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Peckinpah’s Walden: The Violent Indictment of “Civilization” in The Wild Bunch

This article argues that the rhetoric of Sam Peckinpah’s film The Wild Bunch is substantially indebted to the politics of American Transcendentalism as propagated in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. Themes and preoccupations such as the notion of civil revolt, non-conformity, the appreciation of nature as a condition for individuality and the distrust of technological progress all resurface in Peckinpah’s film, where a perceived threat to these ideals is countered by apocalyptic violence. Furthermore, when contrasted with another notable aesthetics of violence - that of Futurism - it becomes clear that the consecration of nature in The Wild Bunch finds embodiment also on the purely stylistic level: whereas Futurism typically invokes the machine as an aesthetic model, poetic form in Peckinpah draws its main inspiration from the anarchically organic forces of nature.

As a technological universe, advanced industrial society is a political universe, the latest stage in the realization of a specific historical project – namely, the experience, transformation, and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination. (Herbert Marcuse)

Much ink has already been spilled over the significance of violence in the cinema of Sam Peckinpah, and in The Wild Bunch (1969) in particular. Critics have examined the film’s savage images from numerous different angles – biographical, cultural, historical, etc.¹ Taking its cue from

Marcuse's statement above, the current discussion will explore the degree to which the repression of "nature" by the forces of modernity may be appreciated as a critical framework in which to explain this obsession with violence. My paper is thus of a synthetic, interpretive nature rather than of an aesthetic one, and aims at providing an additional context in which to grasp this still controversial film. Although some scholars have attempted to analyze the problem of violence in purely theoretical terms, my premise here is that the phenomenon must be grasped contextually. Violence in fiction, I would argue, is always violence-in-relation-to some aspect of human life. I do not, however, thereby imply that the causes of brutal actions in the diegetic worlds of artistic texts can be traced mechanically or systematically, but rather that the filmic (or, for that matter, literary) inscription of violent structures may be investigated according to a myriad of influences which, if nothing else, at least contribute to a richer understanding of how this fictional violence might be appropriated hermeneutically.

The argument with which I commence this inquiry should be relatively familiar. On more than one occasion it has been argued that one important “theme” in The Wild Bunch is that of the mourning of the vanishing of the old West. According to this view, the sensibility of the film represents a form of cultural pessimism and distrust of historical progress whose violent response metaphorically indicts the state of

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