

Masculinity, Melancholia and Misogyny in the Films of Sam Peckinpah

Elsa Machado

Anthony Barker Department of Languages and Cultures, Centre for Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University of Aveiro



Sam Peckinpah

ABSTRACT

With this thesis I have attempted to analyse three salient features in Sam Peckinpah's films: masculinity, melancholia and misogyny. Having made only fourteen films, Peckinpah distinguished himself as an important director in the history of American cinema not only because of his innovative techniques but also because his work was so much in tune with the *zeitgeist* of the turbulent times in which he lived. The analysis of these three main themes aims to cast some light on the work of a director whose temperamental traits and difficult relation with the film industry tend to obfuscate an un-romanticised view of his *oeuvre*. Peckinpah's best work was within the generic traits of the Western but he also made forays into other genres, never forsaking the main worries and worldview that give his films a sense of thematic coherence. Peckinpah became notoriously associated with misogyny not only because of his impromptu comments in the interviews he gave but also because he displayed a problematic relationship with women in real life, giving them a dismissive treatment in his films. This thesis thus attempts to deal with this unsavory feature which many critics disavow or simply ascribe to inflamed feminist criticism. I hope with this work I have managed to address the richness of Sam Peckinpah's films and to reveal how he left a legacy which surpasses the technical artistry for which he became known and the violence which he stylized with the details of his obsessive directorial imprint. This legacy lies in the melancholy mood that traverses his work, resulting from disenchantment and loss.

METHODOLOGY

As one of the main strands of this thesis is the analysis of the way masculinity is portrayed in Peckinpah's films, it is apparent that this cannot be dissociated from feminist theorization. Masculinity studies came into being when feminists rendered manhood "visible" and challenged the phallocentric postulates which have secured its universalizing status. Accordingly, the work of feminist critics was incorporated insofar as their critical reasoning brings to the fore the thin veneer of patriarchal authority which the Western - *par excellence* Peckinpah's privileged genre - has always projected. Since melancholia constitutes one of the main structuring axes in this work, I have traced its checkered historical path and its associations with the construction of an alluring image of a brooding manhood. Intent on showing how cinema has apprehended this "mood" and has also connoted it differently in gender terms, I realized that Peckinpah's films dramatize a pervasively melancholy stance which problematizes notions of male self-sufficiency and authority. Freud's seminal work on "Mourning and Melancholia" has been an important theoretical framework to delve into questions of loss and the way the Western, and more particularly Peckinpah's films, express a libidinal attachment to an unmourning object of love. My methodological concerns in respect of misogyny rely on the notion that it entails mechanisms of defense which, rooted in anxiety and in the fear of emasculation, take on the form - as in Peckinpah's case - of aggression and the perceived imbalance underlying heterosexual relations. Misogyny is an unpalatable characteristic in Peckinpah's work but somehow it has accrued to its underlying contradictions and complexity. But this thesis attempts to explain its darker workings and put them in historical context.

EXAMPLES

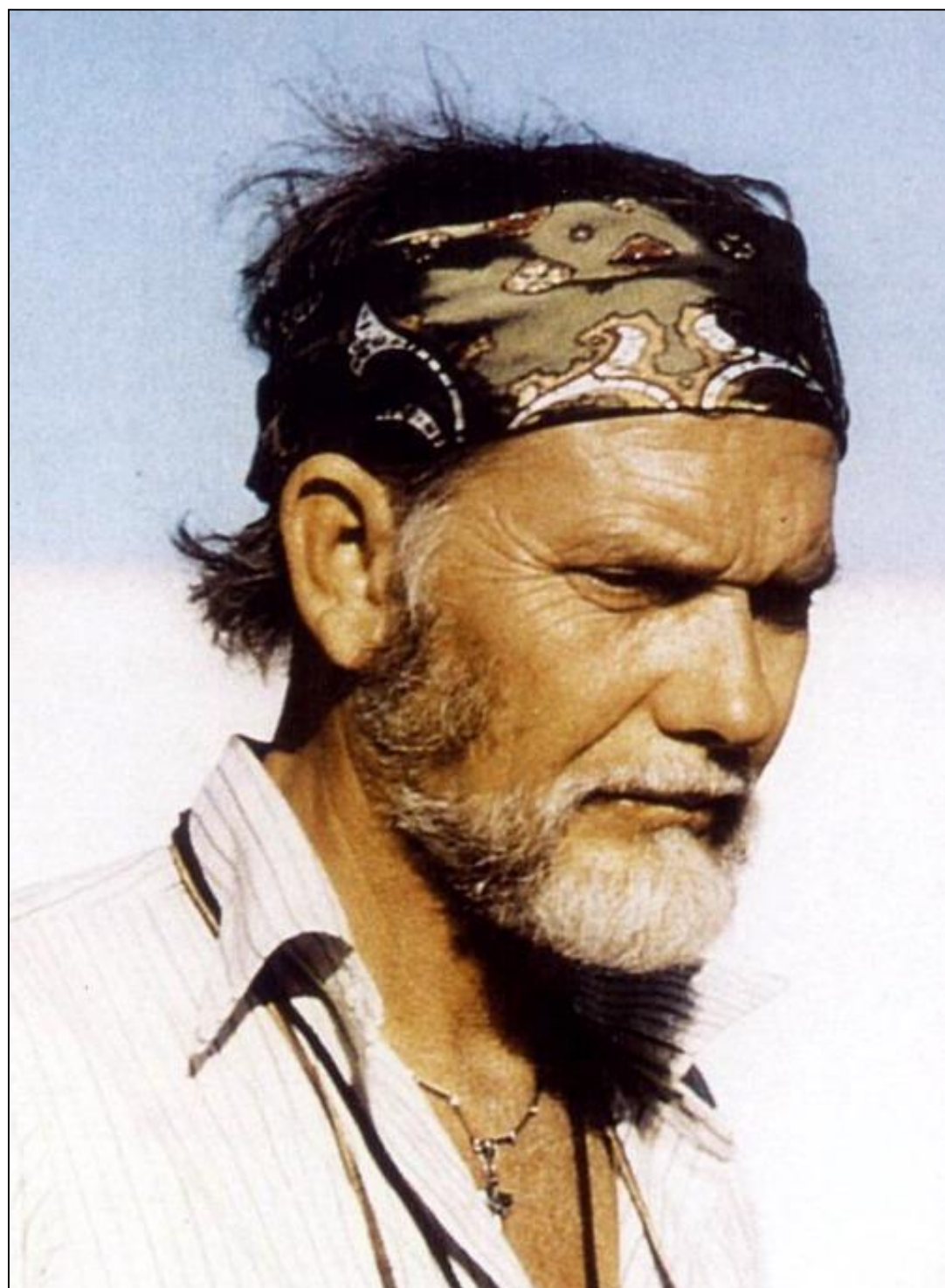


Fig. 1 SAM PECKINPAH IN HIS REBEL POSTURE

Sam Peckinpah was known for his difficult relation with the studios. His films invariably went over budget and fell behind schedule. He cultivated a rebel posture which eventually wreaked havoc on his reputation.



Fig. 2. CHILDREN IN THE WILD BUNCH IN THEIR DEADLY GAME

The scene where children watch a scorpion being devoured by ants. Their delight while watching the destruction suggests the perverse pleasures entailed by impromptu violent deeds, contrasting with their former innocent expressions.



Fig. 3 MAJOR DUNDEE WALLOWING IN ABJECTION

Peckinpah's bitter experience with *Major Dundee*. This early film points already to an image of a tarnished masculinity. Here Charlton Heston playing Dundee in a scene where he loses his self-assurance.



Fig. 4 THE BUNCH MARCHING INTO SELF DESTRUCTION

Peckinpah had a fondness for losers, outsiders and loners. Here, the Bunch march into their suicidal denouement and are crystallised into myth.



Fig 5. HOMOSOCIAL BONDING THREATENED BY THE ENCROACHMENT OF CORPORATE POWERS

Peckinpah was interested in polarized male relationships. *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* is a melancholy reflection on the travails of male bonding and the threat posed to it by materialistic values.



Fig. 6. STEVE MCQUEEN AS JUNIOR BONNER: A NOSTALGIC LOOK AT THE WESTERN

Nostalgia and melancholia traverse Peckinpah's gentlest film. Junior Bonner, the eponymous character in Peckinpah's *Junior Bonner*, represents an anachronistic way of life in the rodeo.



Fig. 7. THE NOTORIOUSLY FAMOUS RAPE SCENE IN *STRAW DOGS*

The scene where Amy (Susan George) is raped by the local thugs acquires a notorious quality since she acquiesces in her predicament. This strengthened Peckinpah's association with misogyny.



Fig. 8 DUSTIN HOFFMAN AS DAVID SUMNER REGAINING HIS PHALLIC POWER IN *STRAW DOGS*

A gun-wielding David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman) finding his phallic power during the siege to his "castle". If the film seems to legitimize violence, in the trope of the worm turning, the former victim Sumner taking revenge on the thugs who had humiliated him in such an unremitting way, it also considers the dangers of a frontier-style vigilante justice. Sumner's "rebirth" at the end is sullied by a sense of psychic alienation, a Travis Bickle-like unanchored loneliness, eventually cut adrift from any sense of ontological safety. When he leaves his wife behind, getting into the car with Niles who pathetically remarks "I don't know my way home" David replies "That's okay, I don't either".



Fig. 9 MISOGYNY IN *THE GETAWAY*

Carol (Ali McGraw) is slapped by Doc (Steve McQueen) after revealing her unfaithfulness. In both examples misogyny is apparent as women are deemed unreliable and untrustworthy.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

With this work I hope to unveil the most original traits of a director whose career seesawed between appraisal and upbraiding. Whereas his misogyny is one of the most unconscionable aspects of his work, melancholia infuses his films with nostalgia and longing. The image of a blemished masculinity belies the construction of an unassailable, indomitable manhood which runs against the grain of classical narratives and bespeaks the climate of pessimism and doubt that riddled late 60s and 70s America.