I want to go it alone," as his bullet-ridden corpse sinks to the bottom of the frame. *Ride the High Country* had it both ways: it presented old Westerners caught up in their own outdated myth, and also justified their existence in terms of that myth. British critic Richard Whitehall wrote that *High Country* "is not only a celebration of the myth, it is also a requiem." Sam Peckinpah's film more acutely captured the Western's old age pangs than did two films of the same period by old Westerners about old Westerners, John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo*. Like McCrea and Scott, Ford and Hawks could close their careers with honor and dignity; Peckinpah had to look beyond the myth and situate it in time. In retrospect the Sam Peckinpah of *High Country* seems to be playing the game of Western directors like Ford, Hawks, George Sherman, Delmer Daves, and Budd Boetticher. In many ways he was playing the game better, but it still wasn't Peckinpah's game. *Ride the High Country* was a prologue, not an epilogue.

*Ride the High Country* and Peckinpah's

TV programs demonstrate certain values which, prior to *The Wild Bunch*, have invariably been associated with the director. In 1963 he told *Film Quarterly*, "My work has been concerned with outsiders, losers, loners, misfits, rounders—individuals looking for something besides security." These heroes, often old in body as well as mind, fall back on certain virtues: Biblical stoicism, practicality, primitivism, and honor. When a Peckinpah character makes the effort to verbalize his desires, which is rare, they are often banal. In Peckinpah's Dick Powell Theater episode "The Losers" (1963) Lee Marvin tells Keenan Wynn, "Peace of mind and an understanding heart. That's all we need." This is not obvious satire, but pure Peckinpah hokum; the insidious parody comes in when his characters, in rare moments, can actually come near to obtaining such a goal.

The crucial line in *Ride the High Country*, a line by which Peckinpah has often been characterized, was a simple profession by Joel McCrea, "I want to enter my own house justified." The line originally came from Peckinpah's father, a Superior Court Judge of Fresno County, California, and before that it came from the Gospel of Saint Luke, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Some of Peckinpah's most vivid memories of his Madera County, California, childhood were his family's dinner table discussions about justice, law, and order. "I always felt like an outsider," he says. It was in the strong Biblical sense of the Publican that Peckinpah sought to justify his characters—and himself—and it has been his desire to justify himself in his own way that has informed his early work. In *High Country* McCrea, Scott, and a fanatically religious farmer swap Biblical texts, each trying to make his point. McCrea loses the battle of the text, but wins justification in the battle of honor. The farmer deprives his daughter of a full life; McCrea returns it to her by sacrificing himself meaningfully. Both the farmer and the gunslinger died, but only one went to his home justified. Peckinpah has no qualms about adding the second half of the Biblical injunction regarding justification, "Whom he justified, them he also glorified." McCrea's glorification was explicit, unobtrusive, and shattering.

Honesty and purity of intent (and thereby justification) no longer come naturally to the Westerner (as they did to the Virginian); they must be fought for and defended. Peckinpah's characters are ruthlessly cynical about ways to protect the Westerner's code against the corrosive influence of "civilization." The code is not a game, but must be defended in every way possible, even unsportingly. In "Jeff," Peckinpah's favorite episode of "The Westerner" series, a bare-knuckled boxer-pimp complains that the Peckinpah hero, David Blasingame (Brian Keith), isn't being a good sportsman. "You're a bad loser, Mr. Blasingame," the heavy says. "I sure am," replies Blasingame. "This isn't a game."

As in all Westerns, the gun is immediately behind the code. Sooner or later it comes down to killing. Like the code, the gun is not a plaything. In another "Westerner" episode, "Hand on the Gun," Blasingame tells a cocky Easterner, "A gun ain't to play with. It's to kill people. And you don't touch it unless you plan to shoot, and you don't shoot unless you plan to kill." Implied in that logical progression were the tenets that you don't kill unless you have to, or you don't kill without a purpose. In his early work Peckinpah clung tenaciously to the Western code. *Ride the High Country* was great as a "Western"—at heart it functioned the way Westerns were supposed to function. But there was also a strong sense of expectation. Sam Peckinpah was young and strong; the code was old and weak. Something had to give.

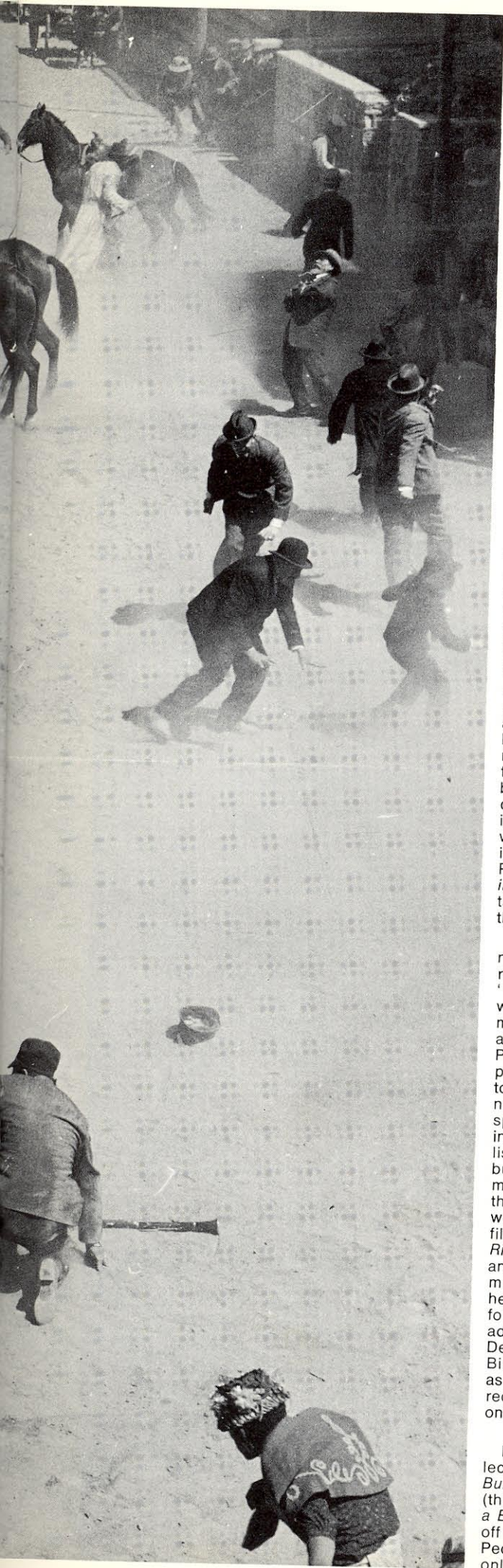
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But nothing had a chance to give. After *High Country* came Sam Peckinpah's seven









lean years. Peckinpah underwent a series of reputation-damaging producer clashes. And as Orson Welles learned so well, once a film-maker's reputation is damaged in Hollywood nothing short of a miracle can retrieve it. No longer is the bum script, the meddling producer, the restrictive budget to blame, but the fault always falls on "that" director, the kiss of death.

*Major Dundee* was Charlton Heston's idea. He had seen *High Country*, loved it, and proposed Harry Julian Fink's script to Peckinpah. *Major Dundee* was Peckinpah's first big budget film (costing \$2½ million compared with \$813,000 for *High Country*). Producer Jerry Bresler (*The Vikings*, *Diamond Head*, *Love Has Many Faces*) was described by a member of the cast as "wall-to-wall worry." In a power play with the studio, Columbia, Heston and Peckinpah won the right to shoot the entire film on location in Mexico, and also, supposedly, final cut privileges. But after the film was shot Heston and Peckinpah's influence began to wane. Peckinpah's final cut ran three hours. Columbia wanted it shortened, and Peckinpah cut it to 2 hours and 40 minutes, suggesting that ten minutes should go back in. But Bresler got nervous, Peckinpah assumes, and cut the film to under two hours. Peckinpah asked that his name be left off the credits, contending that the film was neither the long powerful film he intended, nor the short action film it could have been. Peckinpah still regards his 2 hour 40 minute version as an excellent film, but there are few to verify his opinion. Against contractual obligations neither of Peckinpah's cuts was ever previewed. Heston was one of the few who saw it, and liked it so much that he offered to turn back his salary if the picture were left untouched. Peckinpah also offered to defer most of his salary, but Columbia won the day and *Major Dundee* premiered as a double-bill feature in multiple situations. The anonymous *Newsweek* reviewer knew where to set the blame for the *Dundee* fiasco. His review began, "Think of Yosemite Falls, or suicides from the top of the Empire State Building, or the streaking of meteorites downward toward the earth, and you get some idea of the decline in the career of Sam Peckinpah." Like Welles after the *Journey into Fear* debacle, Peckinpah saw his reputation plummet being able to do a thing about it.

Another Hollywood producer played the next part in the decline of Peckinpah's career. He accused Peckinpah of being a "perfectionist," adding that Peckinpah wanted to make a dirty movie (sex is a remarkably minor factor in Peckinpah's films, and whatever there is is far from titillating). Peckinpah found himself on the street. A projected film for MGM and another for Heston failed to materialize. "I got angry and named names," Peckinpah says. "Then I spent three and a half years without shooting a camera. That's what you call black-listing," Peckinpah says. "I made a living, but for a director there can be nothing but making a film. It was a slow death." During those three and a half years he wrote a western called *The Glory Guys*, which was filmed by Arnold Laven in 1965, and *Villa Rides*, which was rewritten by Robert Towne and directed by Buzz Kulik. Peckinpah's only minor triumph during this period came when he filmed Katherine Ann Porter's *Noon Wine* for ABC's "Stage 67" program. Peckinpah's adaptation starred Jason Robards, Olivia DeHavilland, Per Oscarsson, and Theodore Bikel, and won the praise of critics as well as Miss Porter. That year the Screen Director's Guild ironically selected Peckinpah one of the ten best television directors.

In late 1967 producer Phil Feldman selected Sam Peckinpah to direct *The Wild Bunch*, Feldman's second producing effort (the first was Francis Ford Coppola's *You're a Big Boy Now*). "It was nice to get picked off the street and given a \$5 million picture," Peckinpah reflects. "This picture came about only because of two wonderful reasons: Phil

Feldman and Ken Hyman." Although Peckinpah didn't have final cut rights, *The Wild Bunch* was shot and edited the way he desired. "A good picture is usually 70% of your intentions. *Ride the High Country* was 80% for me. I'd say *The Wild Bunch* was about 96%. I'm very satisfied."

Peckinpah's original cut of *The Wild Bunch* ran over three hours. Warner Bros. was understandably queasy about many of the graphic scenes of killing. Two disastrous previews (one in Kansas City and the other in Hollywood) had indicated some degree of audience revulsion. "I hope you drown in a pool of Max Factor Technicolor blood," one UCLA graduate film student told Peckinpah. Warner Bros. stuck with Peckinpah, however, letting him cut the film down to its present 2 hours and 23 minutes. "There was never danger of an 'X' rating for violence," Peckinpah says. "We had an 'R' right from the beginning. I actually cut out more than Warners requested. There were certain things Warners wanted cut, but went farther. I had to make it play better." To make the film play better Peckinpah excised much of the explicit violence in the initial fight scene, particularly the disembowelings, letting the violence come at the audience more gradually. Included in the 4% Peckinpah regretted losing was a flashback of William Holden (in addition to the present two flashbacks of Robert Ryan and Holden). The flashback, which is curiously included in the international print, revealed how Holden had received a leg wound.

\*On July 18 Warner Bros. cut five minutes from the domestic print of *The Wild Bunch*. The original idea was, Peckinpah says, to cut out the flashbacks in two theaters. Instead three scenes were excised in 400 theaters. The flashback of Ryan's capture and Holden's escape in a brothel was cut out, as was the flashback to the death of Syke's nephew Crazy Lee (Bo Hopkins, who says "I'll hold 'em here till Hell freezes over or you say different, Mr. Pike"). Particularly damaging was the deletion of the entire Las Trancas battle scene, mentioned later in this article. The battle sequence revealed the other side of Mapache's character, the *machismo* in battle and defeat. Without the sequence, Mapache is only comic relief, a drunken sot. The reason for the July 18 cut, the New York Times News Service reported, was to shorten the picture, thereby allowing the distributors more screening times per day. One theater, however, the Pacific Pix in Hollywood, used the extra time to insert a "Tom and Jerry" cartoon. Peckinpah is no longer "very satisfied." — P.S.

At one point in the pre-release intrigue of *The Wild Bunch* Peckinpah feared that it would receive the inadequate distribution of his earlier films. "It was a funny thing," he says. "The European distributor saw it and said, 'Roadshow.' The domestic distributor saw it and said, 'Double-bill.'" This time Peckinpah won the battle and *The Wild Bunch* came to be regarded as Warner Bros.' "picture of the summer" and received a massive publicity campaign.

*The Wild Bunch* is again about old Westerners and killing. Like McCrea and Scott, the Wild Bunch are battle-weary veterans of many movie Westerns: William Holden (8 westerns), Robert Ryan (14), Ernest Borgnine (10), Edmund O'Brien (10), Ben Johnson (16) and Warren Oates (8). Warner Bros. wanted to cast a "young leading man" in the role of Holden's sidekick, but Peckinpah balked. "Someone said what about old Ernie Borgnine and I said, 'Go to it.'" The year is 1914, the pickings are slim, and the killers are tired. "This is about what Bill Holden is today," Peckinpah says, "fifty, middle-aged, wrinkled, no longer the glamor boy." Holden talks wistfully about giving up the Bunch's outlaw existence. "We're getting old. We've got to think beyond our guns." "I'd like to make one good score and back off," he tells Borgnine. "Back off to what?" Borgnine replies.

On the action level, *The Wild Bunch* is the most entertaining American picture in several years. The scenes flow evenly and quickly, and the highpoints seem to pile on top of each other. The editing (by Lou Lombardo, assisted by Peckinpah) is superb, if only for its unostentatiousness. Although *The Wild Bunch* has more cuts than any other picture in Technicolor, 3643, it flows naturally and smoothly. Lombardo skillfully intercuts slow motion shots (taken at 25, 28,



2, 48, and 64 frames per second) with normal action, demonstrating Eisenstein's theory of collision montage even better than he master himself, whose assemblages always seemed more didactic than natural. Someone suggested to Peckinpah that the editing of *The Wild Bunch* was as good as any in the Kurosawa samurai epics. "I think it's better," he replied.

"*The Wild Bunch* is a very commercial picture, Thank God," Peckinpah says. "I just happened to put some of myself into it." It is important to Peckinpah that *The Wild Bunch* be a "commercial" picture and play to large audiences, and not only to retrieve its large budget (approaching, by common estimate, \$8 million). Peckinpah's film speaks in common, proletarian themes and is effective for even the most unsophisticated audiences. Its first appeal is to the vulgar sensibility: callous killings, bawdy jokes, boyish horse-play. *The Wild Bunch* flaunts the vulgar exhilaration of killing. Like the best of American films of violence, *The Wild Bunch* has it both ways: it uses violence to excite and then applies more violence to comment on the excitement. And like such indigenous, murderous American masterpieces as *Underworld*, *Scarface*, *The Killing*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch* puts the stinger in the butterfly: the violence moves beyond itself, becoming something much more virulent, artifice.

Peckinpah carefully manages his violence, bargaining between the violence the audience wants and the violence he is prepared to give. Peckinpah uses violence the way every dramatist has, to make the plot turn. Then he applies vicarious violence to the plot mechanism. We don't really care whether it's logical if so-and-so is killed; we need more blood to satiate our appetite. Most "serious" war films do not progress beyond vicariousness; we simply want to be better war heroes. At the final level, the most difficult, Peckinpah goes beyond vicariousness to superfluity. We no longer want the violence, but it's still coming. Violence then can either become gratuitous or transcend itself. Peckinpah enjoys walking the thin line between destructive and constructive violence. For much of the film he allows the violence to verge on gratuity, until, at one moment, it shifts gears and moves beyond itself. For Peckinpah, this moment occurs during the literal Mexican stand-off at Mepache's Aqua Verde encampment. Holden shoots the general as two hundred soldiers watch on. A silence falls; no one moves. A few soldiers tentatively raise their hands; the Wild Bunchers look at each other and begin to laugh. This is what their lives have led to, one brief moment between life and death. And into death they plunge, the gore and bodies mounting higher and higher.

Robert Warshow wrote that the Western was popular because it created a milieu in which violence was acceptable. After years of simplistic Westerns, Peckinpah wants to more precisely define that milieu. Violence, Peckinpah seems to say, is acceptable and edifiable primarily for the spectator. It may also be edifiable for the participant, but only to the extent that it is suicidal. Like the Western code, it succeeds most when it is self-destructive. To be of any value violence must move from vicariousness to artifice. The spectator must be left "disinterested" in the Arnoldian sense, evaluating what he had previously reveled in.

In the post-slaughter epilogue of *The Wild Bunch* Peckinpah rubs the spectator's nose in the killing he had so recently enjoyed. New killers arrive to replace the old. A way of life has died, but the dying continues. In a departing gesture of shocking perversity Peckinpah brings back the fade-in fade-out laughing faces of each of the Wild Bunch killers to the stirring chorus of "La Golondrina." This is Sam Peckinpah's Mount Rushmore: four worn-out frontiersmen who ran out of land to conquer and went to Mexico to kill and be killed. It is a blatant

parody of Ford's *Long Grey Line* and the petulant perversity of it like the final gunning down of Bonnie and Clyde, throws the viewer out of the movie and into the realm of art. It is one of the strongest emotional kickbacks of any film. The viewer leaves the theater alone, shattered, trying to sort out the muddle Peckinpah has made of his emotions. A friend after seeing *The Wild Bunch* for the first time remarked, "I feel dirty all the way through." Peckinpah wouldn't have it any other way.

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The Westerners of *The Wild Bunch* have only the remnants of the code. They mouth many of the familiar platitudes but the honor and the purpose are absent. The cynicism has hardened; it no longer protects another set of values, but is a way of life in itself. When Angel, the only Mexican Wild Buncher, grieves over his recently murdered father Holden perfunctorily admonishes him, "Either you learn to live with it or we leave you here." As Holden explains later, "\$10,000 cuts an awful lot of family ties." The Wild Bunch does have its particular code, which it likes to think separates them from the others. Concerning Mapache, Borgnine remarks, "We ain't nothing like him. We don't kill nobody." When Ben Johnson threatens to leave the Bunch Holden warns him, "I either lead this Bunch or end it right now." And later, "When you side with a man you stay with him. If you can't do that you're no better than animal. You're finished. We're finished." But the irony of the Wild Bunch is that they are finished, and that they are little more than animals. The Bunch has taken on the characteristics which McCrea repudiated in *High Country*. Warren Oates, playing one of the vulgarized, psychopathic Hammond brothers in *High Country*, explodes in frustrated anger during the final shoot-out, wildly shooting at some nearby chickens. In *The Wild Bunch* there is a similar scene when Ben Johnson, after he and Oates have refused to pay a young whore an honest wage, plays with a baby sparrow, killing it. Unlike Blasingame in "The Westerner," the Wild Bunch draw their guns often, with little purpose and obvious delight. McCrea and Scott have died, the Hammond brothers have firmed up and headed for Mexico. It could be said that the Bunch represents "better" Westerners, in contrast to the broad comedy bounty hunters, but this was not Peckinpah's primary intent. "I wanted to show that each group was no better than the next," he says. The only thing that distinguishes the Wild Bunch is their ability to die appropriately.

*The Wild Bunch* is not a "Western" in the sense of *Ride the High Country*. (Peckinpah claims that neither is a Western. Although he doesn't mind being labeled a "Western director," he states, "I have never made a 'Western.' I have made a lot of films about men on horseback.") The film is not about an antiquated Western code, but about Westerners bereft of the code. The Bunch are not Westerners who kill, but are killers in the West. *Ride the High Country* gave a perspective on why the code was valuable; *The Wild Bunch* gives a perspective on the age that could believe the Western code was valuable.

The metaphor for the old men of *The Wild Bunch* becomes, ironically, children. Peckinpah does not emphasize their honor, but their infanthility. The film begins with the frame of the naively cruel village children. After Mapache's disastrous defeat at the hands of Villa, a young messenger boy proudly struts with the general away from the bloody Las Trancas battle scene. It is a child who, in the final battle, terminates the massacre by killing Holden. At Angel's village (a scene which Peckinpah considers the most important in the film), an old villager and peasant revolutionary, Chano Ureuta, characterizes the Bunch in a conversation with Holden and O'Brien. "We all dream of being children," he says, "even the worst of us. Perhaps the worst more than others." "You know what we are then?"

Holden asks. "Yes, both of you," Ureuta replies. "All three of us!" Holden laughs. Peckinpah conceived of his characters as children and made object lessons of them the way we do of children. "They are all children," Peckinpah says. "We are all children."

In *The Wild Bunch* Peckinpah comes to terms with the most violent aspects of his personality. A long-time acquaintance of Peckinpah recently said of him, "I think he is the best director in America, but I also think he is a fascist." He was using the term "fascist" personally rather than politically. Peckinpah has a violent, domineering streak. There is in Peckinpah the belief that the ultimate test of manhood is the suppression of others. He maintains an impressive collection of guns, and, his California home is kept up by "Spanish domestics," householders who do not speak English. Peckinpah is, in a sense, a colonial in his own home. A good friend of Peckinpah recalled that once he came into the director's office and found him intently watching a cage on his desk. In the cage was a resting rattlesnake and a petrified white mouse. The rattler had already eaten one mouse, probably the survivor's mate, and was now contentedly digesting the large bulge in its stomach. "Who do you think will win?" Peckinpah asked his friend. "You will, Sam," the friend replied.

The fascist edge of Peckinpah's personality does not make him particularly unique. It is a trait he shares with directors like Don Seigel, Howard Hawks, Samuel Fuller, Anthony Mann and all the rest of us who have always wanted to believe that those horse-riding killers were really making the West safe for the women-folk. What makes Peckinpah unique is his ability to come face to face with the fascist quality of his personality, American films, and America, and turn it into art. (I realize that "fascist" is a particularly vicious epithet. But its viciousness implies pain — and pain is the cathartic emotion Peckinpah experiences as he moves away from the old West of youth.)

In *The Wild Bunch* Sam Peckinpah stares into the heart of his own fascism. What had been formerly protected by the code is laid bare. The Western genre is ideally suited to such an examination; Jean-Luc Godard has noted that the Western is the only surviving popular fascist art form. In the past the Western had been able to perpetuate the myth of its own altruism, but, for Peckinpah, that myth had died its honorable death in *High Country*. The Westerners of *The Wild Bunch* have lost their code — only the fascism remains. The power of *The Wild Bunch* lies in the fact that this fascism is not peculiar to Peckinpah, but is American at heart. The America which created the Western (and the Communist Conspiracy) is the America Peckinpah determined to evaluate in his own life.

Like America's former macho-in-residence, Ernest Hemingway, Sam Peckinpah fights his private battles in public, both in life and art, but unlike Hemingway Peckinpah comes increasingly to terms with his own persona as he ages. As Hemingway approached death he relied increasingly on his code; as Peckinpah grows older he progressively discards his, preferring to confront death head-on. *The Wild Bunch* is *The Old Man and the Sea* without a boat, a great fish, or a native boy. The great anguish of *The Wild Bunch* is the anguish of a fascist personality coming to terms with itself: recognizing its love of domination and killing, and attempting to evaluate it.

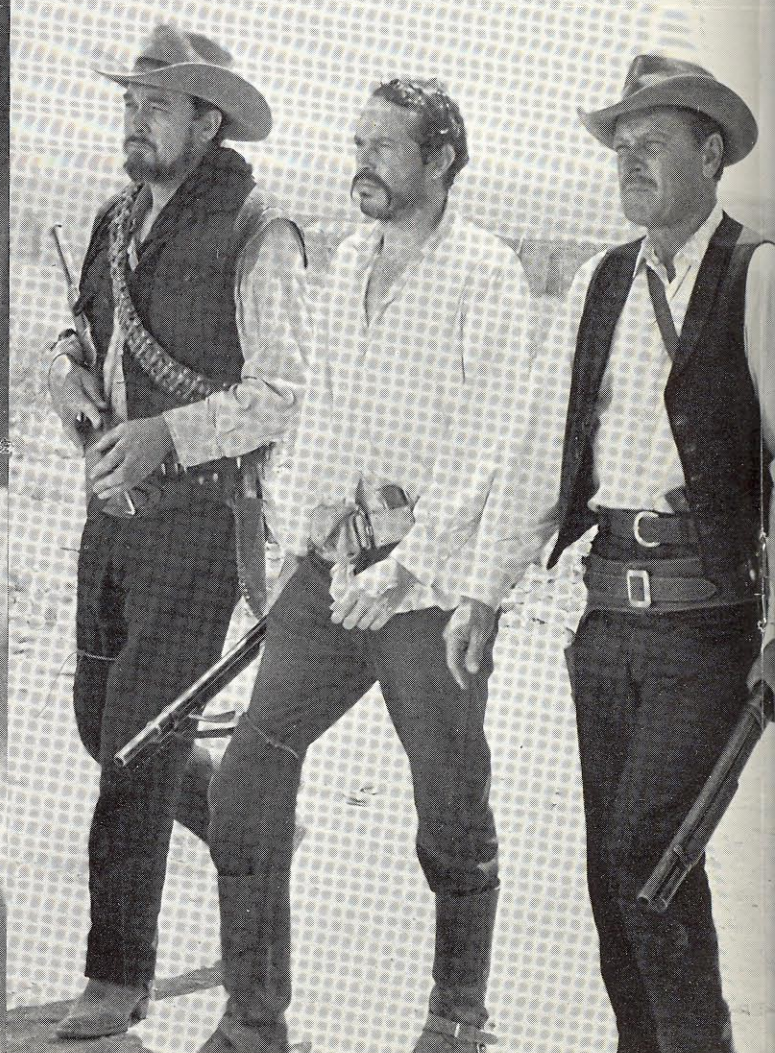
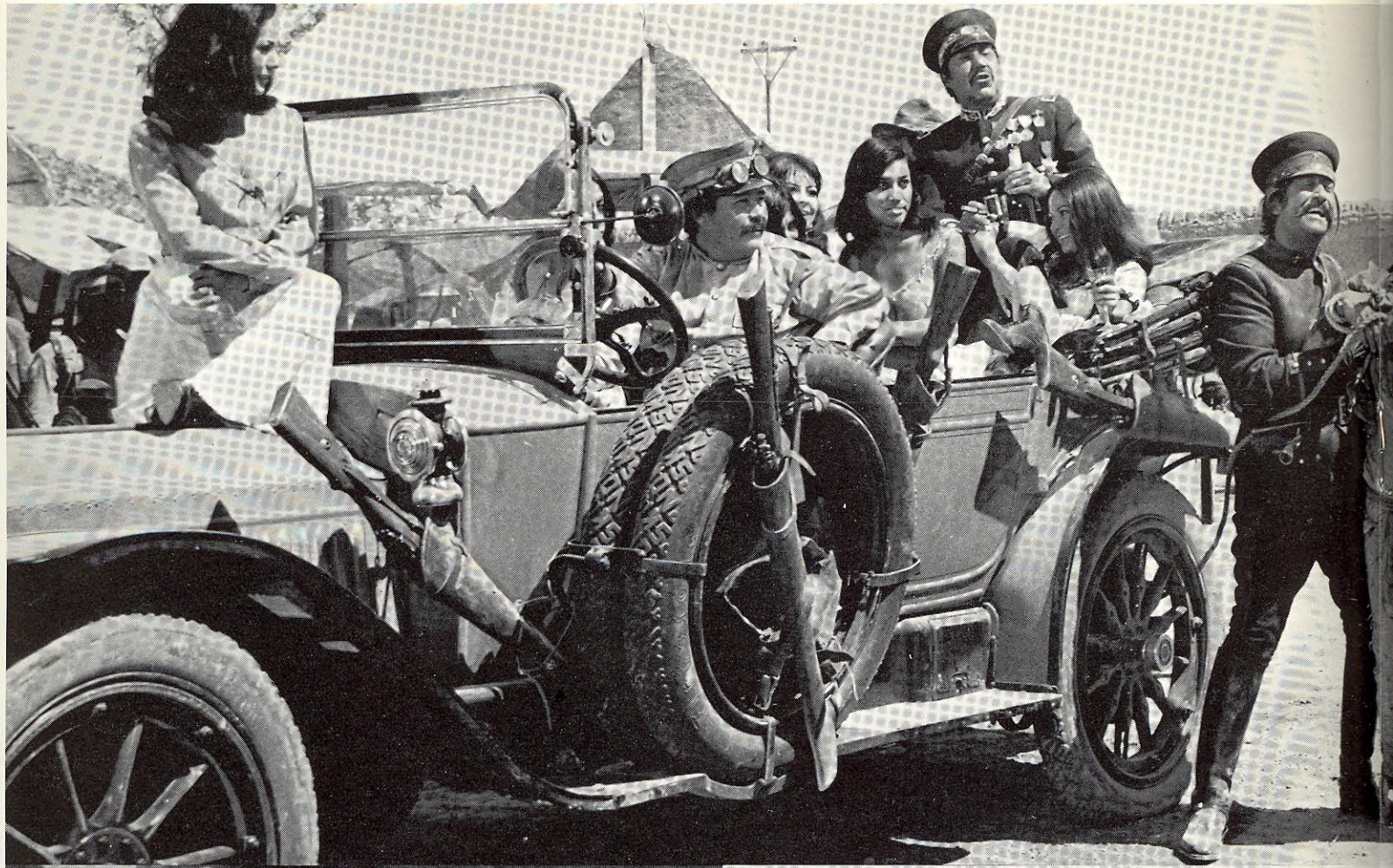
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The new psychopaths in the best of recent American films — *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Point Blank*, *Pretty Poison* — have had a strong environmental context in which to make their killings plausible, whether it be the rural Texas of the Depression era, garish new Los Angeles, or the polluted Massachusetts countryside. Codeless, Sam Peckinpah goes to the land he loves best to recreate and un-

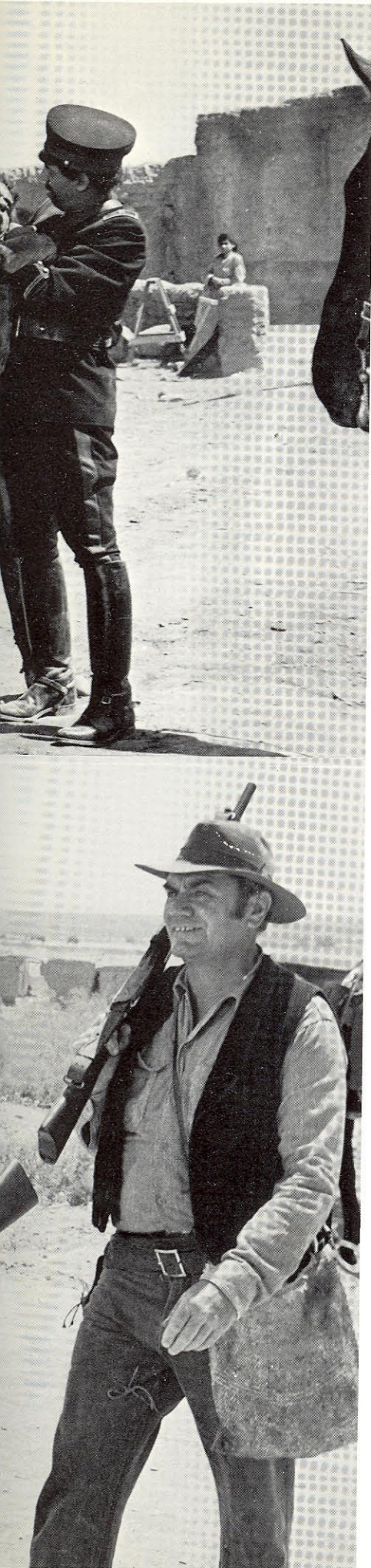












derstand his violence: Mexico. Peckinpah has lived in Mexico off and on during the past few years (a refuge from the Hollywood ordeal) and is a student of Mexican customs and history. "Mexico is the greatest place," Peckinpah says. "You have to go there, just to sit back and rest. You have to go there to get yourself straightened out."

Peckinpah thinks of *The Wild Bunch* as a Mexican film. "It is what really happens when killers go to Mexico. It is my comment on Richard Brooks and *The Professionals*." Brooks' 1966 south-of-the-border adventure story treated Mexico as facilely as it did the Americans who went there; John Huston's 1948 *Treasure of Sierra Madre* is much more to Peckinpah's liking. "*Treasure of Sierra Madre* is one of my favorite films. In fact, *The Wild Bunch* is sort of early Huston. Ever since I saw that film I've been chasing Huston." It was not so much Huston's moralistic story which impressed Peckinpah, but his expressive use of the Mexican milieu (of *Treasure* the late James Agee wrote, "I doubt we shall ever see a finer portrait of Mexico and Mexicans"). Mexico had lent a depth to *Treasure*, a depth Peckinpah wanted to pursue in *The Wild Bunch*.

Agee to the contrary, Huston's characterization of Mexicans was not so much incisive as it was stereotyped — a fault which Peckinpah unfortunately shares. Mexicans fit into pre-existing categories: federalistas, rurales, caudillos. Like Huston's Mexican bandits, Peckinpah's bandoleros speak broken English, have bad breath, and possess a charming sense of humor. Alfonso Bedoya's Gold-Hat in *Treasure* ("Badges? We don't need no stinking badges") is the prototype of Jorge Russek's Lt. Zamorra in *The Wild Bunch* ("I want to congratulate you on great bravery you have done"). Peckinpah wanted to show that the Mexicans (all varieties) were no less psychopathic than the Americans, but compared to the Bunch the Mexicans (with a few notable exceptions like Angel's girl Teresa and the old Urueta) seem colonial subjects.

But *The Wild Bunch* is only secondarily about the individual psychology of the Mexicans; it is primarily concerned with the mood of their country. Peckinpah's film is not about Mexicans, but murderous Americans who go to Mexico. Peckinpah's Mexico is much more powerfully drawn than Huston's and more accurately resembles the Mexico of Luis Buñuel's films. Although Peckinpah does not achieve the individual Mexican psychology of films like *Los Olvidados*, *Subida al Cielo*, *Ensayo de un Crimen*, *Nazarín*, he is able to capture the irrationally savage mood of Buñuel's Mexico. The comparison would please Peckinpah. "I loved *Los Olvidados*," he says. "I know that territory well. I've lived there. I would like to make *Children of Sanchez* one day. *The Wild Bunch* is only a beginning." The opening shot of the taunted scorpion in *The Wild Bunch* is almost identical to the opening shot of Buñuel's 1930 *L'Âge d'Or*, although Peckinpah says he has never seen the Buñuel film (the idea for the ant-scorpion battle in *The Wild Bunch* originated with actor-director Emilio Fernández, who plays Mapache). Peckinpah's Mexico, like Buñuel's, is a place where violence is not only plausible, but inescapable.

Peckinpah was recently asked which films stood out best in his memory. He started to reply, "*Breaking Point*, *Rashomon*, *My Darling Clementine*, *Ace in the Hole*," and then he abruptly added, "If you really want to know about *The Wild Bunch* you should read a book by Camilo José Cela called *La Familia de Pascual Duarte*." It is from the sensibility of *Pascual Duarte*, a seminal book in modern Spanish literature, that Peckinpah draws the frame in which to make the violence of *The Wild Bunch* meaningful. On the most immediate level there is an instant meeting of the minds between Cela and Peckinpah. Cela's dedication to *Pascual Duarte* could serve as the frontpiece for *The Wild Bunch*: "I dedicate this 13th and defini-

tive edition of my *Pascual Duarte* to my enemies who have been of such help to me in my career." *The Wild Bunch* shares themes and sentiments with *Pascual Duarte* which do not figure in Peckinpah's earlier films. "I'm not made to philosophize," Pascual writes in his diary, "I don't have the heart for it. My heart is more like a machine for making blood to be spilt in a knife fight..." McCrea and Scott were philosophers first, killers second; Holden and Borgnine are laconic psychopaths like Duarte. Pascual's wife says to him, "Blood seems a kind of fertilizer in your life." Pascual dedicates his diary to "The memory of the distinguished patrician Don Jesus González de la Riva, Count of Torremejía, who, at the moment when the author of this chronicle came to kill him, called him Pascualillo, and smiled." Peckinpah tells a similar story: "I once lived with a wonderful man in Mexico. He was the most trustworthy man I have ever met. I would have done anything for him; I would have put my family in his care. He took me for every cent. A true friend is one who is really able to screw you."

Like Pascual the Wild Bunch disguise their barbarity in boyish innocence. Whenever Pascual mentions hogs or his behind he adds "(begging your pardon)" and then goes on to describe the most savage acts. Just before the initial massacre in *The Wild Bunch* the Bunch stroll insouciantly down the main street, helping an old woman across the street. Like the scorpion-torturing children of *The Wild Bunch*, the children of *Pascual Duarte* tease injured dogs, sheep, and drown kittens in the watering-trough, lifting them out of the water from time to time "to prevent their getting out of their misery too quickly." Like Pascual the Wild Bunch are picaros, men who roam the country in a never-ending war, spawning a rich heritage of death and suffering. It is into this tradition of Spanish suffering, the tradition of Cela, that Peckinpah thrusts his battle-weary Westerners.

Mexico represents an older, more primitive culture, a place where violence can still have meaning on the functional level. As the works of Oscar Lewis indicate, the Mexican peasant still regards the *macho* — the Mexican Westerner — as a practical prototype, and not just a mythological figure. Mexico is the ideal place for an old Westerner to go to give his violence meaning. The American frontier has been superceded by the more sophisticated mayhem of the city, but in Mexico there is an on-going tradition of significant violence. There you can fill a hero's grave, even if it is a shallow one. In Mexico you can extend the external frontier, and postpone the conquest of the internal frontier. The Mexico of 1914 was the Wild Bunch's Vietnam, a place where the wolf of fascism goes to wear the sheepskin of purpose.

Mexico cannot justify the Westerner's fascism, but it can bring the Westerner to an honorable end. If Holden, Borgnine, Oates and Johnson do enter their homes justified it is not because of any intrinsic virtue, but because of their enthusiastic demise. Deprived of both the mythical and functional qualities of his character, Peckinpah dies the only way he knows how — with his boots on. But Peckinpah has the sensitivity, self-awareness, and feeling for America and Mexico to give his death poignancy and art.

*The Wild Bunch* is a powerful film because it comes from the gut of America, and from a man who is trying to get America out of his gut. The trauma of expatriotism is a common theme in American art, but nowhere is the pain quite so evident as in the life of Sam Peckinpah. *The Wild Bunch* is the agony of a Westerner who stayed too long, and it is the agony of America. ★