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Peckinpah: Violence, Betrayal and the American Auteur

Chris Orlock

(Honors English 154)

The Assignment: Students were asked to select a film director, watch a minimum of three of his/her films, and then write an essay explaining how this filmmaker fit the auteur theory.

Of all the American directors who emerged as "auteurs" in the 1960's--a list that includes such filmmakers as Stanley Kubrick (*Dr. Strangelove, 2001, A Clockwork Orange*), Arthur Penn (*The Miracle Worker, Bonnie and Clyde, Little Big Man*), and Mike Nichols (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, The Graduate, Catch-22*)--Sam Peckinpah is by far the most controversial. Although he worked primarily in mainstream Hollywood genres--Westerns and action-adventure thrillers--he cultivated a personality for outrageous behavior that translated to the screen. He loved to push the envelope of what was considered tasteful and tactful. His battles with producers and the studios are the stuff of Hollywood legend. As David Thomson has observed, Peckinpah "got out of line from sheer, willful resolve, as if certain that self-destruction would be his only peace." (672). And Pauline Kael wrote that "Peckinpah is a great 'personal' filmmaker; he can work as an artist only on his own terms…he can't turn out a routine piece of craftsmanship--he can't use his skills to improve somebody else's conception. That's why he has always had trouble" (112).

As Louis Giannetti defines him, an auteur is a director who stamps his movie with a personal vision, style, and thematic obsession (532). He is like a writer or an artist whose personality is infused in his subject and style. The word "auteur" means "author," and the theory developed by French critics in the 1950's proposed that the film director was that author, even though sometimes hundreds of people are involved in making movies. If we accept the premise that an auteur is the master of his art, then Sam Peckinpah is an auteur. Throughout his films, he struggles with the same issues, questions, and concerns in a fashion that is unique to him alone. We can see his obsessions in three of his most famous films, *The Wild Bunch, Straw Dogs,* and *The Getaway*: violent action that is filmed in a distinctive, almost beautiful way; storylines that hinge on personal betrayal as a motivating factor in establishing conflict; and personal honor as a code to live by. Through Peckinpah's lens, we are shown things many people would just as soon not see: that violence is exhilarating *and* gruesome, that people are capable of the most humiliating betrayals against each other, and that the only way to survive in this world is by sticking to a code of honor regardless of the consequences. (8)

Peckinpah does not try to portray violence in a humorous way, or as exciting, or as anything other than what it really is--frightening and uncompromisingly bloody.
Throughout the films *The Wild Bunch*, *Straw Dogs*, and *The Getaway*, Peckinpah tries to deal with the idea of violence in the world. In *The Wild Bunch*, the characters are accustomed to killing--it is their way of life. And it extends to all segments of society in the film; innocent bystanders, women, and children are given no quarter in Peckinpah's world. No one is innocent. In the opening scene of *The Wild Bunch*, children play by throwing scorpions into a pit filled with red ants. This casual torture foreshadows the end of the film. The four survivors of the bunch (Pike, Dutch, and the Gorch brothers) walk into Mapache's town and fight like the scorpions in the red ant pit--they eventually will be taken down, they know, but they will kill as many of their enemy as they possibly can.

The violence in *Straw Dogs* is even worse. The entire film is shot with a low-key lighting, which gives the impression of a cold, stark reality where there will be no bright tomorrow. Unlike *The Wild Bunch* and *The Getaway*, the violence in *Straw Dogs* has very little of the adrenaline rush of exciting action. Everything is closed in and bottled up. The violence simmers under the surface whenever the

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townsfolk are shown. Thus, we are given glimpses of long-standing feuds between some families in the town. The opening shots of the film show children teasing a small dog in a graveyard, terrorizing it to entertain themselves. A man slaps his dimwitted brother across the face for flirting with the children. A fight nearly breaks out in the local tavern. All of this makes the viewer uneasy, but it is not until Amy's rape that the most horrible violence rears its head. Once it does, the film descends into an orgy of violent combat. At the end of *Straw Dogs*, a drunken mob of townsmen encircle David Sumner's home and terrorize him and his wife Amy, and attempt to get the town's "Lenny" --the mentally retarded Henry Niles--out of David's protection so they can beat and kill him. David's defense of Henry and the principle that his home is his castle that he won't permit to be violated results in the gory deaths of several of the men in this mob, including one who is nearly decapitated by a bear trap.

The Getaway has a more linear plot. The movie portrays the journey of a man, Doc McCoy, and his wife Carol and their attempt to liberate themselves from the law and the past. The violence that occurs in the film is rooted in the story of a bank robbery and a double-cross, and although it is graphic and filmed in Peckinpah's trademark style of slow motion and multiple camera angles, it seems to lack the personal animosity that made *Straw Dogs* so disturbing, except for the character of Rudy. He kidnaps a man and woman and forces the husband to watch while he and the wife have sex. Eventually, this cruelty causes the man to hang himself in a hotel toilet without even a tear from his wife at the loss. Another interesting part of the violence in the movie is that much of it is directed toward cars. It is almost as if the cars take on the personalities of the people who drive them--instead of shooting the police, Doc shoots up the police car. It almost seems as if Peckinpah is tweaking his own reputation, in an "act of self-parody," according to Pauline Kael (112).

Another of Peckinpah's auteur characteristics is that of personal betrayal as an element of the plot. In *The Wild Bunch*, the two characters Pike Bishop and Deke Thornton deal with the effects of betraying people. Deke betrays the gang when he gives his word to bring them to justice in an attempt to free himself from prison. Pike, on the other hand, leaves men behind throughout the film and begins to hate himself for it. This self-loathing builds up until he is standing in the presence of a young Mexican whore and her child, and he realizes that if he continues to run he will lose his self respect. "When you side with a man you stay with him, and if you can't do that you're like some kind of animal," he lectures members of his gang. But these are hollow words. He understands that he has left too many people behind trying to save his own skin and getting the next big score. Crazy Lee, Old Sikes, Thornton--he has failed all of them and he knows that if he doesn't go back for Angel he is just as finished as if he does go after Angel (Seydor 169). The only difference is that if he tries to rescue Angel he dies a man, and not as some coward who could not keep his word.

Straw Dogs also deals with the issue of personal betrayal on several levels. The most glaring betrayal is that of Amy to David. Right before she is raped, she willingly gives herself over to Charlie, betraying her marriage vow to David. At the end of the movie, when she refuses to help David protect Niles, she betrays their friendship. David betrays himself as well. Throughout the entire movie he is prim and proper, the ideal civilized scholar. However, as soon as he is pushed enough, he sheds that air of civilized intellectualism and becomes something of a wild animal. He betrays his wife, Amy, as well. He refuses to acknowledge the lewd comments and looks that the men give to her. Perhaps if he had stood up for her, she would not have been raped and they would not have attacked his house.

In *The Getaway*, pretty much every character attempts to, and sometimes succeeds in, double-crossing or betraying everyone else. Jack Banyon, the crooked politician who set up the bank robbery, tries to use Doc's wife against him in order to get all the money as well as the woman. Rudy tries to double-cross Doc and steal the looted money before they even meet with Jack Banyon. Carol betrays Doc by sleeping with Jack Banyon in order to secure Doc a ticket out of prison. Even at the end of the film, an old friend of Doc's betrays him by informing both Rudy and Jack Banyon's men what room he and Carol are in. All this betrayal is more or less a commentary on how greed sways most people, how bonds can be bought, but just as easily broken.

The most interesting positive theme in Peckinpah's films is the idea of honor as a man's word. In *The Wild Bunch*, Bishop and Thornton believe that a man's word is more binding than the law. When

Thornton gives his word to bring Bishop and the others of the bunch to justice, he doesn't pretend to like it but will do it nonetheless. After all, a man's word is all that he has. Thornton says on several occasions how he wishes he could just ditch the idiots he is riding with and join up with the bunch, but he gave his word and must see it through until the end. This idea of a man's word as a code to live by is missed by many of the other characters in the film; they believe that a man's word only matters depending on whom it is given to. Pike and Deke, however, realize that if there are compromises in that code of honor, a man loses his sense of himself, perhaps the only thing that makes his life worthwhile.

Straw Dogs deals with the idea of a man's word as well. This does not really come into play until the end of the film when the townsmen are harassing David. He gives his word that Niles will not be harmed until the police and the doctor arrive. He finally draws the line and stands up for what he believes in. Amy pleads with him before all the violence happens to just give Niles over to the mob. He says no. He is defending his house and he will protect it. He gives his word on that, yet to Amy it doesn't mean anything--just silly pride. But to David it is something much more. David is trying to finally be a man, someone he can be proud of, someone who will not be pushed around anymore. He realizes that if he gives up Niles to the mob, he will not be able to stand up for himself ever again. In a literary sense, David begins to take on the qualities of an Atticus Finch. However, when he resorts to violence, he loses his civility and sacrifices his own idealism. As Peckinpah noted in an interview following release of the film, "There's a point in the middle of the siege when David almost throws up, he's so sick...He's just used a poker to kill a man who's tried to kill him…he doesn't care at that moment whether he lives or dies" (qtd. in Prince 187).

Carter "Doc" McCoy is the character whose word is his law. He is the "Thornton" of *The Getaway* because he follows his code regardless of whether following it is easy. Immediately after pulling the bank heist, when his wife, Carol, offers the option of running off with all the money and cutting Jack Banyon out of his cut, Doc scoffs and says that a man must follow through with what he says. After all, if a man doesn't have his word, he doesn't have anything. Doc's unwillingness to call his and Carol's marriage quits shows how he is a man who sticks to his word. Although times may be tough, it gives no excuse to cop out when hard times show up. Even at the end of the film, Peckinpah introduces an old scavenger (Slim Pickins) who sells his beat-up truck to the pair so they can escape into Mexico, and remarks on how it is nice to see a young couple stick it through when others would just bail.

Throughout his films, Peckinpah shows a unique approach to filmmaking that is all his own. He possessed an ability to use the conventions of the Western genre and action films--violence, betrayal, and honor--in a way that is both moving and disturbing. Although eccentric and ultimately self-destructive, Peckinpah must be considered an auteur--to call him less cheapens his cinematic genius and his accomplishments. As Paul Seydor states it: "Nobody has recognized anything in Peckinpah's work that wasn't transformed into something authentically his own by the time it got there; and like them or hate them, no one mistakes his films for anybody else's" (368).

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