MOVIES
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Great American movies have often flaunted the vulgar exhilaration of killing. And often their vulgarity was what made these films great and American. Hollywood has historically imported European directors to smother the native vulgarity with high drama, sophisticated farce, and drawing-room comedy, but the most memorable films continued to spring, often unwanted, indigenously from the violent American spirit. Murder is every dramatist's stock-in-trade, but American film-makers have had the unique ability to make the killing seem natural, boyish, and enchanting. The best American films have had it both ways: they used violence to excite and then applied more violence to comment on the excitement. Films like "Scarface", "The Killing", and "Bonnie and Clyde" put a stinger in the butterfly: the insouciant mayhem became something deeper and more deadly.

Sam Peckinpah's THE WILD BUNCH is great the way American films have traditionally been great: it understands Americans and it understands violence. And for its understanding it gets wisdom. The wisdom of "The Wild Bunch" is the wisdom of experience. It sees that a way of life is dying, but the dying is living on. And the chronicler, with a Biblical stoicism so familiar in Peckinpah's work, can only describe what he sees and hope there will be someone around to listen.

"The Wild Bunch" is simply, in Peckinpah's words, "what happens when men go to Mexico." The men are five career criminals, led by battle-weary Pike Bishop (William Holden), who have little communication about killing or personal allegiance. The reason they flee is Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan), an ex-member of the Wild Bunch who is leading a group of "egg-suckin', chicken-stealin,' gutter trash" bounty hunters. And the place is Mexico, where their life of violence ends and takes on new meaning. On the way to and in Mexico they are accompanied by the most persistent, relentless slaughter in movie hisotry.

"The Wild Bunch" contains many elements designed to appeal to a mass audience. "It is a very commercial picture, thank God," Peckinpah says. "I just happened to include some of myself in it also." On the action level, "The Wild Bunch" is the most engrossing two hours and twenty-three minutes American films have seen in several years. Peckinpah's direction is rivaled by only three or four American films of the Sixties. Lou Lombardo's editing (assisted by Peckinpah) ranks with the work of such action-cutting masters as Ford or Kurosawa. William Holden comes from the shadows to give the finest performance of his career. But all in all, "The Wild Bunch" is most impressive by its evenness. Czech director Milos Forman once said, "I do not remember the technique of any film I like." Most often that is the feeling of "The Wild Bunch"; it flows smoothly, inevitably, and always with the viewer firmly in hand.

It is important that "The Wild Bunch" play to mass audiences, and not just to retrieve its large budget. "The Wild Bunch" speaks of great, common proletarian themes and is most effective in large audiences. The film's first appeal is to a vulgar, common sensibility: heartless killings, dirty jokes, boyish horse-play. Even in the "sophisticated" preview audience with whom I saw the film, "The Wild Bunch" brought out the basketball game rooters, huzzaing each success and chortling over each indiscretion. But, like "Bonnie and Clyde", those laughs soon stick in the throat as Peckinpah goes to work on his audience.

In "The Wild Bunch" Peckinpah works through three stages of violence common to American films. First he uses violence in its most conventional form, to make the plot turn. The next stage of violence is one of vicarious thrills. We don't really care if it's logical if so-and-so is killed; we need more blood to satiate our appetite. The third stage, the most tricky, is the touchstone of violent films. At this stage the violence goes beyond vicariousness to superfluousness. We no longer want it; but it's still coming.

Violence then becomes either gratuitous or transcends itself. Peckinpah enjoys walking the thin line between destructive and constructive violence. For a long period the violence seems to verge on gratuity until something

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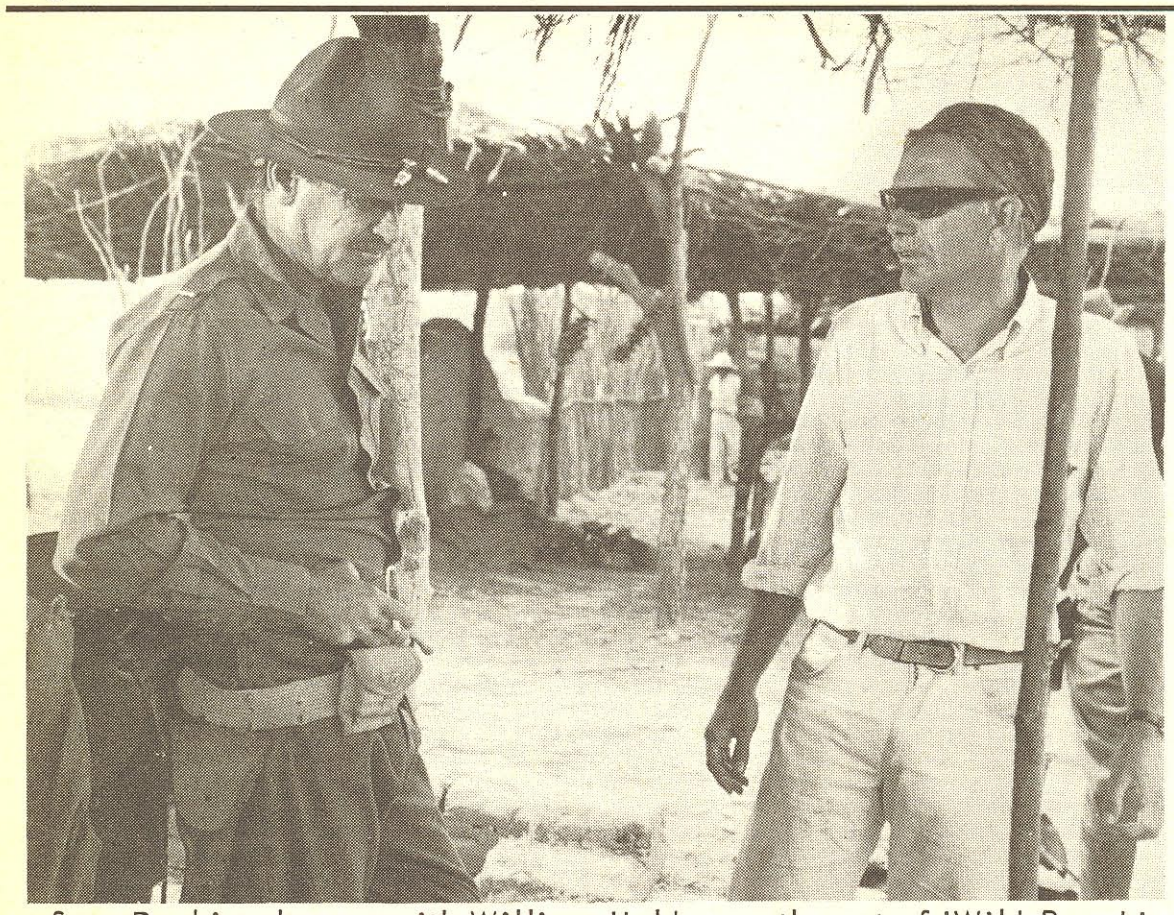

Sam Peckinpah raps with William Holden on the set of 'Wild Bunch'

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snaps and the violence begins to become something else. The moment occurred for me (and I consider it one of the finest moments in any American film) during the literal Mexican standoff when William Holden kills the Mexican general as the general's 200 armed men stand by, and then a sudden silence falls. No one moves. The gringos look at each other and begin to laugh. This is what their lives have led to, that one moment between life and death. And into death they plunge. And as the Wild Bunch charges forward the audience reels back. The violence becomes something *else. It is not so much a plot climax as it is the summational* verse of a poem: this is how it ends. But it doesn't end just then either! New killers replace the old. And in a departing gesture of shocking perversity Peckinpah brings back in double exposure the faces of each of the Wild Bunch killers, all to the stirring strains of "La Colondrina".

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. The result is one of the strongest emotional kickbacks of any film. "The Wild Bunch" does for the emotions what "Shane" did for the intellect. One goes to "The Wild Bunch" in groups and leaves alone, trying to sort out the muddle Peckinpah has made of his feelings.

The new psychopaths in the best of recent films—"Bonnie and Clyde", "Point Blank", "Pretty Poison"—have always had a strong environmental context in which to make their killing seem plausible, whether it be Depression Texas, garish new Los Angeles, or polluted rural Massachusetts. In "The Wild Bunch" Sam Peckinpah goes to Mexico for his strength. For Peckinpah Mexico represents a place perhaps more savage, but also more leisurely. It is where you go to "get yourself straightened out."

The Mexicans are no more intelligent or humane, but at least killing still has a purpose for them. The civil-war-ridden Mexico of 1911 becomes the Vietnam of the lost American Wild Bunchers. There is no frontier left in the West; the killers are tired and their actions are emotionally unsatisfactory. Unable to turn in on themselves spiritually, they head South and find a "hero's" death. On the rich Mexican soil it at least seems worthwhile.

The ending of "The Wild Bunch" exudes a defiant perversity; American violence is still boyish, but the innocence is lost. A contrast with the 1967 "Bonnie and Clyde" is stiking ("Bonnie and Clyde" is the only American film of the latter half of the Sixties which could compare with "The Wild Bunch" for involvement and impact). Bonnie and Clyde were heroes who stumbled onto bad times; at another time they might have been quite respectable. The Wild Bunch are killers in search of an environment to justify their depravity. They must create bad times in order to fill a hero's grave. The American mood of violence has changed and Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch" expresses that shift more shatteringly than any film to date—documentary or fiction, above or underground. It is the perversity of a man who loves his country.