PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: SAM PECKINPAH

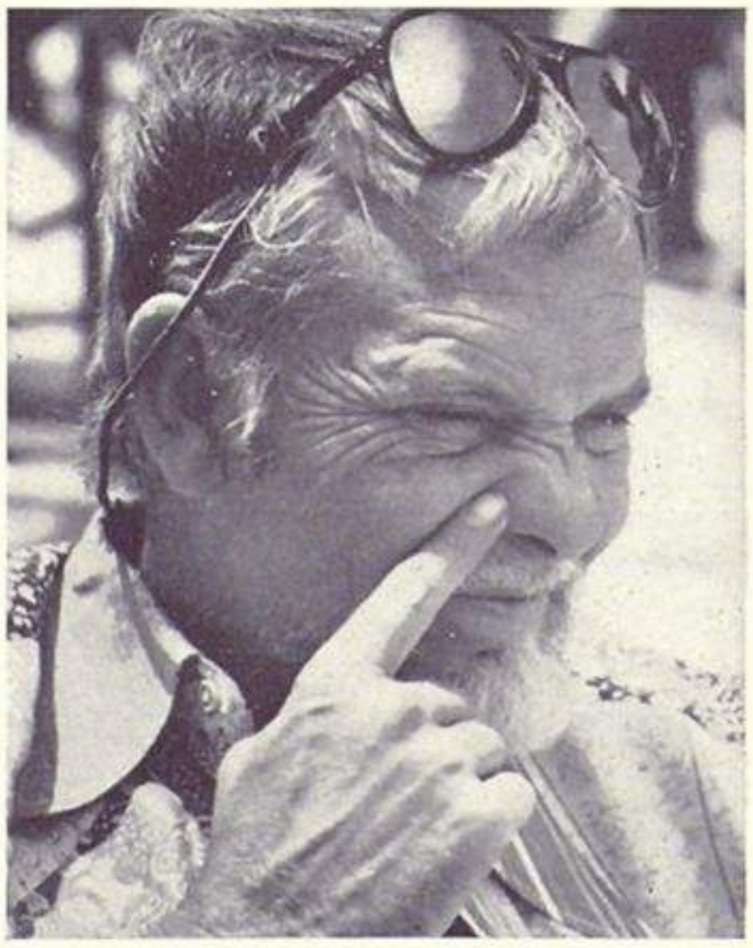
a candid conversation with the screen's "picasso of violence," controversial creator of "the wild bunch" and "straw dogs"

In a scene from Sam Peckinpah's movie "The Wild Bunch," the bunch—a ruthless gang of misfits—is gathered around a campfire after a busy day. They've robbed a bank and killed most of a town while escaping, only to discover that the blood bath had been committed not for the gold they thought they'd stolen but for a worthless bag of washers. Passing a bottle around, they talk about what's to become of them. William Holden, the leader, says to Ernest Borgnine, "This was going to be my last. I was going to pull back after this one." Borgnine replies, "Pull back to what?" This is the theme of Peckinpah's classic film: desperate men with a worn-out way of living locked in a doomed and brutal struggle against a new order.

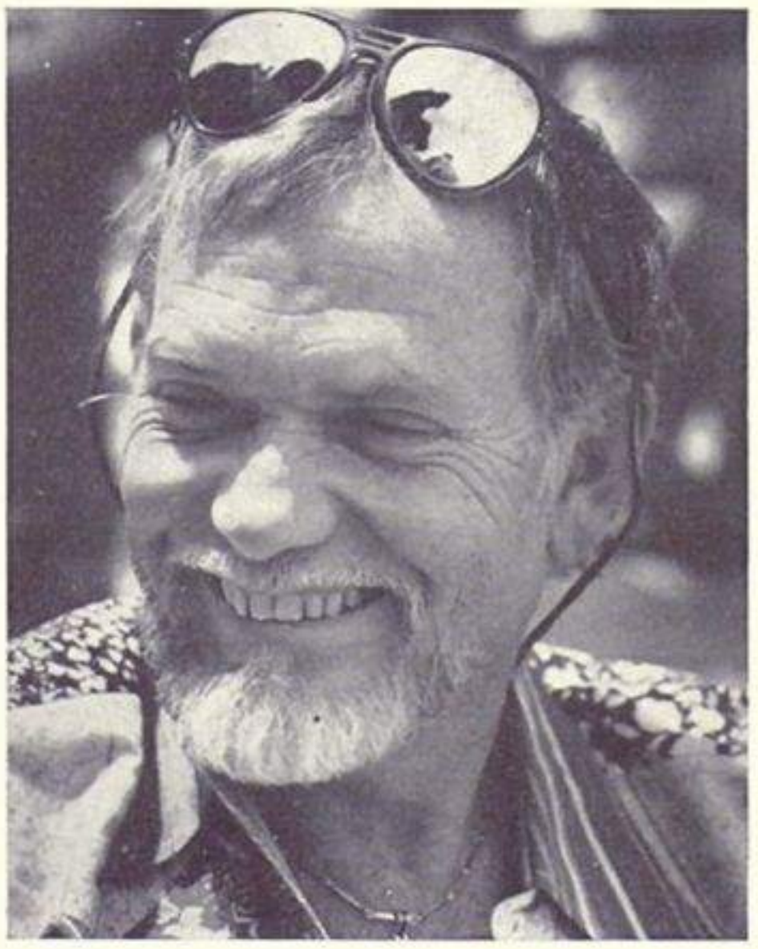
It's been said that Peckinpah shares this sense of his own anachronism. Dustin Hoffman, star of Peckinpah's "Straw Dogs," has said about him: "I think of Sam as a man out of his time. It's ironic that he's alive now, a gunfighter in an age when we're flying to the moon." And Peckinpah says of himself: "I grew up on a ranch, but that world is gone. I feel rootless." That ranch was in rural Madera County, California, in the foothills of a mountain named for his early pioneering family, and he rode, hunted and fished all over it. His father was a judge who ruled his family with the same authoritarianism he exercised in the courtroom. Because Sam resisted this discipline, he was sent to military school. After graduation he enlisted in the Marines, spent a tour of duty in China and returned to the U.S. to enroll in college. He left the University of Southern California with a master's degree in drama and, in the late Fifties, began his career as a scriptwriter, then director, of television Westerns. Over the years, he's written dozens of "Gunsmoke" episodes and helped create two TV cowboy series: "The Rifleman," from which he resigned when it became "a children's program," and the short-lived "The Westerner."

Peckinpah broke into films in 1961, as the director of "The Deadly Companions," and followed that with "Ride the High Country" and "Major Dundee." Although his career seemed to be progressing, he soon established a reputation as a foul-tempered tyrant whose presence was guaranteed to produce quarrelsome sets, out-of-control budgets and absurdly late completion schedules. (His private life has been equally volatile; he's been married a number of times.) As a result, Peckinpah was effectively blackballed from the industry until—after three years of exile—producer Phil Feldman took a chance and hired him to film "The Wild Bunch," the movie that established his ability as a first-class director and started all the talk about Peckinpah's overindulgence in film violence. The release print of the picture was subjected to more than 3500 cuts, the most from any color film in history. It was still, however, one of the bloodiest films ever made, and its success precipitated a flood of screen violence that has not yet ebbed.

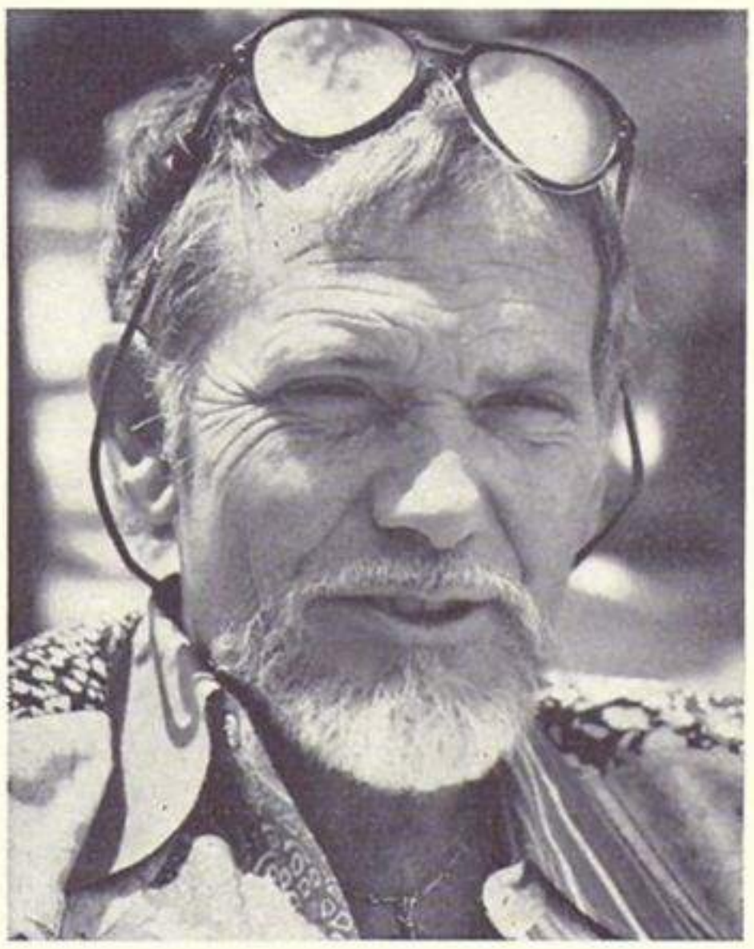
After a much less gory film, "The Ballad of Cable Hogue"—a critical and commercial failure—Peckinpah made "Straw Dogs," the picture toward which the critics felt he had been moving throughout his career; his chef-d'oeuvre of violence. It's the story of a young American mathematician, David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman), who has taken a research grant and is living in Cornwall, England, with his beautiful English wife. Throughout the film, David endures the harassment of five young men from the village whom he's hired to repair his garage. They greet his uncertain work instructions and pathetic attempts at kindness with condescension and sadistic pranks, and smack their lips over his wife, who teases their lust and



"People came up and threw punches at me because they were incensed by the violence in 'The Wild Bunch.' These pacifists came up and actually tried to hit me. They didn't understand who they were."



"True pacifism is the finest form of manliness. But if a man comes up to you and cuts your hand off, you don't offer him the other one. Not if you want to go on playing the piano, you don't."



"I don't want any other son of a bitch making good movies. I detest every film maker except the innocuous ones. I love Ross Hunter. Ross Hunter is my idol. I'd like to be Ross Hunter."

is eventually the rather willing victim of a double rape. David's personal torment builds until the final, 30-minute scene, when, protecting a local mental retard who's wanted by the same men for a suspected sex crime, he denies them entry to his home and the screen fills with blood as David slaughters them all.

The darker implications of "Straw Dogs"—and the level of violence in the picture—provoked contradictory cries from the critics. Writing in Atlantic, *David Denby called it "a hateful but very exciting movie."* The New Yorker's *Pauline Kael went further, pronouncing it "a fascist work of art."* Variety *reviled it as "an orgy of unparalleled violence and nastiness . . . a blood bath that defies detailed description." But* Time's *reviewer, Jay Cocks, hailed it as "a brilliant feat of moviemaking . . . the film perhaps is more cynical than realistic. But if this is not the way things are, then it is a measure of Peckinpah's skill that, in giving voice to his despair, he came to make this nightmare seem like our own."*

There's never been any consensus about Peckinpah, even among his friends —most of whom, at one time or another, he has belted in the mouth, usually without warning. Personally as well as professionally, says a still-friendly survivor of his Sunday punch, "Sam's as unpredictable as a snake." To find out just how unpredictable he is, and to learn if all—or any—of the stories about him are true, PLAYBOY *sent contributor William Murray, who's spent considerable time with Peckinpah, to interview him. Murray reports:*

"Sam is a great con man, as well as a bit of a ham, and he's learned how to handle the press by feeding reporters exactly what he thinks they want to hear. He resists extensive questioning by running away from you, forcing you to do your stuff on the lope. I conducted the interview on the beach in Malibu, in the living room of a rented house, during a party, in various bars, restaurants, trailers and on location in San Antonio and El Paso—where he was directing his new picture, 'The Getaway,' starring Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw. [McQueen is also the star of Peckinpah's recently released film, "Junior Bonner," the story of an over-the-hill rodeo rider. See "Playboy After Hours," page 26.]

"Watching him work can be instructive. He's rarely in the foreground of whatever's going on, but you know, without having to be told, who's in charge. There's something formidable about him. He's usually dressed in Levis, an open-necked shirt and windbreaker—a lean, tightly put-together man with the little black eyes of a gunfighter. His iron-gray mustache, thinning hair and deeply lined features make him look older than his 46 years; he has the face of a man who has fought a lot of wars—and lost a few of them. When he talks, even while giving an order, he speaks so softly that he tends to draw his listeners toward him. Sometimes they regret it, for what he says, as well as the way he says it, can be intimidating. The trick is not to flinch—as I learned when we sat down to begin taping."

PECKINPAH: All right, let's get it on. I promise to do my little number. But I'm not going to talk about violence.

PLAYBOY: Then we might as well not begin.

PECKINPAH: That's fine with me.

PLAYBOY: Why don't you want to talk about violence?

PECKINPAH: Because that's what everybody is trying to nail me on. They think I invented it. They think that's what I'm all about. They think I get my rocks off when the people in my pictures get their heads blown off. I'm pretty goddamn sick of it.

PLAYBOY: When you say "they," do you mean the critics?

PECKINPAH: Who else? You've got a beauty there at PLAYBOY, a real windsucker. That review your man wrote of *Straw Dogs* was literary *linguini.* I didn't know Hefner was hiring *New York Review* groupies, cats who don't know how to write or how to look at a motion picture.

PLAYBOY: As a matter of fact, our reviewer rather enjoyed the film. But many critics thought *Straw Dogs* was a work of art, and most of your other movies have been well reviewed. Perhaps it's just that nobody is lukewarm about your work. They hate you or love you.

PECKINPAH: Either way, they almost always misunderstand me. To some, *Straw Dogs* was a work of integrity but not of major intelligence. To others it was a work of enormous subtlety and substantial intelligence but failed on moral grounds. Goddamn it, *Straw Dogs* is based on a book called *The Siege of Trencher's Farm.* It's a lousy book with one good action-adventure sequence in it—the siege itself. You get hired to take this bad book and make a picture out of it. You get handed a scriptwriter, David Goodman, and an actor, Dustin Hoffman, and you're told to make a picture. You're given a story to do and you do it the best way you know how, that's all. So what's all this shit about integrity and about the picture not being the work of a major intelligence?

PLAYBOY: Pauline Kael has called you a passionate and sensual artist in conflict with himself, and she wrote in her review of *Straw Dogs* that it's the film you've been working your way toward all along. But that's not exactly a compliment: She's horrified by your apparent endorsement of the violence in the film and she claims you've enshrined the territorial imperative and are out to spread the Neanderthal word.

PECKINPAH: More, more, I love it!

PLAYBOY: She also calls it "the first American film that is a fascist work of art."

PECKINPAH: Explain, please.

PLAYBOY: She says the movie acts out the old male fantasy that women respect only brutes and that there is no such thing as rape, that women are all just little beasts begging to be subjugated.

PECKINPAH: Amy, the girl played by Susan George in the picture, is a young, uninformed, bitchy, hot-bodied little girl with a lot going for her, but who hasn't grown up yet. That's the part. It wasn't an attempt to make a statement about women in general, for Christ's sake.

PLAYBOY: But what about the rape scene? Amy is clearly enjoying the experience, isn't she? Aren't you saying, as Kael implies, that that's what women are for—to be used and enjoyed?

PECKINPAH: Well, Pauline, I trust that's part of it. But I'm not putting down all women in that scene. Amy is enjoying the experience, yes. At first. Doesn't Kael know *anything* about sex? Dominating and being dominated; the fantasy, too, of being taken by force is certainly one way people make love. There's no end to the fantasies of lovemaking, and this is one of them. Sure, Amy's enjoying it. At least with the first *hombre* who takes her. The second one is a bit more than she bargained for, but that's one of the prices she pays for playing her little game. There's always a price to pay, doctor.

PLAYBOY: Kael compares you to Norman Mailer and says you're both in the same *machismo* bag, but the difference is that Mailer worries about it. For you, she thinks it's the be-all and end-all.

PECKINPAH: I like Kael; she's a feisty little gal and I enjoy drinking with her —which I've done on occasion—but here she's cracking walnuts in her ass. Look, what if they'd given me *War and Peace* to do instead of *Trencher's Farm*? I'm reasonably sure I'd have made a different picture.

PLAYBOY: But you picked *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* yourself, didn't you?

PECKINPAH: I didn't pick anything. I've never picked any of my films. Except one, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue.* That's the only movie I ever picked to do.

PLAYBOY: Tell us how it works, then. You're offered a lot of projects——

PECKINPAH: I'm looking for a job. I'm a whore. I go where I'm kicked. But I'm a very good whore.

PLAYBOY: Whatever material you're given to work on, you then proceed to make it your own picture. There's certainly no mistaking the Peckinpah touch.

PECKINPAH: The Peckinpah touch! Jesus! Read the goddamn book. You'll die gagging in your own vomit.

PLAYBOY: When you say you're a whore, isn't that a half-truth at best? If you weren't as good as you are, no one would pay any attention to you; there are plenty of whores around.

PECKINPAH: Once I'm handed something

to do, then I take the material and try to work something out of it and, not to sound too goddamn pompous about it, what I put into it is what I see, how I feel about how things are or the way they're going. But I try to tell a story, above all, in terms of the material I'm given, and very seldom have I been given a decent piece of material.

PLAYBOY: What interested you most about what became *Straw Dogs*?

PECKINPAH: What really turned me on was the amount of money I was given to do it. You start with the money and after you get that into focus, you try to figure out what the hell you're doing. In this case, David Goodman and I sat down and tried to make something of validity out of this rotten book. We did. The only thing we kept was the siege itself.

PLAYBOY: David Sumner, the character Dustin Hoffman plays in the movie, is an intellectual who's running away from himself and refuses to take a stand on anything. You portray him as a kind of worm. When he does take a stand, it's an excruciatingly violent one and you imply that he becomes a man through this resort to violence. And that he enjoys the mayhem.

PECKINPAH: Totally wrong. I don't know what movie you saw. There's a point in the middle of the siege when David almost throws up, he's so sick, and he says, "Go ahead, pull the trigger." He's sick of it, sick of himself, sick of the violence that he recognizes in himself. I can't believe anyone can miss this in the movie. He's just used a poker to kill a man who's just tried to kill him. He looks at what he's done with despair and absolute horror and he doesn't care at that moment whether he lives or dies.

PLAYBOY: What about the last shot in the movie, when Hoffman is driving away from the scene of that carnage? One critic saw a look of enjoyment on his face when he tells the half-wit he doesn't know his way home anymore.

PECKINPAH: It's not enjoyment at all. Neither Dustin nor I interpreted it that way. The line was written while driving to location on the last day of shooting. David Warner had cued it off at rehearsal by saying, "I don't know my way home." I turned to Dustin and said, "And you don't either, and that's the whole point of the picture." "Yes," he said, "and I'll say it with a smile, because the irony is too much for him to say it straight." Dustin wanted to do it that way and he was right.

David Sumner had recognized in himself the enormous suppressed violence that he had been living with. And once it had come out, there was no going back. You see, he really set the whole thing up. He could have stopped it any one of a dozen times. He was testing his wife; he was testing himself. He was maneuvering himself into a situation where he'd be forced to let the violence in himself out, as a lot of so-called pacifists and supposedly passive people do. You remember reading about that kid who shot 45 people from the top of a tower on some campus? Boy, there was the honor student, the good guy, the boy-scout leader who was kind to his mother and small animals. Whether he enjoyed shooting all those people isn't the issue. The issue is that he did it. He had all that violence in him and he went up into the tower and let it out. Now, you hear all this talk about the violence in *Straw Dogs* and in some of my other pictures, as if that violence were contributing to the violence of our society. The point is that the violence in us, in all of us, has to be expressed constructively or it will sink us.

I'm a great believer in catharsis. Do you think people watch the Super Bowl because they think football is a beautiful sport? Bullshit! They're committing violence vicariously. Look, the old basis of catharsis was a purging of the emotions through pity and fear. People used to go and see the plays of Euripides and Sophocles and those other Greek cats. The players acted it out and the audience got in there and kind of lived it with them. What's more violent than the plays of William Shakespeare? And how about grand opera? What's bloodier than a romantic grand opera? Take a plot, any plot—brother kills brother to sleep with the wife, who then kills her father, and so on and so on. Want to have some fun? Read *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. When you point things like this out to the New York cats, they tell you it was all art, which is crap. These plays and operas and stories were the popular entertainment of their day.

PLAYBOY: But they weren't as concerned as you are with the physical details of violence. The violence in your pictures is executed lovingly, superrealistically and almost always in close-up.

PECKINPAH: You can't make violence real to audiences today without rubbing their noses in it. We watch our wars and see men die, really die, every day on television, but it doesn't seem real. We don't believe those are real people dying on that screen. We've been anesthetized by the media. What I do is show people what it's really like—not by showing it as it is so much as by heightening it, stylizing it. Most people don't even know what a bullet hole in a human body looks like. I want them to see what it looks like. The only way I can do that is by not letting them gloss over the looks of it, as if it were the seven-o'clock news from the DMZ. When people complain about the way I handle violence, what they're really saying is, "Please don't show me; I don't want to know; and get me another beer out of the icebox."

PLAYBOY: Many people want to put a stop to whatever, on television or movie screens, could contribute to the public violence of our time. Are they wrong?

PECKINPAH: I think it's wrong—and dangerous—to refuse to acknowledge the animal nature of man. That's what Robert Ardrey is talking about in those three great books of his, *African Genesis*, *The Territorial Imperative* and *The Social Contract*. Ardrey's the only prophet alive today. Some years ago, when I was working on *The Wild Bunch*, a friend of mine came to me with *African Genesis* and said I had to read it because Ardrey was writing about what I was dealing with, that we were both on the same track. So after I finished *Wild Bunch* I read him and I thought, wow, here's somebody who knows a couple of nasty secrets about us. *Straw Dogs* is about a guy who finds out a few nasty secrets about himself—about his marriage, about where he is, about the world around him. Some people don't like facing that sort of thing; it makes them itch. You see, David Sumner gets the blinkers pulled off. The man said you can't go home again and David can't either. He can go *on*—we all can—but he can't go back to what he was. I don't know what could be clearer.

PLAYBOY: What about his wife, Amy? What does she find out about herself?

PECKINPAH: Well, there are two kinds of women. There are women and then there's pussy. A woman is a partner. If you can go a certain distance by yourself, a good woman will triple it. But Amy is the kind of girl—and we've all seen them by the millions—they marry, they have some quality, but they're so goddamn immature, so ignorant as far as living goes, as to what is of value in life, in this case about marriage, that they destroy it. Amy is pussy, under the veneer of being a woman. Maybe because of what happens to her, she'll eventually *become* a woman.

PLAYBOY: Are you implying that Amy couldn't become a woman until David became a man?

PECKINPAH: No. David was always a man. It's just that he didn't see deeply enough into himself. He didn't know who he was and what he was all about. We all intellectualize about why we should do things, but it's our purely animal instincts that are driving us to do them all the time. David found out he had all those instincts and it made him sick, sick unto death, and at the same time he had guts enough and sense enough to stand up and do what he had to do.

PLAYBOY: But Amy was the instrument of his self-discovery, wasn't she? Didn't she push and prod him to "act like a man"?

PECKINPAH: She didn't know *what* she wanted. She pushed him, as you say, but not in any constructive way. To start out with, she asked for the rape. But later she could barely bring herself to pull the trigger to save his life. I don't know whether they'll get back together

again. At least they'll have to deal with each other on a different plane. What I hope he does is keep going in that car at the end—not turn back. He obviously married the wrong dame. She is basically pussy. What I favor is marriages made in heaven, and that's the only place marriages ought to be performed. And speaking of rape, I'd like to point out to Miss Kael and these other so-called critics that rear entry does not necessarily mean sodomy, as they said in their reviews. In the picture, Amy is taken by one guy she used to go with and then she's taken from the rear by another guy she didn't want any part of anywhere. The double rape is a little bit more than she bargained for. Anyway, I guess Miss Kael and her friends have anal complexes. Perfectly justified in this day and age.

PLAYBOY: If Amy is pussy, why did David marry her?

PECKINPAH: Come on, that's beneath you. Most of us marry pussy at one time or another. A smart, unscrupulous cunt can always use her looks to get some poor slob to marry her. And in marriage, so often, especially if the man is lonely, he will clothe her in the vestments of his own needs—and if she's very young, she'll do the same thing to him. They don't really look at what the other person is but at what they want that person to be. All of a sudden the illusion wears off and they really see each other and they say, "Hey, what's all this about?" Now that David can see *himself*, too, he can begin to build his life. As for her, probably she'll never change.

PLAYBOY: You sound like a man who's had a lot of experience with pussy.

PECKINPAH: I wouldn't have it any other way. One of the advantages of being a celebrity is that a lot of attractive pussy that wasn't available to you before suddenly becomes available. Groupies and star-fuckers abound and you certainly don't have to marry them, though a lot of poor fools do.

PLAYBOY: How do you account for the mutual attraction of stars and groupies?

PECKINPAH: It's the same thing that attracts all men to women, and vice versa. Men are primarily turned on by physical beauty, magnetism, or maybe just the way a woman moves and the kind of atmosphere she surrounds herself with. But what attracts a woman to a man is entirely different. It has a lot more to do with where a man is with his life. I'm not talking about money; I'm talking about success. I'm talking, really, about territory. How much and where and how secure. It's the most basic human urge. Watch the behavior of any herd. Who's got the cows? The biggest, strongest bull. And every year he has to fight off all challengers until eventually someone does him in. But while he reigns, he has it all his own way. It's the most basic and fascinating evolutionary process there is.

PLAYBOY: Ethologists might agree with you, but it's doubtful that women's lib would buy much of what you're saying.

PECKINPAH: I ignore women's lib. I'm for most of what they're for, socially as well as politically and economically, but I can't see why they have to make such assholes of themselves over the issue. Those bull dykes and the crazies in their tennis sneakers and burlap sacks—just try to explain a few facts of life to them. Like the fact that I have a penis that thrusts into a woman and she has a vagina to receive me. The basic male act, by its very nature, starts out as an act of physical aggression, no matter how much love it eventually expresses, and the woman's begins as one of passivity, of submission. It's a physical fact. Except to a bull dyke. Not that I'm knocking Lesbianism. I consider myself one of the foremost male Lesbians in the world.

I don't care what goes on in people's heads; we are physically constructed in a certain way and we've been handed a set of instincts to go with the machinery. Tell that to any of these women's lib freaks and they'll swear you're a male-chauvinist pig. What can happen when you deny your basic instincts and drives is what *Straw Dogs* is all about. I read somewhere recently that some cat was having trouble making it with women today because half the ones he took to bed began by making geographical demands. They lay out a whole sexual battle plan before they start. They want this, they want that. You're expected to provide instant satisfaction by delivering like some kind of computerized acrobat. That's logistics, not sex—and certainly not love. In sex, when you do it only for yourself or the other person, you're masturbating either yourself or her. Any good whore knows more about sex than Betty Friedan.

PLAYBOY: Do you really like whores?

PECKINPAH: Of all the whores I've been with—American, Chinese, English, Mexican, any nationality—I've failed to end up in some kind of warm personal relationship with only about ten percent. I've *lived* with some good whores. They've taken me home or I've taken them home. We've been human beings together. I never thought of these women as objects to be used. I put a lot of the relationships I've had with whores into the love story of Cable Hogue and his whore, Hildy. They had a relationship that was truer and more tender than that between most husbands and wives. The fact that she was a whore and went to bed with men for money didn't change anything. Most married women fuck for the money that's in it.

PLAYBOY: Regardless of your relationship with whores, doesn't the fact that you relate so well to them signify some need on your part to remain either superior or emotionally uninvolved?

PECKINPAH: Possibly, but I believe it signifies mostly that I like an honest woman, a woman who's honest with herself and the people she cares about. Not infrequently, in one way or another, she turns out to be a prostitute.

PLAYBOY: Come to think of it, most of the women in your movies have been prostitutes.

PECKINPAH: You find something good, you stay with it.

PLAYBOY: Like violence. You've always dealt with it, haven't you?

PECKINPAH: One of my big themes. But if you want to find out something about violence in this country, you ought to talk to the people in our prisons, as I've been doing lately in connection with *The Getaway*. Those guys'll wake you up. For them it's a way of life, a life lived according to certain codes. There are some things you do and others you don't do. The whole thing is built into the fabric of their lives, as it was for those cats in *The Wild Bunch*. They were people who lived not only by violence but *for* it. But the whole underside of our society has always been violent and still is. It's a reflection of the society itself. Do you know, people came up and threw punches at me because they were incensed by the violence in *The Wild Bunch*? These pacifists came up and actually tried to hit me. They didn't understand who they were. In George Bernard Shaw's play *The Devil's Disciple*, a preacher discovers his true nature, which is that of a man of action, a man of violence, and the man of action discovers he's really a preacher. Doesn't that suggest anything to you?

PLAYBOY: That maybe you're a bit of a preacher yourself.

PECKINPAH: Right on. Something to do with my background, maybe.

PLAYBOY: Do you think pacifists are dishonest with themselves or out of touch with reality? Or just plain unmanly?

PECKINPAH: Of course not. True pacifism is manly. In fact, it's the finest form of manliness. But if a man comes up to you and cuts your hand off, you don't offer him the other one. Not if you want to go on playing the piano, you don't. I'm not saying that violence is what makes a man a man. I'm saying that when violence comes, you can't run from it. You have to recognize its true nature, in yourself as well as in others, and stand up to it. If you run, you're dead, or you might as well be.

PLAYBOY: When you say that someone is a real man, what do you mean by it?

PECKINPAH: That he doesn't have to prove anything. He's himself. My dad put it another way. When the time comes, he used to say, you stand up and you're counted. For the right thing. For something that matters. It's the ultimate test. You either compromise to the point where it destroys you or you stand up and say, "Fuck off." It's amazing how few people will do that. So if I'm a fascist because I believe that men are

not created equal, then all right, I'm a fascist. But I detest the term and I detest the kind of reasoning that labels that point of view fascistic. I'm not an anti-intellectual, but I'm against the pseudo intellectuals who roll like dogs in their own verbal diarrhea and call it purpose and identity. An intellectual who embodies his intellect in action, that's a complete human being. But sitting back and quarterbacking from the stands is playing with yourself.

PLAYBOY: David Sumner in *Straw Dogs* is the first intellectual you've ever made the hero of a movie.

PECKINPAH: He's not a hero. He's a heavy. I'm crazy about heavies.

PLAYBOY: Is that how you felt about your characters in *The Wild Bunch*? You've been quoted as saying that you hated Pike Bishop, the Bill Holden part, and his buddies, that they were dangerous and had to go; but the way you handle them in the movie seems to contradict you. It expresses respect and even love for them and what they stand for.

PECKINPAH: Sure I loved them. I love *outsiders*. Look, unless you conform, give in completely, you're going to be alone in this world. But by giving in, you lose your independence as a human being. So I go for the loners. I'm nothing if not a romantic and I've got this weakness for losers on the grand scale, as well as a kind of sneaky affection for all the misfits and drifters in the world.

PLAYBOY: Aren't your losers and misfits conformists to outdated codes?

PECKINPAH: Outdated codes like courage, loyalty, friendship, grace under pressure, all the simple virtues that have become clichés, sure. They're cats who ran out of territory and they know it, but they're not going to bend, either; they refuse to be diminished by it. They play their string out to the end.

PLAYBOY: But isn't the hard truth about the frontier that it had *no* real code—other than survival of the fittest?

PECKINPAH: Yep, but I don't make documentaries. The facts about the siege of Troy, of the duel between Hector and Achilles and all the rest of it, are a hell of a lot less interesting to me than what Homer makes of it all. And the mere facts tend to obscure the truth, anyway. As I keep saying, I'm basically a storyteller. I'm not even sure anymore what I believe in. I once directed a Saroyan play in which one of the characters asked another if he would die for what he believed in. The guy answered, "No, I might be wrong." That's where I am. I'm not going to get between my audience and the story. I hate the feeling in a theater of being more aware of what the director's doing than of what's actually up there on the screen.

PLAYBOY: Is that why you like doing Westerns, because the West is almost the only mythology we have?

PECKINPAH: Hell, no. I came by it naturally. My earliest memory is of being strapped into a saddle when I was two for a ride up into the high country. We were always close to the mountains, always going back to them. When my grandfather was dying, almost his last words were about the mountains. We'd summer in them and some winters I ran trap lines in the snow. We loved that country, all of us. My granddad, Denver Church, had a 4100-acre cattle ranch in the foothills of the Sierras, about 25 miles east of Fresno, and the whole family, the Peckinpahs and the Churches, had been wandering in that country since moving out from the Midwest in the middle of the 19th Century. We even have a mountain named after us.

PLAYBOY: Have you used your family as characters in your pictures?

PECKINPAH: No, they got too respectable. They went into real estate, politics, the law. My mother, who's still very much around, believes absolutely in two things: teetotalism and Christian Science. My father was a judge. He believed in the Bible as literature, and in the law. He was an *authority*, and we all grew up thinking he could never, ever be wrong about anything. The law and the Bible and Robert Ingersoll were our big dinner-table topics. When I was still a kid, Dad made me go to the trial, in his court, of a 17-year-old boy accused of statutory rape. He thought it would be a good lesson for me. It was, but not for the reasons he thought. In addition to being a judge, my dad was probably the worst cattleman in the business. He went broke 13 times. And in the mountains, he made his own laws. He believed that you didn't hunt unless you ate what you killed. But he claimed that all the animals on his land were his to do what he liked with. I was 20 years old before I knew there was such a thing as a hunting season or a game warden, and I was 30 before I began paying any attention to it.

The people, the places in that area! It's mostly all gone now. Fresno's like a little L.A. today, and the country around it is chopped up with new roads and resort facilities and overrun with all these shit-ass tourists and campers. My brother Denny and I were in on the last of it. A lot of the old-timers dated back to when the place had been the domain of hunters and trappers, Indians, gold miners—all the drifters and hustlers. All that's left now are the names to remind you, and *what* names: towns like Coarsegold and Finegold, Shuteye Peak, Dead Man Mountain, Wild Horse Ridge, Slick Rock. And the old-timers had their stories to tell, too. Denny and I rode and fished and hunted all over that country. We thought we'd always be a part of it. The last few years I haven't even been hunting anymore, but I'm thinking of taking it up again.

PLAYBOY: Do you agree with your father that it's wrong to hunt unless you eat what you kill?

PECKINPAH: Yes, and you also shouldn't kill more than you can eat. A deer tastes good, but it's also a beautiful animal. Anyone will kill, though, if he gets hungry enough—even those who refuse to hunt at all, for moral reasons. A gnawing in the belly is a great equalizer of principles. Of course, most men kill *only* out of principle, and then it's usually his fellow man. Nice principle.

PLAYBOY: Do you think it's possible, as one critic once said about you, that you're really a 19th Century man and that in your work you're living vicariously the period you'd have preferred to live in?

PECKINPAH: When you're doing a picture, first of all, the period matters less than what the thing is about. You become all the characters. I've been every character in my pictures. The actors do the same. They wear each other's parts to try them on for size, to test them and themselves, sometimes against each other. But I did like that period in American life. And I liked the period I grew up in, the Thirties. It was a different America. We hadn't run out of ground.

PLAYBOY: With your hard-nosed WASP background and your commitment to the outdoors, how did you make the leap into show business?

PECKINPAH: By chance. I was just out of the Marine Corps after World War Two and I had nothing very specific in mind. Denny had gone into law. The only thing I was sure of was that I didn't want to do that. I went back to school, to Fresno State, because I had nothing better to do. There I met my first wife, Marie, who wanted to be an actress. Fresno State had a small but active theater department and I tagged along after Marie one day into a directing class. It turned me on right away. I especially dug the plays of Tennessee Williams, and my big project at school was a one-hour version of *The Glass Menagerie* that I adapted and directed. I guess I've learned more from Williams than anyone. He's easily America's greatest playwright. I've always felt strongly moved by him. I've also directed *Streetcar*, as well as most of his one-acts. He's a tremendous artist and I wish him the best of luck, always. I think I learned more about writing from having to cut *Menagerie* than anything I've done since.

PLAYBOY: Writing was what opened doors for you, wasn't it?

PECKINPAH: Yeah, but it was hell, because I hate writing. I suffer the tortures of the damned. I can't sleep and it feels like I'm going to die any minute. Eventually, I lock myself away somewhere, out of reach of a gun, and get it on in one big push. I'd always been around writers and had friends who were writers, but I'd never realized what a lot of

goddamn anguish is involved. But it was a way to break in. I paid my dues in this business. I was a go-fer, a stagehand. I swept out studios and I watched a few good people work. Then I started writing and finally selling TV scripts. And after a while I decided to try my hand at movies. I always had two or three projects going at a time. I'd put everything into them and I'd sell a few and then they'd disappear.

I wrote two pretty good scripts in those days, and what happened to them was typical. One, *Villa Rides*, was produced with Yul Brynner in the lead. It was awful. I've put in a lot of time in Mexico and I know Mexican history. Brynner said I didn't understand Mexico and *Villa Rides* is the result of the changes they made. It's a phony. The other script became *One-Eyed Jacks*, directed by and starring Brando. I had adapted the thing from a novel by Charles Neider called *The Authentic Death of Hendry Jones*, based on the true story of Billy the Kid. It was the definitive work on the subject, but Marlon screwed it up. He's a hell of an actor, but in those days he had to end up as a hero and that's not the point of the story. Billy the Kid was no hero. He was a gunfighter, a real killer.

But I don't want to knock actors. Some of my best friends are actors. It was Brian Keith, who'd worked with me on *The Westerner* series, who got me my first movie-directing break. He'd been signed to star opposite Maureen O'Hara in *The Deadly Companions* and he persuaded the producer of the picture, who happened to be Miss O'Hara's brother, to take me on. It wasn't the best deal in the world: I wanted to make a picture and this guy wanted to push me around. The script needed lots of work, but I'd get told to go back in my corner. Brian knew we were in trouble, so between us we tried to give the thing some dramatic sense. The result was that all of his scenes worked, while all of hers were dead. I found out about producers, all right.

PLAYBOY: You've always had trouble with producers. Are there any you've ever enjoyed working with?

PECKINPAH: One, maybe two, and even then not much. I don't work well under people. I think there has to be one person who's making a picture and that person has to be the director. Producers are often only administrators and they're too interested in defending their own prerogatives. I've got a temper and I can't stand stupidity, so I'm always at war with these cats. I want control of everything, from the script to the cutting room. And if I don't get what I want from people, I put them on the bus. The trouble with producers is you can't do that to them. Everybody else comes and goes on a picture, but the producer

and the director are with it from beginning to end. The best producer is a guy who'll let you make your own movie. There aren't many around.

PLAYBOY: What directors have that clout?

PECKINPAH: Kurosawa has it. Fellini. Bergman. But no American has it. Some, like Kubrick and Nichols, think they do, but they don't. It's not just a question of what happens to you during shooting and editing; it's what they do to you once the film is entirely out of your hands. Huston once almost had total control, but he blew it on *The Red Badge of Courage*, when he walked away from the cutting of the picture. I'm a great admirer of his, anyway. Every picture of Huston's has tried not only to tell a story but to make some kind of statement. The perfect films of this kind are *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. I wish I could make a film that good. Compared with John Huston, I'm still in seventh grade —but I'm moving up.

PLAYBOY: We've heard that Huston didn't run out on *Red Badge*, that he had another commitment.

PECKINPAH: Well, even if he *did* run, I wouldn't blame him at all. This isn't a game. There's too much at stake. And the woods are full of killers, all sizes, all colors. I didn't know about all of this when I was just a writer. I couldn't stand being so alone with myself, and it was very, very hard work; but writing has one very big advantage over directing: You only have to deal with yourself; you can escape into your fantasies and be a king. The outside world, as far as a writer's work goes, is limited to dealing with an agent and maybe a couple of editors, some of whom can be pretty good people. But a director has to deal with a whole world absolutely teeming with mediocrities, jackals, hangers-on and just plain killers. The attrition is terrific. It can kill you. The saying is that they can kill you but not eat you. That's nonsense. I've had them eating on me while I was still walking around. My basic job is dealing with talent in terms of a story and getting it on. I wish the rest of it were that simple. But there's all the shit that comes before and after.

PLAYBOY: Now that the big studios don't control the industry anymore, don't you and a few other top directors have much more freedom to make the kind of movies you want to make? Isn't that what the so-called New Hollywood is all about?

PECKINPAH: I'm not talking about Hollywood, new or old. What I'm talking about is money, doctor. That's what it's all about. Unlike a novelist, for instance, I'm dealing with a product that costs several million dollars. When you're dealing in millions, you're dealing with people at their meanest. Christ, a showdown in the old West is nothing compared with the infighting that goes on over money. To get my films made, especially at the beginning, I always had to lie and cheat and steal. It was the only way I could cope with all the muscle that stood behind the weight of the money. And even then I couldn't win. MGM saw *Ride the High Country* as a low-budget quickie they could throw away in the second halves of summer double features, and if I'd tried to talk to them about the basic theme of that picture, which was salvation and loneliness, they'd have fired me on the spot. Even so, they hated what I'd done, and they threw me out before I could finish cutting, dubbing and scoring. *Major Dundee*, which had a good man in it, Chuck Heston, and could have been something, was butchered by the studio and the producer turned out to be a weasel whose real talent was for poisoning wells.

Marty Ransohoff fired me from *The Cincinnati Kid* after only four days. He gave a story out to the trades that I was vulgarizing the picture by injecting a nude scene into it. There was a scene in a hotel room between Rip Torn and this girl who was playing a dreary little hooker. Well, we worked on it and the scene got sadder and sadder. It just happened that the girl turned out to be naked under her coat. It was only one element in a much bigger scene. But I learned one thing about Marty: He had a tremendous hatred of real talent.

It was nearly four years before I worked again. I got by on moonlighting, borrowed money and an occasional script. I couldn't get people on the phone or get through a studio gate. I was out. It wasn't until Danny Melnick, who'd seen *High Country* and liked it, hired me to adapt and direct Katherine Anne Porter's *Noon Wine* on television that I found myself back in business. And when word got out that I was being hired, Melnick got calls from people who not only had never worked with me but who didn't even know me. They all tried to warn him off me.

PLAYBOY: Why?

PECKINPAH: A lot of cats in this business are overpaid and guilty about it. To them I'm a threat.

PLAYBOY: Or maybe you just haven't gone out of your way to make friends in the movie business. In any case, after *Noon Wine*, you really established yourself. Didn't this make things easier?

PECKINPAH: Not much. My next two pictures, *Wild Bunch* and *Cable Hogue*, got made but were practically wiped out. Warner Bros. cut *Wild Bunch* to pieces and you have to go to Europe to see the picture in anything like the version I made. *Cable Hogue* was thrown away in multiple release despite the fact that people had begun to pay some attention to my work and *Wild Bunch* made a lot of money for the studio. Before I started on *Straw Dogs*, I had five pictures in the can, not one of which was visible anywhere in this country either at all or in anything like the form I wanted it to be in. What I'd done had been butchered or thrown away. The worst that can happen to a novelist is that his book goes out of print, but it survives somewhere, in libraries, at least, in its original form. There are people all over the place, dozens of them, I'd like to kill, quite literally kill. You know, you put in your time and you pay your dues and these cats come in and destroy you. I'm not going to work for people who do that anymore.

PLAYBOY: So where are you going from here?

PECKINPAH: Logistically or spiritually?

PLAYBOY: Both.

PECKINPAH: Logistically, all I want out of my work now is health and happiness for my precious family, as Williams puts it in *The Glass Menagerie*. That means I'll keep working. I have two scripts in hand at the moment, but they both need work. All scripts need work.

PLAYBOY: Why do you feel you always have to rewrite?

PECKINPAH: No matter how good a script is, you have to adapt it to the needs of the actors.

PLAYBOY: How about your own needs? All your scripts, whether originals or adapted from a book, have a distinctive style, a unique kind of language, that identifies them as yours.

PECKINPAH: The Peckinpah touch again? Well, some people think my pictures are pretty dreadful, including your movie reviewer, who I'd like to see cut a tin bill and go out and pick shit with the chickens.

PLAYBOY: We'll give him the message. You seem to be pretty vulnerable to what people think of you.

PECKINPAH: I think the role of the critic is very important to films, and that's why I get so goddamn angry when the critics don't pick up on good films and go along with bullshit, as they did on Bogdanovich's film, *The Last Picture Show*, which was a crashing bore, and ignore something like *Two-Lane Blacktop*, which I thought was a potential work of art. *The Last Picture Show* was artsy-craftsy, jacksy-offsky and a real pain in the ass. I was supposed to have dinner one night with Ben Johnson, who was superb in it, but I knew Peter would be there and I'd have to hit him right in the fucking mouth, so I didn't go. I really hated that film.

PLAYBOY: What films have you liked recently?

PECKINPAH: My own. I make marvelous films. I think *Junior Bonner*, which I shot in 40 days, may possibly be my best picture. I'm truly delighted with it. And

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I don't think McQueen has ever been better, which is saying a lot. The picture's about three days in the life of a bull rider, a loner on the rodeo circuit.

PLAYBOY: Are there any other films, besides your own, that you'd care to talk about?

PECKINPAH: I haven't seen much. But I loved *Dirty Harry*, even though I was appalled by it. A terrible piece of trash that Don Siegel really made something out of. Brilliantly done. Hated what it was saying, but the day I saw it the audience was cheering.

PLAYBOY: What about *The Godfather*?

PECKINPAH: Haven't seen it—but I hate Coppola, too.

PLAYBOY: Why?

PECKINPAH: Because I hear the film is great and the only movies I want to like are *my* movies. I don't want any other son of a bitch making good movies.

PLAYBOY: So you hate the good directors as well as the bad ones.

PECKINPAH: I detest every film maker except the innocuous ones. I love Ross Hunter. Ross Hunter is my idol. I'd like to *be* Ross Hunter. He knows where it's at, baby. But you asked me back there where I was going logistically and spiritually and I've only answered the first part of the question.

PLAYBOY: Well?

PECKINPAH: Spiritually, I need rest and refreshment, and that usually means Mexico. I've been working steadily now for a long time and I'm tired.

PLAYBOY: Why do you always go back to Mexico?

PECKINPAH: Mexico has always meant something special to me. My Mexican experience is never over. I first went there right after the war, because I'd been to China with the Marines and wanted to go back there and couldn't after the Communists took over. Mexico was the nearest place to go, and it was a time of going. We were all on the road in those days, just as Kerouac wrote about it. I loved Mexico. I stayed three months that first trip and I've gone back ever since. I took Marie there first. My second wife was Mexican. And I married my current wife, Joie, in Juárez, when we got to El Paso with *The Getaway*. Everything important in my life has been linked to Mexico one way or another. The country has a special effect on me.

PLAYBOY: Can you define it?

PECKINPAH: You bet I can. In Mexico it's all out front—the color, the life, the warmth. If a Mexican likes you, he'll touch you. It's direct. It's real. Whatever it is, they don't confuse it with anything else. Here in this country, everybody is worried about stopping the war and saving the forests and all that, but these same crusaders go out the door in the morning forgetting to kiss their wives and water the flowers. In Mexico they don't worry so goddamn much about saving the human race or about the wheeling and dealing that's poisoning us. In Mexico they don't forget to kiss each other and water the flowers.

PLAYBOY: You don't put much faith, we gather, in social or political solutions.

PECKINPAH: None. You know what this country's all about, doctor? It's advertising. It's brainwashing. It's bullshit. It's hustling products and people, making no distinction between the two. We're in the Dark Ages again. Look at who the people are voting for—Nixon, Wallace—killer apes right out of the caves, all dressed up in suits and talking and walking around with death in their eyes. And what's the alternative to these cats? Humphrey and Muskie? Two guys with absolutely no souls of their own, no concept of where they stand, who they are, no fundamental morality.

PLAYBOY: And George McGovern?

PECKINPAH: I doubt whether he's tough enough to cut it. If he turns out to be, they'd better throw a metal shield around the poor bastard and keep it there. The rifle shot that rang out in Dallas in 1963 was a very big and ugly noise. You know, I wouldn't film any part of *The Getaway* in Dallas. We were set to go in there and shoot some railroad sequences. I was driving around and I stopped for a stop sign and I looked up and there was this plaque on a building and I realized I was at *that* crossing. I said, "Let's get the hell out of here. We aren't going to shoot any part of my picture in this town." You want to go shopping at Neiman-Marcus? Fine. Great store, the greatest in the world. But staying in Dallas to put some part of yourself on the line there? No. Anyway, to get back to politics, I guess I agree with something my brother said some time back. The time will come, he said, when you'll look back on Harry Truman as possibly the best President this country ever had. Even Eisenhower was better than these guys. At least he knew who he was. He wasn't dead and the society wasn't dead.

PLAYBOY: What about those who are fighting to change things? America seems to be full of good causes these days and good people actively committed to them. Don't you think there are some grounds for optimism, for hope?

PECKINPAH: No. Boredom will kill them off. The country has no attention span. We're television oriented now. We'd better all wake up to the fact that Big Brother is here. And now, with cable TV and video cassettes coming in, no one will ever have to get up off his ass, even to go to the corner for a movie. It's awful. One of the great things about going to a movie or the theater is the act itself—the getting out, the buying of the tickets, the sharing of the experience with a lot of other people. Eighty percent of the people who watch television watch it in groups of three or less, and one of those three is half stoned. Most people come home at night after work, have a couple of knocks before dinner and settle down in their living-death rooms. The way our society is evolving, doctor, has been very carefully thought out. It's not accidental. We're all being programed, and I bitterly resent it.

PLAYBOY: What can we do about it?

PECKINPAH: We have to water the flowers—and screw a lot.

PLAYBOY: You think love is the answer?

PECKINPAH: What are you, some kind of nut? All I know about love is: Don't fuck with it.

PLAYBOY: Well, at least you're making money these days. What are you doing with all of it?

PECKINPAH: I've got four kids and a big load to carry. I don't own much and I don't want to. I still have an ocean-front lot I bought years ago in Malibu and a small cattle ranch outside Ely, Nevada, but I'm trying to unload both of them. I'm selling everything I can. I want to get rid of this creature-comfort thing.

PLAYBOY: What's wrong with some of the more pleasant amenities success can bring you? Why not live a little?

PECKINPAH: I live plenty. I like good drink, good food, comfortable clothes and fancy women. But if I get sucked into this consumer-oriented society, then I can't make the pictures about it that I want to make. I'm a goddamn nomad. I live out of suitcases and my home is wherever I'm making a picture.

PLAYBOY: If the money means so little to you and you don't care about possessions, then what do you really want from your career? Is it just an ego trip?

PECKINPAH: Fuck you, buddy. OK, ego has a lot to do with it, sure. But it's not what the game's about, and you know it.

PLAYBOY: If it's a game, then what's the game about?

PECKINPAH: I'll put it to you this way. I've come a ways and I've paid a price. It's cost me plenty—maybe my sanity and at least a couple of marriages—and I'm not sure the game is worth it. Sometimes I want to say the hell with it and pack it in, but I can't do that. I stick or I know I'm nothing. Then I look around and I notice I'm not entirely alone. There are maybe 17 of us left in the world. And we're a family. That family is composed of the cats who want to do their number and get it on. It's the only family there is. My father said it all one day. He gave me Steve Judd's great line in *Ride the High Country*: "All I want is to enter my house justified."