

Self-consumption as the Last Frontier in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*

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Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) was revolutionary in its depiction of violence in Hollywood cinema, and his stylistic design of violence greatly influenced subsequent filmmakers. His various techniques for producing ultraviolence — multi-camera filming, montage editing, the juxtaposition of slow motion and normal tempo, the usage of blood squibs — accompany the victimized bodies with a balletic effect. Peckinpah's portrayal of graphic violence on-screen gave rise to controversy among critics who either hailed the director as a serious artist or condemned him as a sadist and a glorifier of violence. But regardless of the psychological effects on the audience, Peckinpah's stylistic representation of violence seems to function as a way of describing a postmodern concept of human subjectivity, clearly unlike the traditional notion of the self-authored subject described in classical Westerns, in which an individual hero with a special ability always surpasses society.

In the opening and climax of the film, the audience finds two massacre sequences in place of the face-to-face confrontation between individuals seen in traditional Westerns. In each of the battles, the Bunch, led by Pike Bishop, recklessly shoots anyone around them with a machine gun instead of traditional six-guns, without distinguishing between the common public and their enemies. Here, the violence of the “heroes” represents neither justice nor individualism.

Violence in the classical Western generally supports individual heroism. Michael Coyne suggests that violence in the Western functions to support the hero's independence as an individual:

More than any other genre, the Western was a paean to individualism, a consummate fantasy of freedom of movement and limitless horizons, lacking most social constraints, especially those governing the use of vio-

lence. No Western movie hero ever sidestepped a showdown because he was worried about job security, mortgage payments or how the courts might judge him for taking the law into his own hands. (11)

Indeed, heroes in classical Westerns control villains or Indians with their masculine power; their violence, based on personal belief and not on the law or social rules, appears as justice and constitutes their identities as individuals.

Peckinpah himself remarks on his fascination for the Western heroes' strength as individuals (Seydor 181). Yet, when the heroes of *The Wild Bunch* lead themselves to self-destruction as the outcome of their own violence, how can we understand their violence and death? Indeed, the "wild bunch," the central figure of the film is not an individual but a group of outlaws who are self-seeking killers. Surprisingly, viewers accept that they are doomed to die and not triumph. It, however, does not mean that the viewers simply regard the Bunch members as evil. Peckinpah realizes that his spectators would empathize with his outlaws who obey Pike Bishop's code to their final demise: "The strange thing is that you feel a great sense of loss when these killers reach the end of the line" (Seydor 181).

The cause and effect of violence and death in the film have been the central questions among critics: why the outlaws need to die, and how Peckinpah's excessive violence or the outlaws' deaths affect the audience. For example, Michael Bliss believes that upholding "a set of values by which one lives," which is the most inevitable attribute that allows *The Wild Bunch* to retain its identity as Western, brings about "redemption" to the Bunch (xvii). He also believes that their suicidal deaths create "a religious feeling" among the viewers (xvi). In this essay, I will focus on the function of violence in the narrative structure rather than its psychological effects on the audience, because this violence seems to indicate that the relationship between the individual and society based on the Western myth has definitively changed in the film. Before discussing *The Wild Bunch*, I will examine the hero's masculinity and femininity in Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) because these masterpieces of the 1950s as well as *The Wild Bunch* describe the transformation of the relationship between the individual and society through the disorientation of masculinity and femininity in the heroes.

Martin Pumphrey pays attention to the taboo of presenting a hero in the

nude in traditional Westerns and suggests that the genre has been the educational code that implants "individual (modern) masculinities" in the viewers' minds (51). The Western heroes generally escape from exposing even the upper halves of their bodies because "[n]akedness diminishes masculinity" (55). The typical Westerns have presented the canon of American masculinity; the frontier spirit based on freedom and democracy has been linked to this image of masculinity. Pumphrey, however, clarifies that Western heroes are originally ambiguous:

Heroes must be *both* dominant and deferential, gentle and violent, self-contained and sensitive, practical and idealist, individualist and conformist, rational and intuitive, peace-loving and ready to fight without quitting at a moment's notice. Quite simply, the hero's masculine toughness must be partially feminised. (52)

The heroes' feminine characteristics are necessary for distancing them from the villains. They basically side with the townspeople and assimilate into the community. Yet the heroes' feminine characteristics are elaborately hidden from the viewers' perception. Heroes are shown attending to their "cleanliness," while the scenes of bathing or shaving are never presented on-screen (53). Villains can display their naked bodies, but only in the revealing of "wounding and torture" is nakedness allowed in the case of heroes (55).

However, the films *High Noon* and *The Searchers* imply that the heroes' feminization represents the change in their relationship with society. In the narrative structure of the Western genre suggested by Will Wright, the classical hero is an unknown outsider to the local people, but he is finally accepted by the community after fighting against the villains (48–49). The narrative structure of *High Noon*, however, is reversed: the hero, Will Kane, is not an outsider but remains inside the community to protect the civilization as the sheriff of Hadleyville (Wright 74). The reversal of the classical plot is not irrelevant to the hero's femininity. Kane proves his masculinity in his scuffle with a deputy, but he goes to a barber shop to recover his neat appearance and a clean-shaven face in preparation for his fight with the villains. In addition to the civilization of his body in the shaving scene, Kane is "feminized" when he requires his wife's support to win the duel.

In *The Searchers*, as Pumphrey points out, Martin Pawley, who becomes a homesteader after his marriage with Laurie, exposes his naked body on three occasions, including in a bath scene, while Ethan Edwards, the masculine hero, reveals his wounded body only once (56). Martin's femininity and warmhearted personality seem to be connected with his own identity as the other; he is one-eighth Indian blood, although he is raised in a white, male dominated society. Finally, Martin's good balance of masculinity and femininity becomes crucial in resolving Ethan's racism and haughty attitude toward women; Martin mediates between Ethan, who cannot forgive his niece for assimilating into the Indian community, and Debby, who unlike other white captive girls, can cope with her white and Indian identities without becoming unhinged.

In addition, both films promote rather than conceal the masculine characteristics of the female characters. In *High Noon*, the difference between the two female characters is visually emphasized: Kane's white Quaker wife, Amy Fowler, appears in a white dress, and his former lover, Helen Ramirez, a Mexican woman, is in black. However, in reference to these women, Gwendolyn Foster suggests, "neither fits the mold of the classical good-girl, bad-girl scenario" (94). Amy maintains her Quaker principles and resists her husband's violence; Helen succeeds as a businesswoman and her Mexican identity never surrenders to her white male lovers'.

In *The Searchers*, Martin's femininity is emphasized by Laurie's masculine attributes. Laurie actively expresses her affection for Martin and ridicules him when he is defenseless in a bathtub. Her strong personality and physical robustness also appear in a scene where she thrusts Martin from her. In contrast to the subversion of the typical gender roles in the younger generation, Ethan's exaggerated manliness does not allow him to have a lover or wife, and Martha, who welcomes him affectionately, is described as a feminine and motherly woman. Thus, in *The Searchers*, the traditional hero and heroine figures (Ethan and Martha) are revised into the feminized hero and masculinized heroine (Martin and Laurie) in the alternation of generations both within the film and in the history of the Western genre.

In *High Noon* and *The Searchers*, the male protagonists' feminine characteristics are accompanied by their female counterparts' masculine qualities. The

alteration between male and female images reflects the heroes' difficulties in exploring the frontier; therefore, Fred Zinnemann and John Ford observe the conflicts concealed within the community — capitalistic self-interest and racism — rather than seeking the "other" in the outside world. *High Noon* focuses on Kane's struggle with the capitalist ideas of citizenry and his repudiation of society. In *The Searchers*, Ethan experiences the difficulty with his own discrimination against the Indians rooted in the white man's society rather than Indians as established enemies. Thus, in the two films, the heroes find a true enemy within society; their personas are complicated in that they are deeply involved in society while partially surpassing it.

In *The Wild Bunch*, compared to *High Noon* and *The Searchers*, the diminishment of the frontier spirit is more clearly expressed metaphorically through the heroes' "aging" bodies, which cannot be controlled by their masculine power. Peckinpah breaks the taboo of the hero in the nude and draws the viewer's attention to the sauna scene between the four members (Pike, Dutch, Angel, and Old Sykes) and the Gorch brothers' bath scene with prostitutes. The members of the Bunch bathe following their agreement to rob an American military train for general Mapache in order to receive a reward in exchange for the stolen weapons. In the sauna, Pike and Dutch promise Angel to let him save a case of rifles for his villagers in exchange for his share of the reward money. Why does Peckinpah set this important negotiation scene, which leads to the final battle, in an environment where they are all naked? In the sauna scene, the audience witnesses the outlaws' aging bodies, except for Angel's, instead of their masculine strength. Their attention is also drawn to Pike's wounded body, but the significant scar on his thigh is not a mark of his bravery but the bitter reminder of his failure to protect Aurora, the Mexican woman whom he loved, from her husband's violence. Furthermore, the white, flaccid bellies of Dutch and Old Sykes foretell the transiency of their careers as wild outlaws. Indeed, in the same scene, Pike relates his hopes for retirement to Dutch. In contrast to the young Mexican Angel, who relinquishes his share of the award money for his people and village, Pike realizes that there is no longer a frontier to be explored because he is losing his stance as the unyielding leader of the Bunch.

However, if we view the outlaws' death as a result of heroism, which accord-

ing to Michael Bliss determines the film as a Western, how do they assert their masculinity? Richard Slotkin states that Pike's Bunch has lost the women who justify their violence:

In an outlaw/gunfighter Western the romantic symbolism vested in the redemptive woman reinforces (and sometimes substitutes for) the love of justice and democracy as a guide to the *redemptive* use of violence. The "evil" order is identified by its corporate character, its deliberate assault on the family, and/or its victimization of the redemptive woman. And once the evil order is so identified, the conventional genre-values of "populism" and "romantic love" authorize the hero to use whatever degree of violence might be necessary to punish and destroy the evil. But in *The Wild Bunch*, the linked motives of populist sympathy and redemptive love are first disconnected, then discredited; as a result, the heroes' license to kill is called into question. (603–4)

In the classical Western, the female protagonists are categorized into two stereotypes: schoolmarm and bad girl. Maidens, rescued by heroes, prove that masculine strength or violence can be turned into justice. In *High Noon* and *The Searchers*, there exist women (Amy and Debby) whom heroes should rescue although the films are no longer this simplistic in their narrative patterns and themes.

In *The Wild Bunch*, however, it is Pike's code that finally protects the Bunch's masculinity from Mapache's sadistic cruelty: "You're not getting rid of anybody. We're going to stick together just like it used to be. When you side with a man, you stay with him. If you can't do that, you're like some animal. You're finished! We're finished! All of us!" But Peckinpah informs the audience of Pike's self-violation of the principle with the usage of three flashbacks: first, he abandons his best friend, Deke Thornton, to avoid being captured in a brothel; second, his discovery that Crazy Lee is Sykes' grandson reminds him that he has deliberately left the young man in the railroad office to escape from an ambush; and third, his careless meeting with Aurora results in her death. Pike's memories accompanied by flashbacks, force him to return to the past. On the contrary, Angel represents a positive future through his choice to support his people. The young Mexican, the embodiment of otherness in the white male group, seems to be the alternative to the salvation of a woman by

the Bunch.

Peckinpah, other than feminizing Angel in this small community uniquely composed of men, ensures Pike's masculinity through Dutch's admiration for him. Pike, who is aging and has a weak leg, falls from his horse. His vulnerability paradoxically proves his leadership. Without retorting to the Gorch brothers' sarcastic remarks, he practices his code with a dignified attitude. The close-up of Dutch's face reflects his respect for Pike; his warm gaze directed at Pike's back demonstrates that Pike still deserves his place as their leader. In addition, Dutch sleeps close to Pike in a bivouac and repeatedly calls out his name in their last moments. Dutch's potential homosexuality has been discussed, but it seems to me that Peckinpah just needed to integrate some feminine components to activate the more masculine elements in this homogeneous group of men.

Peckinpah repeatedly emphasizes that romantic love as well as a female figure who should be rescued by a hero is an illusion created by the Western myth. After frolicking with prostitutes in the wine bath, the Gorch brothers bring the women to the sauna. Lyle, who is completely inebriated, introduces one woman to his members: "I want you to meet my fiancée." His comical performance of romantic love sends the other members into gales of laughter. The Bunch members laugh at Lyle's dubious fantasy for marriage since they have no idea how to engage in romantic love in their relationships with prostitutes.

In *The Wild Bunch*, all of the female characters, including Teresa and Aurora, with whom Angel and Pike get involved romantically, are finally treated as the men's properties. Pike's one true love is killed by her husband, who feels insulted by another man's "robbery." In a similar manner, Angel, who apparently represents anti-capitalism, shoots his fiancée, Teresa, the moment he confirms that she has willingly eloped with Mapache to become his woman. When informed that Teresa is Angel's mistress, Mapache responds to her death with satisfactory laughter. Teresa's worth — to be romantic for another — indirectly strokes Mapache's masculine ego. Referring to the "misogyny at the base of romantic love" (103) that Pike and Angel share, Christopher Sharrett points out that Peckinpah deliberately nuances the differences between Pike, Angel, and Mapache (86). In the bath scene, Peckinpah shows

American aging bodies in contrast to the young Mexican's muscular body, but Angel does not necessarily represent an opposing societal value to those represented by Pike or Mapache. In other words, the three men are all dominated by a capitalistic ideology that absorbs the other into the self.

The Wild Bunch exposes that the categorization of virgins and prostitutes is just an illusion that helps conceal the negative aspect of masculinity in order to enhance Western civilization; in the film, masculinity, without justice, just works to support capitalism. When the Bunch enters San Rafael to rob the railroad office, Pike accidentally collides with a senior woman but follows with a polite apology and an offer to escort her. But his act can be viewed as chivalry only when the woman does not match up to his masculine power. Angel, who is also dominated by such a binary classification of women, fails to accept that Teresa herself can be motivated by capitalistic self-interest and simply worships her as a "goddess." Thus, when he shoots her, Angel never deals with her as the Other who is beyond his understanding, but the other under his control.

Supporting Peckinpah's deconstruction of the virgin-prostitute structure, John L. Simons believes that Pike's loving memories of Aurora induces his final commitment to his code — the rescue of Angel. Pike, before the final battle, acquires a Mexican prostitute. The young woman in a white slip, with her baby, resembles the Madonna. Simons states, "Pike makes love with the young woman, recapitulates his *physical and spiritual* love for Aurora, and becomes at once a new man and the father of his reborn self" (emphasis added, 101). In contrast to Simons, who focuses on Pike's physical and spiritual love for a woman, Michael Coyne refers to Pike's "orgasmic" killing of a woman in the final battle (157). Indeed, it seems problematic to consider Peckinpah's description of women and men beyond the binary opposition of romantic love and sexual desire since his characters themselves are occupied with the simple classification of women.

In addition to the confusion of a clear separation between pure love and prostitution, *The Wild Bunch* dissolves many opposing values — heroes and villains, civilization and brutality, innocence and cruelty, good girl and bad. In the opening of the film, a group of children torture a swarm of red ants and some scorpions. More shockingly, the captured Angel is chased and assaulted

by children in Mapache's armed town. The viewers also watch an infant suckled by a Mexican mother with her bandolier strap lying between her breasts.

The difficulty in interpreting *The Wild Bunch* without depending on one or the other of the two opposite values truly appears in the argument of some critics who are concerned with Peckinpah's depiction of violence and its moral effects on the audience. The complexity of editing violence, beyond realism, gives some viewers tremendous visual exhilaration. Recollecting his first viewing of *The Wild Bunch*, Charles Higson remarked that, for him, the film's violence produced tremendous sexual excitement: "Once the film was over, I was exhausted and in a state of high nervous excitement. I wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. I wanted a Gatling gun. I wanted to be pierced by a hundred bullets." (*Savage Cinema* 99). In *Savage Cinema*, Stephen Prince admits that Peckinpah's dynamic usage of montages and slow motion, against his expectation to wake people up to the horror and agony of violence, made violence aesthetically beautiful and fascinated many viewers (98). Prince, however, believes that the explicitness of Peckinpah's violence can originate in his moral purpose:

[B]y situating that violence in a narrative context marked by despair, melancholy, and suffering and by placing a bad protagonist at the center of the narrative, Peckinpah aimed to alienate viewers from their own excitement and enjoyment of the aestheticized violence. The self-consciousness that might result from this alienation — the awareness of one's own fascination with violence and the excited emotional response to it — was intended by Peckinpah to be disturbing, painful, at times terrifying. (229)

Prince estimates that Peckinpah's cinema embodies "more humanistic moral sensibility" than do the works of contemporary filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, and Quentin Tarantino, whose violence fail to represent psychological and emotional anguish and numb their viewers to ultraviolence (xix). In contrast to Prince, Sylvia Chong insists that Peckinpah and Stone both lose the control over the responses of their viewers because of "the very obscenity of their representations, blurring as it were the gap between materiality and textuality — transgressing the boundaries between inside and outside the body, victim and aggressor, and pain and pleasure" (261). Prince

himself recognizes, the audience responds to Peckinpah's violence in different ways and his violence can be discussed in the context beyond the dichotomy of good and bad. If we attempt to abstract ethics from *The Wild Bunch*, it seems possible that Peckinpah did not resolve the contradictions in his outlaws' character building and their motivation that led to the last battle, although not in his purpose for having used stylistic violence.

Referring to the twist in Pike's code and finding no redemption in the outlaws, Wheeler Winston Dixon estimates Peckinpah as an artist whose subject is "the collapse of the Western" (174). *The Wild Bunch* actually reveals that the frontier myth, which has celebrated violence and individualism, is an illusion in corporate capitalism, where an individual hero never surpasses society. It is visually represented in the final massacre that exposes the Bunch members who are victimizers and victims at the same time. Nonetheless, the film can still be considered a Western in that the outlaws narrowly protect their masculine images in their desperate sacrificing of themselves, maintaining their belief in the frontier myth; they can no longer see their future in the outside world and, hence, the consumption of their heroic images is the only frontier, which is within themselves. Deke Thornton, who mourns Pike's death, and Old Skyes, the last survivor of the Bunch, choose to pursue their paths in the revolution in Mexico. Peckinpah, however, seems to realize that consuming their self-images as Western heroes is the last imaginary frontier that remains for his outlaws.

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