Savage Cinema

SAM PECKINPAH

AND THE RISE OF ULTRAVIOLENT MOVIES

STEPHEN PRINCE

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by Stephen Prince

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AUSTIN

For violence, like Achilles' lance, can heal the wounds that it has inflicted
—Jean-Paul Sartre

If you would endure life, be prepared for death.
—Sigmund Freud

I'm afraid the truth, to me as I see it, is more important than entertainment for its own sake. The unfortunate thing is, I suppose, I see a certain kind of truth only too clearly.
—Sam Peckinpah

*For My Parents
and Tami*

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Introduction

Sam Peckinpah directed only fourteen feature films, a small number compared with the output of such prolific directors as John Ford and Howard Hawks. Peckinpah's career as a feature director was a relatively brief one, spanning just over two decades and marked by several lengthy hiatuses between productions. Measured in terms of the quantity of his output, therefore, he might appear to fall outside the circle of major American filmmakers. Part of what gives Ford and Hawks their stature is, in fact, a measure of quantity—the large number of accomplished films that they directed. If we shave from Peckinpah's career those productions where the work was chaotic and relatively undisciplined, we are left with six or seven clearly first-rate pictures.

Why, then, does Peckinpah's presence loom so large in modern American cinema? A small part of the answer lies in the folklore and legends that surrounded Peckinpah, the man. Like John Huston, he was an exceptionally colorful and interesting personality about whom friends and associates could spin an endless supply of anecdotes and tall tales. With his brawling and drinking, Peckinpah cut a wide swath through life, a life that was consistent with a peculiarly romantic notion of how an artist should

live and behave. Sadly, that romantic ideal included a requisite for self-destruction as the certifier of the artist's integrity and sensitivity, and Peckinpah ably fulfilled this component as well, dying at fifty-nine after a long period of decline and abuse of his talents.

This end was consistent with the romanticism on which his career has been constructed in the media and in the public eye—a romanticism that was, to some extent, lived out by Peckinpah. Today so many movies seem utterly mechanical and prefabricated, assembled by engineers who are digital wizards but have little to say about life. Actors emote in a void, placed before a blue screen for subsequent compositing with computer-animated environments. In this climate, the intensity that Peckinpah brought to his life and art and the general (and romantic) disdain that he felt for machinery ("The Devil seeks to destroy you with *machines*," a preacher snarls in *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*) seem a more authentic stance to occupy with regard to life and cinema. Peckinpah studied drama in college, but he was not a film-school graduate, and in temperament and spirit he belonged with an earlier generation of American filmmakers—Raoul Walsh, William Wellman, Hawks—who brought a wealth of life experience with them when they entered the movie industry. Thus, their artistic reference points included these lived experiences as well as other movies, whereas for many of today's directors the only reference points are other movies and television shows. Peckinpah was a great director of Westerns (and one of the last great ones) precisely because the West was, for him, an authentic place and experience that he had briefly encountered in his youth during visits to the Sierra Nevadas and his grandfather's ranch. The loss of that ranch haunted him as an adult and was a paradigmatic experience underlying his treatment on film of a vanishing West. Part of Peckinpah's staying power for modern filmmakers and viewers, then, lies in the legendary and mythic qualities of his larger-than-life personality and the romanticism and authenticity (as noncontradictory qualities) that he brought to his roguish films.

A second reason for his current stature is the extraordinary influence that the style and content of his films has exerted over later filmmakers. Though he did not innovate them, the slow-motion violence and exploding squibs that are closely identified with his work have now become the normative techniques for rendering screen violence. More than any other American director, Peckinpah made slow motion the requisite format for capturing and extending the action of violent gun battles, and he coupled this with an extremely kinetic mode of montage editing. To look at the ac-

tion set-pieces in the films of Walter Hill, Tony Scott, or John Woo is to see a visual syntax that ties their work directly to Peckinpah's films and clearly demonstrates that the traditions his work has established are part of its legacy.

The moral abrasiveness of Peckinpah's work, particularly its tendency to place a brutal or compromised protagonist at the center of the narrative, has been a tremendous influence on subsequent filmmakers. In pictures like *The Wild Bunch* and *Straw Dogs*, Peckinpah decisively shifted moral parameters of commercial cinema away from a clear separation of good and evil and toward the unsettling contemplation of flawed, debased behavior viewed up close and without a secure moral reference point. When in *The Wild Bunch* Pike Bishop executes a wounded comrade without feeling or hesitation, and when children, sentimental archetypes in generations of film, gleefully torture and burn a scorpion, we see that Peckinpah did not merely attach a new level of violence to screen images but exploded the moral absolutes that had given shape and meaning to screen narratives for decades.

Beyond their capacity for brutality, Peckinpah's villains and killers are memorable because he characterized them so vividly. Crazy Lee's dying dare in *The Wild Bunch* that his killers kiss his sister's black cat's ass, and Chris Cawsey's merry proclamation in *Straw Dogs* that "Rats is life" do not exactly make these no-accounts endearing, but such remarks do make these men become, through this brief poetry, unforgettably, disturbingly human. Directors like Martin Scorsese took courage from this and began to explore the creative possibilities inherent in the portrayal of evil, psychopathic, or borderline personalities. Many of the cynical and amoral characters who now populate our movie screens—and the ultraviolence they perpetrate—derive from the flawed heroes and gutter-trash losers who scrabble through Peckinpah's films.

Peckinpah's work helped propel American film toward explorations of subterranean aspects of human behavior that had been too dark or twisted for the industry to countenance in earlier decades. Recognizing this brings us to the most important feature of Peckinpah's relevance for modern American film and highlights for us the fundamental issue explored in this book. Graphic screen violence has become an obsessive feature of contemporary filmmaking. We cannot, it seems, go to the movies today and avoid for very long the spectacle of exploding heads and severed limbs, or escape the company of the screen sociopaths who perpetrate these acts. If we trace this contemporary fetish for graphic bloodletting to

one of its chief sources, we arrive again at Peckinpah's films. Violence is what his work was chiefly known for in its day, and it continues to be the central attribute that many people think of when his films are mentioned. This is with good reason. We have already noted that Peckinpah showed subsequent filmmakers how to stylize scenes of graphic violence and that his techniques have become the standard tools of the trade. Moreover, the rise of ultraviolent movies is tied to the impact of Peckinpah's work on the American cinema. Violence, I will argue, is the central preoccupation of his cinema.

Does this not damn his work? If we (correctly, I believe) tie the current cinematic fascination with graphic bloodshed to his groundbreaking work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and if we accept that contemporary movie violence is excessive and produces harmful social effects, does this not tend to invalidate any claims we might make on behalf of Peckinpah's work?

We could seek to legitimize that work by claiming that its violent content is only a secondary and lesser component of other thematic or stylistic interests that lie essentially elsewhere (e.g., the vanishing West or the vicissitudes and travails of friendship). But if we argue, as I do here, that the inquiry into violence is the most important, and basic, component of Peckinpah's work, and if we can see clearly where that inquiry has led contemporary cinema, then this might seem to foreclose on the usefulness of closely studying these films. After all, doesn't their violence make them a known quantity? But this is not the case. By confronting the violence issue directly and unraveling the volatile problems with which it is entangled, we can position Peckinpah's work more precisely and gauge its singular importance in the history of American cinema. We must try to differentiate his films' focus and moral attributes from the unfortunate tradition of movie violence that they have helped inspire. Peckinpah is a major figure and his filmmaking a major force in postwar American film, and the value we should accord to Peckinpah's work rises or falls on the violence issue. We must confront this issue to understand the work, and this task becomes more urgent given the pervasiveness of the bloodshed in recent film.

What follows, then, is a systematic and comprehensive examination of Peckinpah's use of cinema to inquire into the phenomenon of violence in human life and an analysis of the consequences of this inquiry for contemporary cinema. This focus necessarily imposes boundaries. I do not systematically cover all of Peckinpah's films in depth. For instance, in *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* and *Junior Bonner* Peckinpah notably moved away

from the violent screen worlds that he more typically rendered. Accordingly, these films do not receive an extended treatment here. (The less said about *Convoy,* the better.) Of his other work, I principally examine those productions from *The Wild Bunch* in 1968 to *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* in 1974, a period that is arguably the most significant portion of his career. Before 1968, Peckinpah was constrained by the MPAA Production Codes and could not explore the violence issue as he did in the years that followed, and after 1974, his work becomes quite checkered. These factors motivate the rationale for the principal time period covered by this study.

Furthermore, the study is organized conceptually, and individual films are examined with reference to the particular issues and problems at hand. I do not proceed chronologically, film by film; neither do I completely analyze a given film in any single chapter. Rather, I reexamine the films across the chapters according to the particular frames of reference that are important within a given topic or focal area. I trust that this method better clarifies the structural features of Peckinpah's cinematic inquiry into violence, features that transcend their incarnation within any single film.

Given the nature of this study's focus, it does not deal with other vital aspects of Peckinpah's work. His Westerns, for example, helped decisively to revise that genre, shifting it away from the chivalric and idealized West of Ford toward a more pyschopathic and mud-spattered landscape. This territory has been ably explored by Paul Seydor, and I consider it in *Sam Peckinpah's* The Wild Bunch, a collection of essays dealing with that film and Peckinpah's use of the Western. [1] Peckinpah's remarkable ability to elicit superlative performances from actors is evident in the outstanding work contributed to his films by William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, Susan George, Robert Ryan, James Coburn, and others. Furthermore, the memorable stock company comprised of R.G. Armstrong, Warren Oates, Strother Martin, and L.Q. Jones is an indelible part of his work. But assessment of these sterling performances properly belongs in a more traditional study of Peckinpah as dramatist. A detailed assessment of the production history of Peckinpah's ongoing collaboration with composer Jerry Fielding, cinematographers Lucien Ballard and John Coquillon, and editors Lou Lombardo and Robert Wolfe also falls outside the purview of this study.

To understand Peckinpah's approach to, and stylistic rendering of, screen violence, we must first grasp the social preconditions that fueled his worldview and allowed it free expression, before turning to the aesthetic properties of his distinctive mode of presentation. Chapter One examines the social preconditions, which fall into two broad areas: transfor-

mations within the film industry and changes within society at large. When Peckinpah returned to feature filmmaking with *The Wild Bunch,* he was able to take advantage of sweeping changes in the codes governing acceptable screen content and of the film industry's willingness to champion new kinds of films and filmmakers. The years from 1966 to 1968 saw a series of key economic, sociological, and artistic changes that predated Peckinpah's innovative work on *The Wild Bunch* and helped make it possible. The first chapter profiles these changes and discusses their relevance for Peckinpah's filmmaking. In style and sensibility, Peckinpah was a late 1960s filmmaker, and to understand his work, he must be situated in reference to an industry that was dramatically reorienting and reinventing itself to keep pace with a changing society.

These larger shifts in society constitute the second broad arena in which Peckinpah's work should be located. Chapter One also examines the numerous ways in which Peckinpah reacted and responded to the era's tumultuous events. Some of the responses address specific events that appalled and agitated him, such as the My Lai massacre and the murders of John Kennedy and Sharon Tate. But, more generally, Peckinpah's attitudes and views toward the nation, particularly the era's ongoing social violence, resonate with the radical, New Left critique of American culture that was being developed and applied during those years. Peckinpah was an engaged observer and commentator on the dynamic and memorable history of the period through which he lived and during which he directed his best films. To understand why Peckinpah was drawn so deeply toward exploring the violence issue in his films, we must understand him as an artist connected with and responding to his times. This has, on the whole, been an area that scholars have neglected when trying to understand Peckinpah's films, and I hope to show how essential the 1960s were for shaping and influencing his work. Peckinpah himself acknowledged that great art emerges from powerful connections between artists and the society in which they live, and he remarked that "*The Ballad of Cable Hogue* is perhaps the least obviously social film I have made. But it is a dimension which is not totally absent from it." [2] Peckinpah's use of cinema was more socially engaged and less abstracted than commentators have traditionally emphasized, and this chapter places his work on the social landscape which helped configure it.

While Chapter One helps explain *why* Peckinpah chose to explore violence in films, the three chapters that follow explain *how* he did it. They explicate the basic aesthetic structures that he utilized in representing

screen violence. The unique aspect of his films is the way they super-impose these structures to provoke viewers into disturbingly ambivalent responses. Chapter Two examines Peckinpah's use of montage editing to stylize human violence according to what he considered to be its essential external, physical attributes and its internal, spiritual ones. Peckinpah used three principal types of montage construction to aestheticize violence in ways that would compel the viewer's fascinated attention. The chapter explores these in detail and closes with a consideration of the danger inherent in a montage aesthetic: namely, a glorification of violence rather than its condemnation.

Chapter Three examines the emotional and psychological attitudes in the films that attach to the violent episodes and that tend to counterbalance the spectacular visual effects of the montages. We will see that, for the most part, Peckinpah was rigorous and systematic in excoriating violence by showing the emotional pain that is its consequence. Peckinpah claimed that he wished to use cinema to warn viewers about the terrible nature of violence and to produce a cathartic experience that would have beneficial social effects. Accordingly, the viability of the catharsis theory is assessed in Chapter Three, with particular reference to the extensive social science data on the effects of viewing film violence. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for Peckinpah's work.

Chapter Four examines Peckinpah's use of self-reflexive audiovisual designs as declamatory devices for emphasizing what he saw as essential principles or truths of human violence. These devices tend to impose a more emphatically intellectualized perspective on the films, and, accordingly, they inflect the work in a very different direction from the use of montage to elicit spectacle. These designs demonstrate the rigor and care with which Peckinpah pursued the violence question and his awareness of the need to control and contextualize the explosive effects of his montages.

Chapter Five orients Peckinpah's work in relation to the legacy of screen violence that it helped inspire. I emphasize this as a problematic legacy and a misleading one. Peckinpah's work belongs to a different historical period than the films of such contemporary masters of gore as Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, and Quentin Tarantino, and consequently Peckinpah's films embody an alternative, more humanistic moral sensibility than does the work of these contemporary directors. Peckinpah's films, then, ought to be disentangled from the legacy that they have helped to inspire, because the moral and social project that his work undertakes is incompatible with the terms by which Scorsese, Stone, Tarantino, and

others today render violence. By explicating the reasons for this, I hope to show why Peckinpah's films remain valuable and important, as violent works of art, at a time when one might sensibly and in principle object to contemporary screen violence. Understanding Peckinpah's work enables us to understand the problems and limitations of the treatment of violence in contemporary film.

To help explain the complexities of Peckinpah's approach to, and representation of, violence, I have drawn extensively on his papers and correspondence, which are archived at the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles. This material reveals significant aspects of his work, and of the perceptions which underlie it, which have not traditionally been emphasized in scholarly studies of his films. The Herrick Collection is extraordinarily rich, and it demonstrates that we are only yet beginning to understand the dynamic interplay between Peckinpah, his times, and his work.

In particular, this material reveals a rather different Peckinpah than the personality he colorfully presented to the press. Peckinpah's frequent belligerence when talking to the media was a creation not unlike the persona of guileless entertainer that Alfred Hitchcock adopted when talking with reporters about his work. In each case, the postures adopted by Peckinpah and Hitchcock were intended to deflect serious and extended discussion of their films—discussion which they were often reluctant to undertake. However, both filmmakers were very thoughtful about their work and approached it with intelligence and ambition. In the extensive set of interviews he granted French filmmaker François Truffaut, Hitchcock dropped his pose and revealed the seriousness with which he conducted his work. Similarly, Peckinpah candidly discussed the design and goals of his work, without the public posturing, in his private correspondence and in his working papers directed at production personnel. Peckinpah's remarks in these private papers are validated by the evidence of the films. In the chapters that follow, I therefore give more weight to the correlation between the filmic evidence and the private papers than to the more colorful pronouncements he made when posturing for the media.

Screen violence is now a largely debased and exploitative form. Despite this, Peckinpah's films are of seminal importance for the stylistics and history of recent American film. They demonstrate the enormous, if transient, creative and social potential of the cinema in the late sixties and beyond. It will take some time to show this, so, as Peckinpah's most famous character might say, a little impatiently, "Let's go."

**1—
Peckinpah and the 1960s**

Movies today are saturated with blood. Beatings, shootings, and dismemberments, portrayed in lingering and graphic fashion, crowd the screen. Filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs*, 1992, and *Pulp Fiction*, 1995) and Paul Verhoeven (*Robocop*, 1987, and *Basic Instinct*, 1992) have found critical and popular acclaim, in part, at least, through the outré images of violence they have fashioned. Both of these filmmakers have used explicit gore to make audiences alternately squirm with discomfort and roar with delight. The ear-cutting scene in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* is quite unpleasant to watch, while the exploding head in the back of the car in *Pulp Fiction* initiates an extended comic sketch in that film. Verhoeven opens *Robocop* with the gruesome scene of the cop Murphy (Peter Weller) being literally shot to pieces by gangsters and subsequently shifts the film's violence into a more comic mode when a thug is covered with toxic waste and quickly turns into a glob of (walking) gunk.

The intense audience reactions these scenes elicit demonstrate the considerable skill and care with which they have been crafted. That each of these films was a critical and commercial hit shows, as well, how palatable graphic screen gore now is. An entrenched feature of contemporary cin-

ema style, it extends well beyond the work of Tarantino and Verhoeven, two of its most successful practitioners. Even moronically plotted movies, careless in their handling of narrative and character, will often boast state-of-the-art blood effects. Ultraviolence is offered up by auteurs and hacks alike, and it regularly draws fire from politicians and other social watchdogs over its presumably unwholesome influence on American culture.

For those concerned about the contemporary state of American visual culture, the present fetish for explicit gore is a worrisome development, given the evidence that now exists (and which we will review in Chapter Three) about the effects on viewers of repeated exposure to violent images and narratives. Furthermore, it is highly probable that ultraviolent movies are here to stay, and that, once having turned that corner, American cinema cannot unlearn its present violent ways. Once the taboos and restrictions on movie content have come down, they prove very hard to reestablish. In addition, because ultraviolence is immensely popular, the style is likely to have considerable staying power.

We ought, therefore, to ask some questions of it. Principally, these are three: When did ultraviolence come to the American cinema and why? What are the aesthetic and ethical problems and contradictions for filmmakers and viewers that are inherent in the presentation of graphic screen violence? Must ultraviolence be a retrograde phenomenon? In other words, can it be used in a way that is aesthetically and intellectually honest and that might have progressive social consequences? We will examine these questions in a historical context. To understand the present, we shall look at the recent past.

We can gain considerable insight into the problems and shortcomings (both artistic and social) of contemporary movie gore by tracing ultraviolence back to that period when the detailed visual rendering of physical violence first became a distinct stylistic possibility in the American cinema. One figure clearly emerges from this period as the dominant and most influential practitioner of graphic movie violence. Sam Peckinpah is the crucial link between classical and postmodern Hollywood, the figure whose work transformed modern cinema in terms of the stylistics for rendering screen violence and in terms of the moral and psychological consequences that ensue, for filmmaker and viewer, from placing brutality at the center of a screen world. The cinema today is an uncommonly savage place. To understand how it got to be that way, we shall explore the genesis of movie ultraviolence in the work of its seminal practitioner, Sam Peckinpah. By looking backward, at an earlier period of filmmaking, we can
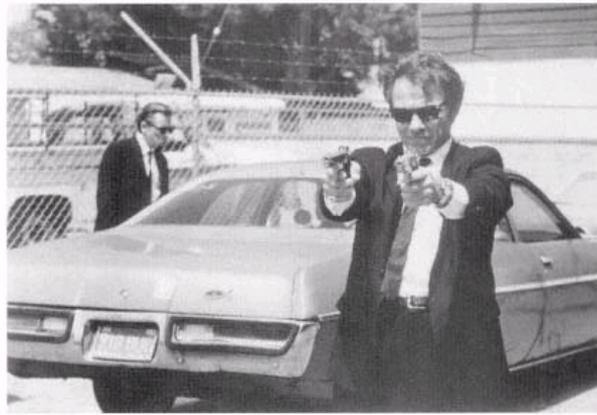
Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* features the graphic bloodshed
and general fascination with violence that typify contemporary filmmaking.
© 1992, Miramax Films.

better understand the forces that have made contemporary cinema so bloody and, most importantly, why ultraviolence is today so limited and so deadening a style.

In his day, Sam Peckinpah was one of the most contentious directors working in the American cinema and one of its most controversial. Following *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and, especially, *Straw Dogs* (1971), his work became synonymous with graphic, slow-motion violence, and it earned him the dubious sobriquet, "Bloody Sam." The controversies that swirled about his renditions of violence and the moral (or amoral) visions of his films came to overshadow his achievements, and with the rapid and sad decline of his talents after 1974, Peckinpah's critical reputation seemed thoroughly tarnished. He had his defenders and fans, but, following his death in 1984, he and his work sank into a critical obscurity that lasted for a decade. During this period, for many critics and scholars Peckinpah seemed to have become a largely discredited and forgotten figure in American cinema. But this neglect did not last. With the restoration and theatrical reissue of *The Wild Bunch* by Warner Bros. in 1995, accompanied by glowing reviews in the popular press, and with the publication of David Weddle's 1994 biogra-
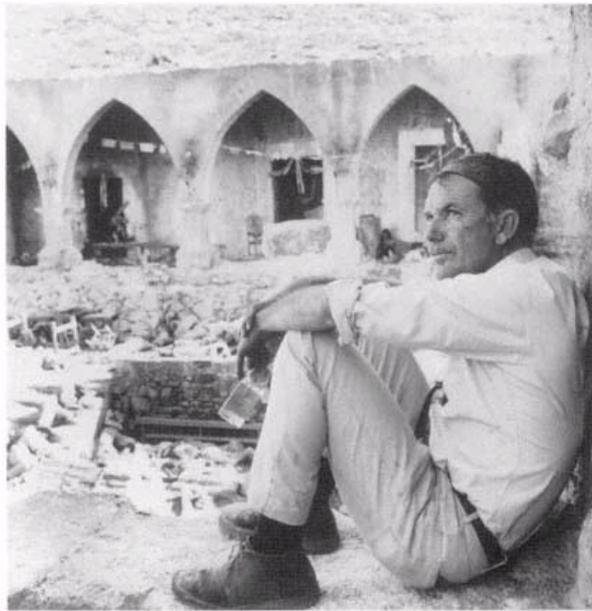
Director Sam Peckinpah was the pivotal figure who transformed
the stylistics of violence in modern cinema. Here, he relaxes during
filming of the Agua Verde massacre in *The Wild Bunch*,
an epochal and trend-setting sequence of screen violence.

phy of Peckinpah, the director reemerged into the spotlight as an authentically roguish voice in the American cinema and one in need of careful critical reassessment.

Peckinpah's detractors and admirers loathe and love him with passions equal in their intensity. That his work could so inspire such extremes of response is surely one sign of its extraordinarily rich texture, yet the existing critical discussions of his work have tended to neglect or minimize some of its most important dimensions—namely, the precise ways in which it connects with the era during which Peckinpah worked and the importance it gives to the moral and stylistic inquiry into violence. Peckinpah's