

Document Citation

Title	Blood of a poet: the cinema according to Sam Peckinpah
Author(s)	Kathleen Murphy
Source	<i>National Film Theatre (London, England)</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	6
Subjects	Peckinpah, Sam (1925-1984), Fresno, California, United States
Film Subjects	The Osterman weekend, Peckinpah, Sam, 1983 The ballad of Cable Hogue, Peckinpah, Sam, 1970 The Wild bunch, Peckinpah, Sam, 1969 Straw dogs, Peckinpah, Sam, 1971 The Killer elite, Peckinpah, Sam, 1975 Junior Bonner, Peckinpah, Sam, 1972 Ride the high country, Peckinpah, Sam, 1962 The Getaway, Peckinpah, Sam, 1972 The Deadly companions, Peckinpah, Sam, 1961 Bring me the head of alfredo garcía, Peckinpah, Sam, 1974 Convoy, Peckinpah, Sam, 1978

Cross of iron, Peckinpah, Sam, 1977

Major dundee, Peckinpah, Sam, 1964

Pat garrett & billy the kid, Peckinpah, Sam, 1973

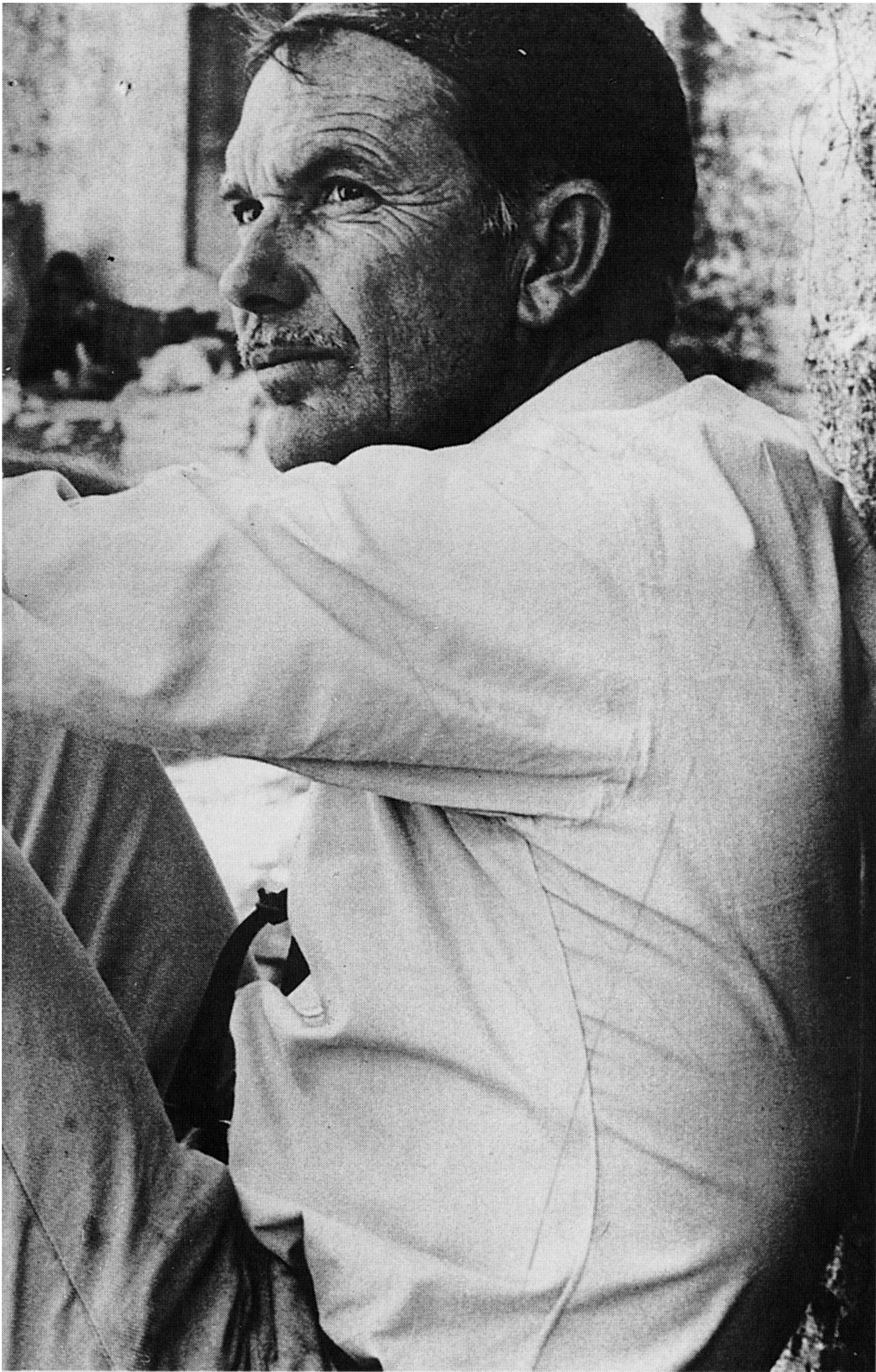
Blood of a Poet

the cinema according to Sam Peckinpah

Sam Peckinpah

A bent but fundamental moralist, Peckinpah found baptisms where he could, in tacky hotel showers, in the free flow of wine and tequila, in momentarily Edenic lakes and ponds, and always in the blood of his much-fallen and fragmented Christs. In the end, Cable Hogue gets run down by a shiny green horseless carriage – ‘just a means of transportation,’ a machine the colour of money. Movies – risky vehicles promising transports – and the money that drives them did Peckinpah in. Hooked on their power and beauty, he laid sole claim, with fatal hubris, to the machinery of creation. Film-making, as much as Montana or Mexico, was Sam’s idea of Eden, his Great Good Place. An artist of the first water, he was much in exile. Rarely matched in metaphysical montage – poetic manipulation of cinematic time and space – Peckinpah had a gift for mapping out the fault lines and high ground in American myth/mise-en-scène. Bastard son of John Ford, he too found the West fertile in legend, but showed the American Dream profaned... going, gone rotten, machines (and money) choking *The Wagon Master’s* garden, Ford’s hard-won gatherings at the river mutating into soulless centres of commerce, Chinese boxes of power and paranoia. When that ranch-house door shuts on Ethan Edwards at the end of *The Searchers*, Ford’s hero is irrevocably out of room and out of time.

Following John Huston, Peckinpah populated his movies with colourful dregs, down-and-outers with a penchant for bravely, obsessively taking off on dangerous trips to nowhere – for honour,



'It's not so much dyin' you hate... it's not knowing what they're goin' to say about you when you're gone,' confides the eponymous hero of *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*. As apt an epitaph for Sam Peckinpah – much mistook in his time – as for Cable himself. This American auteur's 14-film gallery, along with his television work, is crowded with shattered mirrors of himself.

revenge, money or just the hell of it. You can hear unmistakable Hustonian echoes in old Eddie Sykes' (Edmond O'Brien) laughter as dust blows over the Wild Bunch's last stand and Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan) enlists yet another Mexican lost cause. Peckinpah's Billy the Kid (Kris Kristofferson) sheers off from sanctuary in Mexico for fear of turning into 'just another drunken gringo shittin' out chilli peppers and waitin' for nothing.' It's that 'nothing' – name and life stamped null and void – that often galls Peckinpah's anti-heroes into cataclysmic action.

Outlaws all, Peckinpah's native sons are obsessed by whatever dream of self and destiny they've signed on for. When that dream is violated or diminished, as it must always be, these fractured souls convulse in outrage. In the penultimate films, the grand gestures of outrage became crippled and crowded, the skull beneath the skin of Peckinpah's increasingly entropic style showing through at every turn. In what stands as one of the finest pieces of Peckinpavian criticism – 'Notes on the Nihilist Poetry of Sam Peckinpah' – Pauline Kael writes that *The Killer Elite* 'isn't about CIA-sponsored assassinations – it's about the blood of a poet.' Few of his movies were about anything else. ■

KATHLEEN MURPHY

Introduction and all film notes from Blood of a Poet: The Cinema According to Sam Peckinpah – The Film Society of Lincoln Center, March 1995. Curated by Kathleen Murphy.



Special Preview: *The Wild Bunch* (restored version)

Tue 3 Oct 8.15 NFTI

Fired from *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965) and blacklisted as impossible to work with for three years – until his TV adaptation of *Noon Wine* gave him new legs – Peckinpah came back strong: *The Wild Bunch* is the kind of revolutionary masterpiece after which movies can never be the same. Its narrative shape is two explosions strung together by a taut narrative wire, the retreat of an aging gang of outlaws – pressed for time and losing ground – into Mexico, momentary Eden and ultimate dead end. The weathered faces of William Holden, Robert Ryan, Ernest Borgnine, Warren Oates and Ben Johnson are western landscapes, mythic ground, and Peckinpah's time-and-space-shattering montages, visceral epiphanies. US 1969. With Emilio Fernandez, Jaime Sanchez. 145 mins. Preview courtesy of Warner Bros.



The Deadly Companions

Wed 4 Oct 6.30 NFTI

Brian Keith plays 'Yellow Leg,' a Yankee maimed in body and soul, grimly hunting down the Confederate soldier he holds responsible for his ills. Along the way, Keith hooks up with a fast gun (Steve Cochran) and a strong-willed dance-hall queen (Maureen O'Hara) who offers to detour him into some kind of salvation as they transport her son's body through Apache territory. It's exhilarating to see Peckinpah's vision starting to take form and style: the long shadow cast by American history; a revenge-quest that climaxes in a funeral for the past; spiritual brothers – one falling, one deep-dyed in sin; and a 'fallen woman'. US 1961. With Chill Wills. 90 mins.



Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid

Wed 4 Oct 8.40 NFTI

Pat Garrett (James Coburn) and Billy the Kid (Kris Kristofferson) drift around the Southwest – crossing paths with a rogue's gallery of allies and adversaries – and finally fetch up at Fort Sumter for their fatal appointment. Peckinpah's last Western band of outsiders self-consciously act out duels and their own demises in the richly coloured, heavy air of late New Mexican afternoons and dusk; the mystery lies in the birth of legend: the way and where a man will lie down, how he will be remembered. The film is crowded with unforgettable faces and voices. US 1973. With Bob Dylan, Jason Robards. 122 mins.



Major Dundee

Tue 10 Oct 8.40 NFTI

Charlton Heston, *Major Dundee's* star, returned his entire salary to the movie's producer to buy Peckinpah's final cut – but this Hollywood Mapache kept the money and sliced an hour from what might have been an epic masterpiece. Mutilated but still potent, *Dundee* follows a Union cavalry officer (Heston), a paroled Confederate captain (Richard Harris), and their band of motley warriors into Mexico on a bloody quest to catch up with some Apaches who have kidnapped a pair of settlers' sons. Peckinpah is after nothing less than the whole slide of history – personal and national – from high-minded, killing ideals down into broken but beautiful dreams. Punctuated by absurd, gallant gestures, *Major Dundee* is like a wound taken in the act of love. US 1964. With Warren Oates, Slim Pickens. 124 mins.

Noon Wine

Sat 14 Oct 12.30 NFTI

Directed and adapted by Peckinpah from Katherine Anne Porter's short novel. Wrote *The Hollywood Reporter*. 'Peckinpah's realisation emerged as one of the finest hours of many a season, something of a milestone in location colour videotape production, and one of the few TV moments which can be termed poetic.' ABC tx 23.11.66. With Jason Robards, Olivia de Havilland, Per Oscarsson, Theodore Bikel, Ben Johnson, LQ Jones. 60 mins. Plus *Sam Peckinpah – Man of Iron*. A *Moving Pictures* profile of Sam Peckinpah including interviews with Jason Robards and James Coburn. tx BBC2 4.1.92.



The Ballad of Cable Hogue

Sat 14 Oct 6.10 NFTI

Cable Hogue (Jason Robards in one of his finest performances), a grizzled desert rat left for dead by a pair of sleazy dregs named Taggart and Bowen (LQ Jones and Strother Martin), instead finds water where it wasn't (having struck a conman's deal with God) and turns entrepreneur: his is the only oasis on the stage route, so as soon as he's run up the American flag, dug a three-holer, and cooked some rattlesnake stew, Cable is raking in the long green. Read this sweet-tempered musical about the emotional and economic costs of capitalism as Peckinpah at ease with a working metaphor for redemptive movie-making among friends. One of Peckinpah's best films (and the director's favourite) – celebratory and elegiac, raunchy and metaphysical. US 1969. With Slim Pickens, R G Armstrong. 121 mins.



Straw Dogs

Sun 15 Oct 8.40 NFTI; Mon 16 Oct 8.40 NFTI

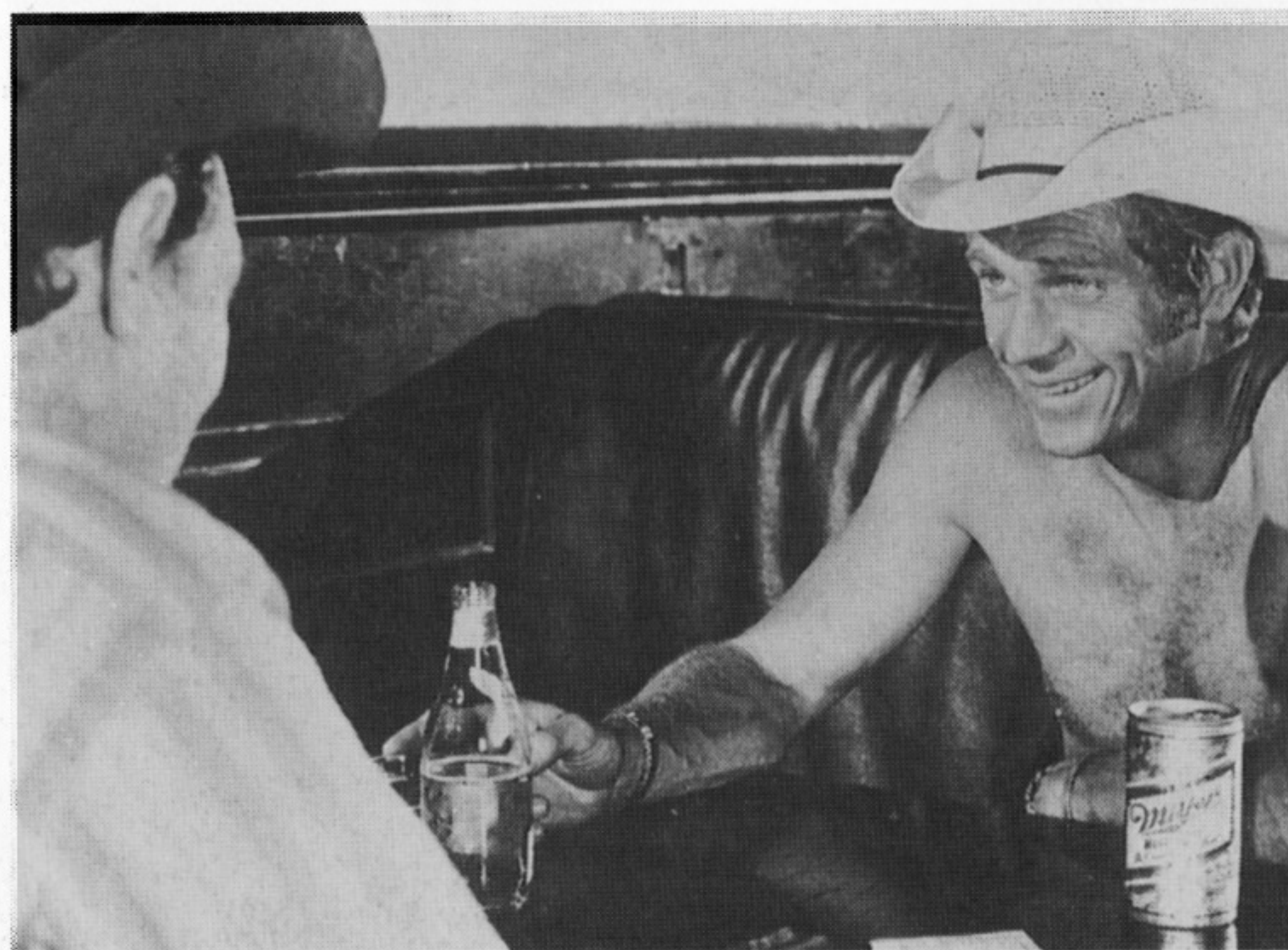
Pauline Kael condemned *Straw Dogs* as 'a fascist work of art,' and Peckinpah's first foreign film outraged feminists and those entrenched against violence in the movies. A deliberately detached mathematician (Dustin Hoffman) moves into his wife's home in England to get away from campus distractions, so he can do research in peace. Sexually adrift, his pouty wife (Susan George) tries to seduce him away from his blackboard when she's not teasing an old flame. When the Sumners are besieged by a coven of native sons out to lynch an accidental killer, the result is a brutally punishing Walpurgisnacht. Pre-siege, the Sumners have been children playing at life; *Straw Dogs* is *Bringing Up Baby* as baptismal bloodbath. US 1971. With David Warner. 118 mins.



Junior Bonner (brand new print)

Thu 19 Oct 9.00 NFTI

Steve McQueen plays an aging rodeo-rider come home to Prescott, Arizona, to find his father's land bulldozed and sold off for a mobile-home retirement community by his real-estate brother (Joe Don Baker). Sire Ace (Robert Preston) and his wife (Ida Lupino) are estranged, and the old man dreams only of lighting out to Australia, the last frontier. Junior must choose his own brand of 'retirement' – as an electric horseman shilling Western acreage or Ben Johnson's assistant in rodeo management – or he can try one last time to stick on legendary bull Sunshine for eight seconds. This contemporary Western about too-late reunions on the 4th of July is the last Peckinpah would ever make, excepting *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, a twilight purgatory far from sunny Prescott. US 1971. 105 mins.





The Rifleman

Sat 21 Oct 2.10 NFTI

Four episodes of this popular series from 1958-59. *The Sharpshooter* is *The Rifleman* pilot, rewritten by Peckinpah from a *Gunsmoke* script (Dir Arnold Laven. With Dennis Hopper, R G Armstrong, Sidney Blackmer); *The Marshal* (Dir Sam Peckinpah. With Paul Fix, R G Armstrong, James Drury, Warren Oates); *Home Ranch* (written by Sam Peckinpah); *The Money Gun* (Dir Sam Peckinpah. With John Dehner, Paul Fix). 96 mins total. Admission free, no pre-booking.



The Getaway

Sun 22 Oct 6.20 NFTI

Doc McCoy's wife (Ali MacGraw) springs him (Steve McQueen) from jail by selling herself to bigtime gangster Jack Benyon (Ben Johnson); Doc thinks his consummate skills as a bankrobber got him out. Double-crosses and disillusionment propel these deadly companions into desperate flight as much from the worst of themselves as from Benyon's hitmen. There's a provocative flatness to the look of *The Getaway*; at one point, the McCoy's become just another kind of debris in a garbage dump – but Peckinpah's modern-day outlaws are gifted with one last ticket to ride into sanctuary by old Western hand Slim Pickens. US 1972. With Dub Taylor, Al Lettieri. 122 mins.



Ride the High Country (aka Guns in the Afternoon)

Fri 27 Oct 8.45 NFTI

A sublimely beautiful Western that satisfies the mythic desire for a good father who, sacrificed, cleanses and elevates a dirty, low-down world. Peckinpah looked to his own father for this autumnal film's bloodline – 'All I want is to enter my house justified' – and drew two aging Western film icons (Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott) into his earthly parable about staying on the straight-and-narrow even when it doesn't matter anymore. Superannuated lawman Steve Judd (McCrea) signs an old friend Gil Westrum (Scott), now reduced to a carney sharp-shooter, to help bring gold down from a mining camp in the high country. US 1962. With Warren Oates. 94 mins.



Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia

Sat 28 Oct 8.45 NFTI

Smalltime hustler Bennie (inimitably scruffy Warren Oates) is playing piano and droning 'Guantanamera' in a rat hole Mexican bar when he gets caught up in the lucrative quest for an unholy grail: the bloody head of an old friend. Seems Bennie's buddy deflowered the daughter of a very powerful Mexican jefe (Emilio Fernandez), and now a lot of money rides on the father's thirst for revenge. Peckinpah's road movie about sex, death and salvation south of the border is a down-and-dirty masterpiece that pits a diminished portrait of himself against a world of highhanded money men and back-stabbing manipulators. US 1974. With Isela Vega, Gig Young, Robert Webber. 112 mins.

Sam Peckinpah, the Western and Beyond Thu 5 Oct 7.30 MOMI

Reports of the death of the Western have turned out to be greatly exaggerated, but back in the 1960s Peckinpah's films appeared to be an elegy for a genre whose time had come. Twenty-five years on, Ed Buscombe (head of publishing at the British Film Institute, editor of *The BFI Companion to the Western* and author of *Stagecoach* in the BFI Film Classics series) asks how we should situate Peckinpah's work in relation to the Western, and to the development of Hollywood cinema generally.

The Killer Elite

Sun 29 Oct 8.40 NFT I

James Caan and Robert Duvall are friends who make a living as samurai for a CIA-like outfit; in the opening moments of *Killer*, Duvall betrays Caan, shooting him in both knees so as to make sure his partner's forever counted out as a player. Instead, Caan painfully rehabilitates his body and sets out for revenge – only to find that the wrong-doing is so pervasive and so multifaceted, there's no way to ever make his dark constricted world right. Wrote Pauline Kael: 'Wrapped in their cult garb so we can't tell one from another, the darting killers [at the film's climax], seen in those slow-motion fast cuts, are exactly like Peckinpah's descriptions of the teeming mediocrities, jackals, hangers-on and just plain killers that Hollywood is full of.' US 1975. With Arthur Hill, Burt Young. 123 mins.



Cross of Iron

Mon 30 Oct 6.10 NFT I

Peckinpah shot *Cross of Iron* in Yugoslavia for a cabal of German producers. Though based on Willi Heinrich's powerful second world war novel with German protagonists, and made far from the director's native ground without the support of his superb stock company, the film is nevertheless mainstream Peckinpah. In Sgt Steyner (James Coburn), the almost mythically indestructible leader of a battle-weary *Wild Bunch* of a platoon, he has another projection of his own embattled position within the film industry, while Stransky (Maximilian Schell), an aristocratic officer determined to parlay Steyner's talents into an Iron Cross for himself, surely stands in for Hollywood's producer class. UK-West Germany 1977. with James Mason, Senta Berger. 133 mins.



Convoy

Wed 1 Nov 8.45 NFT I

A badass trucker named 'Rubber Duck' (Kris Kristofferson) has a run-in with a Southwest sheriff (Ernest Borgnine) and, along with several buddies and their rigs, takes to the open road. Soon he finds himself, unwitting and unwilling, at the vanguard of a caravan and of a vast populist movement, tracked by the media, exploited by the politicians, and increasingly likely to become a martyr to Lord-knows-what. Inspired by a country-and-western ballad of the day, *Convoy* is a great idea for a Peckinpah movie, fatally compromised by production and post-production interference (again), but also by the director's own increasing cynicism. US 1978. 110 mins.



The Osterman Weekend

Thu 2 Nov 8.45 NFT I

Director of the CIA Burt Lancaster wants to be President; glamour-puss TV news anchor Rutger Hauer wants to be a star; master spy John Hurt wants revenge on the System that murdered his wife. The upshot is that, during a weekend dedicated to the annual reunion of some half-dozen old friends, Hauer's well-appointed suburban home is besieged by black-clad assassins and his personal world is shattered. This was Peckinpah's first film after five years of enforced inactivity (and a near-fatal heart attack) – and as it turned out, his last. Peckinpah's wry signature and farewell image: a close-up of a dog, its mouth tied shut, listening attentively as its master's voice issues from a TV set. US 1983. With Craig T Nelson, Dennis Hopper. 102 mins.

