

Peckinpah Today

**New Essays on the Films
of Sam Peckinpah**



Edited with an Introduction by Michael Bliss

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For Jeff Slater: Peckinpah archivist, gentleman, friend

Art is the habit of the artist; and habits have to be rooted deep in the personality. They have to be cultivated like any other habit, over a long period of time, by experience. . . . The habit of art . . . is more than just a discipline, although it is that; I think it is a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things.

—Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," in *Mystery and Manners*

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Introduction: Times Maybe, Not Them—The Enduring Value of Sam Peckinpah’s Films

Michael Bliss

Toward the beginning of Sam Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, the following exchange takes place.

BILLY: Sheriff Pat Garrett. Sold out to the Santa Fe Ring. How does it feel?

GARRETT: It feels like—times have changed.

BILLY: Times maybe. Not me.

In the context of the film, this dialogue’s meaning is clear: afraid of being old and poor, Garrett has made a choice that in many respects he regrets. Regardless of changing values, Billy steadfastly remains true to his principles. But there’s another possible meaning. Billy represents an idealization of how Peckinpah saw himself: as an honest outlaw who lives by a code, a man opposed to people who compromise their ethics for the sake of comfort and convenience. This notion of integrity applies equally to Peckinpah’s films’ allegiance to a series of values: loyalty, friendship, love, commitment. Now more than ever, in a period in which almost every film is touted as being significant and yet so few are, Sam Peckinpah’s films are important.

The artistic force that Peckinpah used to unlock the fascinating elements that one so often finds in his films, elements that would most properly be called forms of (in Emerson’s words) “conscious beauty,” outlives him. Like *Major Dundee*’s Amos Dundee, like Pike and his associates in *The Wild Bunch*, Sam Peckinpah has passed into legend—not because of who he was but because of what he has done. There are many instances in Peckinpah’s films of what the director referred to as “moments”—junctions at which the entire film seems to compact down to a word, a gesture, a glance, all of which shimmer with meaning: the interaction in the fog between the

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Russian boy and Steiner in *Cross of Iron*, the gentle conversation between Steve and Elsa about right and wrong in *Ride the High Country*, those brief seconds during which Cable Hogue tells Hildy, “Lady, nobody’s ever seen you before.” These moments are what people who love these films will always carry with them.

But of course, the attraction of Peckinpah’s films isn’t restricted to such moments. What we value about so many of these films is the enthusiasm that they demonstrate, not just for their subject matter but for the medium of film itself. While he was writing for the television series *Broken Arrow*, Peckinpah was offered the chance to direct an episode of the show. “Christ, they knew I was dying to direct. They didn’t have to ask me a second time,” he stated.¹ The intensity that Peckinpah brought to his television work seemed to become greater when he moved into feature films. It’s there in the tremendous tension leavened with grim humor in his first feature, *The Deadly Companions*; in the harrowing antagonisms in *Straw Dogs*; in the powerful sense of honor and loss that hangs over *Cross of Iron*. But it’s perhaps most readily appreciable in *The Wild Bunch*. The excitement about cinema in that film is apparent as soon as we hear the opening strains of Jerry Fielding’s theme music and see those first few shots of the Bunch riding into Starbuck. Not only do we feel the technical mastery at once, but we know that we’re about to view a terrific film.

In experiencing Peckinpah’s films we are brought out of ourselves, into the films, and then, finally, beyond the films, even past the artist himself, and into that region from which the films emerged: the imagination, the soul, the universe, and, one dares say it, God. It’s a heartbreaking journey, because as soon as we become acutely aware of how truly wonderful so many of these films are, we also realize how evanescent was the person who helped bring them into being. We grieve, but at the same time we celebrate—and in celebrating, we become one with those who celebrate with us.

Like all great art, Peckinpah’s films are living entities, evolving through time, nurtured by the careful attention that filmgoers and critics lavish on them. And like all living entities, these films have organic integrity. In a film such as *Ride the High Country*, the emphasis on the Bible and moral rectitude is not imposed on the film so much as grows out of the individual needs of two intimately related characters, both of whom are component parts of a great struggle to live the right kind of life. Each man faces difficulties. One stays true to his beliefs, making do as best he can. One drowns

his agonies in drink, and even when he's offered the opportunity to reform, he still feels the pull of compromise, only to eventually find himself at last, as do so many of Peckinpah's characters. Some find themselves in action, some in abusiveness. In what I consider the most significant of these films, they find themselves through spirituality. That the feature films from the first half of Peckinpah's career move toward redemption as though it were a necessary consequence is a testament less to their director than to this tendency's inevitability, while the films from the latter part of Peckinpah's career slip away from this ideal, ending sadly, even mournfully.

Peckinpah was a man who had not only great passions but a great potential for self-destruction. That the latter capacity, with its attendant despair, won out in the end was perhaps unavoidable given the abuse to which he subjected his body, which dragged down his spirit along with it, but it does not take away from the magnificent qualities in the masterpieces that he gave us, chiefly *The Wild Bunch* and *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, as well as that ruined song of cinematic textures that is *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, the finest keen for the Western ever committed to film.

The essayists in this book write from a sense of devotion to the films and all that they stand for. In a groundbreaking piece of scholarship and criticism that combines analysis with interview, Garner Simmons supplies us with insights into the role that *The Deadly Companions'* screenwriter, producer, and director played in the production of the film. *The Deadly Companions* gives us an idea of some characteristic Peckinpah dramatic concerns: the connection between love and hate, the binding of characters in fierce opposition, the focus on small cinematic elements that develop into evocative icons. Thanks to Simmons' essay, we learn a great deal about both the film and Peckinpah's working method.

Generally acknowledged as Peckinpah's masterpiece, *The Wild Bunch* is in many respects a film about a lost past and a dimly perceived future that seems bereft of possibilities. Yet at the core of the film is a subtle sense of optimism that is constantly at odds with grim realities. In my essay on the film, I endeavor to catch a bit of what I feel are the film's deeply spiritual underpinnings, which rise to its surface at its conclusion. In my view, it's this aspect of the film, and not the disappointments and violence that it so brilliantly portrays, that sets its tone.

Carrying this emotional momentum forward is the director's next film, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, a romantic tribute to the traditions and values

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of the Old West as well as a melancholy meditation on its imminent disappearance. Steven Lloyd's essay focuses on the film's biblical aspects. Not without its gritty moments, *Cable Hogue* nonetheless opts for love over violence, redemption over retribution, as Lloyd's essay makes plain while also drawing attention to the important script contributions that Peckinpah made to the film.

In large part thanks to its depiction of psychological and physical brutalities, *Straw Dogs* incited a great deal of controversy when it was first released, and it continues to do so. That the conflicted responses that the film occasions cannot be resolved is testimony to the director's complexity. Peckinpah is never easy to label, hence the inappropriateness of many of the charges leveled against this film with regard to its supposed biases. *Straw Dogs* has been widely misunderstood, a situation compounded by Peckinpah's pronouncements about Ardreyan territorial imperatives and women as little more than sex objects. Clearly, though, the film is far more refined than many of the comments on it made by its director would lead one to believe. Its condemnation of protagonist David Sumner and the subtle accenting of his wife's resolve are brutally yet artistically portrayed. As for the film's extended farmhouse assault sequence, it is less an example of directorial indulgence than a sad, foregone conclusion to the type of socially approved violence that David had been unleashing throughout the film. Michael Sragow not only investigates these notions but also shows us how Peckinpah and screenwriter David Zelag Goodman transformed Gordon Williams' pulp novel *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* into a film of extraordinary power.

Anyone familiar with Cordell Strug's essay in the first published collection of Peckinpah essays, *Doing It Right*, knows how the application of this author's deeply contemplative sensibility to Peckinpah's films yields such satisfying results. In his essay for this book, Strug focuses on *The Killer Elite* and *Cross of Iron*, two films deserving of greater critical attention. Strug shows how strongly complementary these films are, how they are both concerned with humanistic issues. Although there's a careless, slapdash feel to the former film that is not relieved by its supposed irony, both films are richer for the attention that Strug lavishes on them.

When the Special Edition of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* was released in 2005, it generated a great deal of controversy. Many writers, feeling that the so-called Director's Cut of the film accurately represented Peckinpah's

intentions, were disturbed by what they believed was an inappropriate reworking of the film. In a response to *Pat Garrett's* Special Edition, Stephen Prince asserts that it is at variance with accepted standards for film restoration. By carefully documenting the work on other film restoration projects, as well as the ethical implications of the rationales used in these projects, Prince presents us with a point of view that is argued with clarity and conviction.

Paul Seydor, the Editorial Consultant for *Pat Garrett's* 2005 version, not only provides us with information about the choices involved in the film's recutting and how they are grounded in historical data but also offers post-production information and a critical appreciation of the film that dovetail with his discussion of the work that he did on it. Together, the Prince and Seydor essays present two sides of a difficult and controversial issue.

Peckinpah's final film, *The Osterman Weekend*, received equivocal reviews when it was first released, and it has not garnered much better critical reception since then. Tony Williams addresses this imbalance by giving us an essay that views the film as a sophisticated tract on media. Complementing Williams' piece, and rounding out the volume, is Gérard Camy's essay on *The Deadly Companions* and *The Osterman Weekend*, which highlights what a dramatic shift in sensibility there is between the two films and grants us a deeply personal view of what Camy regards as the darkening path that Peckinpah's artistic odyssey took him on.

Here, then, is *Peckinpah Today*: not just a collection of essays but a collaborative attempt to evoke the essence of the films and all that they stand for. Changing times notwithstanding, these films remain. Like their director's spirit, Sam Peckinpah's work lives on, today and always.

Note

1. Qtd. in Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films—A Reconsideration*, 6.

The Deadly Companions Revisited

Garner Simmons

Over the quarter century since his death, Sam Peckinpah's reputation has evolved out of critical acclaim for eight of his fourteen features. By general consensus, his best work can be seen in the exceptional *Ride the High Country*, *The Wild Bunch*, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, *Straw Dogs*, *Junior Bonner*, and *The Getaway*, along with his two flawed masterpieces *Major Dundee* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*.¹ It is no small tribute to Peckinpah's talents that these eight films span barely a dozen years—an intensely creative period from 1961 to 1973. This fact seems even more remarkable when one takes into account the years immediately following the debacle of *Major Dundee*, which resulted in Peckinpah being deemed “difficult” and essentially “unemployable.”

While much has justifiably been written about these core films, considerably less time has been spent examining the film that effectively launched Peckinpah's career as a feature director—*The Deadly Companions*. Despite the fact that Peckinpah himself repeatedly attempted to dismiss it as flawed beyond redemption and unrepresentative of his artistic intent, the film still bears his undeniable stamp. Yet over the years, *The Deadly Companions* has failed to attract more than a smattering of serious critical consideration. Clearly, the time for reexamination is long overdue.

In 1973, the year I began to write *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage*, it was impossible to view *The Deadly Companions* due to legal wrangling over who controlled the copyright. Since I had not seen the film in its original release in 1961, I was anxious to locate a print. Upon my arrival in Los Angeles, having spent three weeks with Peckinpah in Mexico, where he was preparing to film *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, I managed to track down

a 16mm copy of the film at a company called Bartco, which was located in Hollywood on North Cole Avenue. Despite reluctantly admitting that they had the film, they were unwilling to screen it for me. After some discussion, I finally managed to persuade a gentleman who worked there named Pat Duram to allow me to “borrow” the print for twenty-four hours. I then contacted the AFI, housed at the time in the Doheny mansion in Beverly Hills, which was good enough to allow me the use of a screening room. Given the difficulties I had experienced in simply obtaining the film, I ran it twice out of concern I might never see it again. What immediately struck me were the similarities it shared with Peckinpah’s other works in terms of look, tone, and thematic concerns, despite his efforts to disclaim it.

Today, of course, it is possible to purchase a DVD of the film.² Seeing it again recently reminded me of how much the picture reflected Peckinpah’s fledgling style. It also made me wonder anew about what really went on between Peckinpah and producer Charles B. FitzSimons during the making of the film. I had interviewed FitzSimons in 1974 and included a portion of that interview in the chapter of my book that dealt with *The Deadly Companions*. And while I had interviewed Peckinpah extensively, he had had such a negative experience during the making of the film that he refused to discuss it in any depth. However, in rereading the transcriptions that I had made of those interviews, I began to see how things that seemed irrelevant then now warranted closer examination. What had always been lacking, of course, was the original source material, mainly the script itself. In my initial research for the book, I had learned that the writer, A. S. Fleischman, had actually turned his screenplay into a novel published under the title *Yellowleg*. However, since it had been a paperback original with no hardcover printing, I had been unable to track down a copy at the time. With the advent of the Internet, this was no longer an obstacle.

After locating a copy of the novel online, I purchased a first edition, published in 1960, for a mere ten dollars.³ But despite the claim by FitzSimons that Fleischman had adapted the novel directly from his screenplay, there were inconsistencies with respect to the finished film that made me wonder if this was correct. With both Peckinpah and FitzSimons no longer alive, I decided to go in search of A. S. Fleischman.

Born in 1920, Albert Sidney Fleischman was a former newspaperman turned novelist who had adapted his own novel *Blood Alley* into a screenplay for John Wayne and director William Wellman.⁴ This in turn led him

to write *Yellowleg*, which would eventually make it to the screen as *The Deadly Companions*. Fleischman would become better known as a writer of award-winning juvenile fiction. Taking a chance, I decided to contact him through his website and discovered that he still lived and wrote in Southern California. Agreeing to meet with me, he not only was willing to talk about his experiences on *The Deadly Companions* but also provided me with a copy of his screenplay. This new infusion of previously unknown source material coupled with the transcriptions of the interviews mentioned above form the basis for this study.

It seems decidedly prophetic that Peckinpah's career as a feature director should begin with a film titled *The Deadly Companions*, considering the acrimonious conflicts that would develop between Peckinpah and FitzSimons. Peckinpah had just come off of *The Westerner*, the television series he had created for Dick Powell at Four Star Productions, a prolific television company in the 1950s and early 1960s. As producer, writer, and director on the series, Peckinpah had effectively been given full creative control. Clearly accustomed to making all creative decisions himself, Sam Peckinpah was young, talented, and ill-prepared for his encounter with FitzSimons. Ironically, this primal conflict can be seen as a paradigm for the struggles Peckinpah would have with producers throughout his career.

Charles B. FitzSimons was Irish by birth and a lawyer by training. As both a producer and actress Maureen O'Hara's brother,⁵ FitzSimons had been on the lookout for a script that would take advantage of his sister's talents. At the same time, such a film would allow him to make the transition to full producer.⁶ Hence, he had taken a proprietary position with respect to *The Deadly Companions* long before Peckinpah arrived on the scene.

Speaking about the film in June 1974, FitzSimons maintained: "*The Deadly Companions* originated as a long treatment by a very fine writer named A. S. Fleischman that I fell in love with. The treatment was originally optioned by Marlon Brando. And I waited and waited to see what Brando would do with it, and when Brando decided to do *One-Eyed Jacks*, he dropped his option on the treatment. So I met with Fleischman and talked to him about what I wanted to do with [the project] and he and I became firm friends and partners, forming a company called Carousel Productions. He then wrote what I considered to be a fairly brilliant screenplay."⁷

Interestingly, Fleischman, who preferred to be called "Sid," remembered the situation somewhat differently. Still a working writer despite his age, he agreed

to meet with me only after completing what would turn out to be his final book, a biography on comedian and filmmaker Charlie Chaplin (published shortly before Fleischman's death in 2010 as *Sir Charlie: Chaplin, the Funniest Man in the World*). When we finally did sit down together, Fleischman began by explaining that *The Deadly Companions*—originally titled *Yellowleg*—had begun as a screenplay since he did not believe in or use treatments. He recalled: “I had gotten an option for the screenplay from Marlon Brando. So to support [Brando's attempt to set the film up] and to give it a little more dignity, I turned it into a novel. I don't recall how long Brando had it—and he helped himself to a couple of ideas, which he used in *One-Eyed Jacks*, by the way—but when he let it go, Charles came into the picture.”⁸

Working together, FitzSimons and Fleischman struggled to get the financial backing to mount a production. According to Fleischman, at least some of the difficulty came from the kind of film they were attempting to make. “The picture was really Maureen's picture,” he recalled. “But of course having a Western as a woman's picture gave us all sorts of problems at the time in terms of marketing. But Charles was determined, and he eventually put the deal together.”⁹

Similarly, FitzSimons remembered:

We found it very, very difficult to get financial backing for the motion picture because it was this morality play and required the carrying of a dead child in a coffin throughout the film. Many people wanted us to change the story . . . but we refused to do it.

Then we got lucky. Fleischman had written it as a novel from his screenplay which was published by Gold Medal in paperback and was enormously successful—it sold around 250,000 copies. So based on the success of the novel, [James S.] Sam Burkett, who at that time was head of sales for Pathe Laboratories, persuaded Pathe to co-finance the picture along with the Theater Owners of America.

My first choice for the role of Yellowleg was Brian Keith. Maureen was going to play the girl. . . . At that time I had other ideas as to who I wanted to direct it. But Brian had some form of moral commitment to Sam Peckinpah with whom he had done the television series *The Westerner*. And Brian asked if we would consider Peckinpah for the picture. So I ran some of the episodes of the series and agreed to give him a chance.¹⁰

It is possible that FitzSimons' claim that Brian Keith was his first choice for the role of Yellowleg was in deference to his relationship with Keith at the time, but Fleischman remembered the casting somewhat differently:

We were going to do it with Errol Flynn. But Flynn died unexpectedly. So we decided to form Carousel Productions with Maureen O'Hara, Charles's sister. Given her status as a major star at the time, Maureen agreed to do the picture for scale but take a 50 percent stake in the company; Charles and I owned a quarter each. Maureen had just done *Parent Trap* with Brian, and they had gotten along very well. So we decided to offer him the role. We then hired Peckinpah on Brian Keith's recommendation for \$15,000. We only paid Brian \$30,000. The entire picture was done for \$300,000 to \$400,000—unheard of for a picture of that quality at the time.¹¹

Sam, when I knew him, was a much different director than he would become. This reputation he developed for being a wild man—arrogant and difficult—was not evident on *Deadly Companions*. In fact, one of the very few times I remember Sam losing his temper was the scene where Brian Keith is supposed to shoot a rattlesnake. But the sharpshooter we had hired didn't kill the snake with the first shot and had to shoot it a second time. And Sam really blew up because it wasn't a clean kill. Of course in the final cut all you see is one shot and the snake's dead. But Sam obviously hated to see it suffer. I liked Sam but Charles did not, and I think that the picture suffered because of that.

Deadly Companions had become Charles's passion. Getting it made took us years. He felt he knew what he wanted literally in every shot. And that made it very tough for Peckinpah. Now Peckinpah went to Tucson ahead of us. And when we got there, he had hired a secretary and had begun to rewrite the script. That's where the trouble started because Charles didn't even bother to read his notes. He simply said to Sam: "We hired you to shoot the script." Charles and I had worked hard on that script. Now I was far more flexible than Charles because I always felt that if something wasn't working, I could come up with another idea. But Charles wanted that script shot as is. And they were both fairly bullheaded when it came to artistic decisions. And that was a problem.¹²

FitzSimons concurred: "Now I believe that everyone is entitled to his opinion, but I also believe that there has to be a boss. Unquestionably, Sam

thought that everything he was suggesting was right, and I felt that, having spent two years on what we had, there was no reason to change. I couldn't believe that the author and I could be that far wrong. So we went ahead, and we made the picture according to the original screenplay without any of Peckinpah's changes. And as he would try to change it during shooting, we would lock horns."¹³

However, irrespective of FitzSimons' stated belief that he had prevented Peckinpah from straying very far from the script, a comparison between the original screenplay and the finished film reveals a number of striking differences. In fact, after a careful examination of the film, it is possible to discern Peckinpah's unique imprint despite FitzSimons' resistance. And it begins with the very first scene.

Both Fleischman's screenplay and the novel open in daylight with three riders—Turk, Billy, and a former Union cavalry sergeant called Yellowleg—headed for the town of Gila City, ostensibly to rob the bank there. The film, however, opens quite differently. Entering an out-of-the-way barroom at night, Yellowleg (Brian Keith) passes a man, Turk (Chill Wills), balancing on a barrel, his hands tied behind his back, a noose around his neck, and five aces pinned to his shirt. Reaching the bar, Yellowleg catches sight of the teeth marks in Turk's left hand and instantly realizes that this is the man who attempted to scalp him on a Civil War battlefield some years before—the man he's been pursuing ever since. When he asks what's going on, the bartender refers to Turk as a "five-ace card player," while the men he cheated lay bets on how long it will take him to slip off the barrel and hang himself. Unwilling to allow Turk to die before he can claim his revenge, Yellowleg intervenes. Knocking out one of the card players, he starts to cut Turk down when Billy (Steve Cochran) enters, shirt undone and a pair of six-guns in hand, from a backroom in the company of two prostitutes. Seeing what's happening, Billy reacts, shooting the rope before Yellowleg can finish cutting Turk down. The three men then leave together. Once outside in the dark, Yellowleg takes charge, suggesting he knows of a town with "a new bank and an old marshal" that they might rob. Mounting up, they head off together for Gila City.

While Fleischman did not remember the details of writing this opening scene, he did recall that the suggestion of a man balancing on a barrel with a noose around his neck as being Peckinpah's idea. Despite how protective FitzSimons was regarding Fleischman's screenplay being the sole source

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