

I. THE OPENING SCENE.

OVER THE THRESHOLD OF THE DIRECTOR'S VISION:
FILMS OF FELLINI, PECKINPAH, AND COPPOLA

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DIRECTOR'S ON DIRECTING
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In venturing forth to embrace a comparative discussion on 8 ½, Apocalypse Now, and The Wild Bunch, three films which are profound directorial icons for Federico Fellini, Francis Ford Coppola, and Sam Peckinpah, respectively, consideration on style, structural unity, and form are valuable in an attempt, albeit problematic, to deconstruct to some degree the enigmatic artistic vocation of whom we refer to, for lack of a more suitable label, as the “*Director*.” Each one of the aforementioned films present a nearly overwhelming volume of information for analysis and discussion, let alone as a collective source for multiple parallel juxtapositions of all three films. With this precursor— dare say, “disclaimer,”—in mind, the focal point of this discussion will remain within the confines of what is arguably the most important segment of a film: the opening introductory scene. Working within this framework of initiality, it becomes apparent that the three filmmakers, in these specific films, while perhaps differing in the acute particulars of style and structural unity, do adhere to certain codified elements in pursuing the foundation for the *form* of their film. Ultimately, the opening scene of all three films presents the audience with heroes who embark on personal quests that must be completed. The fates of these heroes are held within the director’s omnipotent grasp of predestination.

Turning to the opening sequences of the three films, one finds a certain cohesive trend upheld by all three of the directors. Each one sets a precedence, an initializing tone, from the foundation of which they will unfold the entire ensuing film to their audience. All three films, incidentally, yield forth the notion of chaos and disorder found within Nature, and more directly, the inharmonious discourse of Man, whether in social terms or not, with Nature.

In 8 ½, Fellini makes use of an oneiric dreamscape for his initiating scene in which his protagonist, Guido, is found trapped and suffocating in a car— metaphorically symbolic of Guido’s poetic and artistic frustrations— before able to liberate himself in an epiphany of sorts whereby he flies high into the heavens. Fellini’s approach to the initial car shots of Guido’s suffocation and complete solitude magnifies those feelings of loneliness and helplessness, for all sound is extracted so that it seems as though Guido is in a vacuum, isolated from the blank uncaring faces that stare at him. Fellini constructs Guido’s heavenly flight to be reminiscent of Icarus, for, moments after succeeding in his attempt to reach lofty heights of absolute and uninhibited freedom, Guido is soon shackled and torn down to earth by his

Jungian *Anima* figure, forced to return to reality: the awakening from his dream.

Fellini's transition from dream to wakeful consciousness is nearly seamless so far as the character of Guido is concerned, for Fellini reintroduces Guido to the audience as a soul trapped and suffocating even in reality through the use of art design of the room and blocking: not only is the room dark and brooding, but once awakened, Guido's head is covered with a towel by the doctor, essentially suffocating him. Furthermore, the only spoken words in the dream predestine Guido for failure— "Down, down... come down," "Yes, down... it must be down."— and not simply failure, but self conducted in an almost masochistic manner for it is a persona of Guido himself who pulls on the rope which sends his own self crashing down. Thus, Fellini creates a simple chaotic pattern of *suffocation*, followed by *escape/freedom*, ending with *ultimate failure*; a pattern exhibited throughout the film, culminating in the finale.

In a similar manner to Fellini's dream-filled disorder, Sam Peckinpah paints a setting of complete chaos immersed in irony during the opening scene of The Wild Bunch. Peckinpah uses an interesting device to frame the beginning and ending of the first scene, "the bank-heist scene," by using the assembly of children playing with a swarm of ants which are devouring two scorpions. In the end of the children's "game," both the ants and scorpions are set on fire and destroyed. A strong directorial comment here, Peckinpah is blatantly illustrating the deadly struggle of all life in Nature, as well as the violent and cruel nature of human beings found intrinsically in youth, thus, to a certain degree, desensitizing the audience to the ensuing explicit violence while also establishing the graphic shootout in town as a standard of violence for the remainder of the film. Furthermore, Peckinpah foreshadows the destruction of the "Wild Bunch" who, like the two scorpions who are overwhelmed by the swarming weaker ants, are killed by an army. If Fellini's opening scene can be described as one dealing with psychological frustration of the self, Peckinpah's scene is comparatively one of unbridled chaos apparent within the whole of society.

One example of society's chaotic behavior is illustrated by Peckinpah's portrayal of the "law-men" as, in some ways, more evil than the gang of "outlaws" who are being pursued. Not only is Deek Thornton, the leader of the scraggly vulture-like bounty hunters, a former criminal who is unwillingly working as the law, but he was once an outlaw member of Pike's gang, the very man he pursues. In their desire to capture Pike's gang, the designated "law-men" initiate a melee' shootout in the crowded streets of a busy town, callously killing innocent bystanders in what soon becomes a

massacre. Furthermore, if the “law-men” are difficult to label and recognize, then the “outlaws” are even more-so, for they are all clean-shaven, initially well mannered men, dressed in U.S. Army Cavalry uniforms—the Wild West’s quintessential icon of protection and justice in the face of savage lawlessness. Both parties are established with these false facades in opposition of each other for a short time before Peckinpah tears ways those facades to reveal the paradoxical nature of the characters.

The manner in which Peckinpah depicts the shootout in the street is an innovative way of illustrating a western gunfight, especially for 1969. The opening scene is extremely clever in terms of presenting the audience with a multi-tiered ensemble of information, almost Fellini-esque with the trademark carnival-like parade playing through the scene. Peckinpah accomplishes this layered ensemble of information via the use of slow-motion and the cutting from shots of men and women dying, to shots of a boy and a girl holding one another in the midst of the massacre, and then to shots of Pike’s man toying with the hostages using a religious song, “Gather at the River,” (a song which is perhaps an *homage* to John Ford’s My Darling Clementine, and the legendary gunfight at the O.K. corral). In suspending time by inter-cutting the slow motion shots with real time, Peckinpah emphasizes the death-throes of men, forcing the audience to more drastically consider the event threefold: a narrative device of empathy; a shocking and exhilarating device; and artistic and poetic expression of temporal elongation.

Francis Ford Coppola also makes use of distorting temporal reality with slow motion, although rather than explicitly revealing information to his audience as Peckinpah did, Coppola subtly draws the audience into the consciousness of an individual man. The opening scene of Coppola’s Apocalypse Now introduces the audience to a world where Nature is accosted by Man, the two of which are together entwined in a mutual destructive descent. The haunting static long-take of the jungle palm trees, calmly swaying in the breeze, establishes nature in its serenity and calls to mind the beauty of an Eden-like environment. Moments before allowing the audience to become too comfortable with this idea, Coppola shatters any peaceful thoughts with a massive aerial bombardment which transforms the entire screen into a fiery explosion. Accompanied by the chilling first words of Jim Morrison’s song, “This is the end...,” there can be no doubt in anyone’s mind that Coppola’s message here is humanity’s capability of self destruction in the presence of the Eden-like Nature which created man to be chaotic and violent. The multiple dissolve technique Coppola uses, allows him to immerse his protagonist, Willard, *within* the very fires of destruction,

portraying his face in a devilish manner with the incessant spinning of the ceiling fan evoking feelings of turmoil and confusion. Thanks to the haunting cinematography of Vittorio Storaro, Willard's very eyes are ablaze with reflections of the exploding fiery bombs. Furthermore, by immersing Willard in images of the burning jungle as well as with war-helicopters flying through Willard's head, Coppola is fortifying the fateful inseparable communion Willard has with both the evils of war as well as the more base fundamental chaos which so readily defines Man within Nature.

Hence, we have seen how Federico Fellini, Sam Peckinpah, and Francis Ford Coppola have all taken advantage of the powerful force of the first opening scene of their films, 8 1/2, The Wild Bunch, and Apocalypse Now, in immediately presenting to the audience the thematic foundation they wish to portray. By thus establishing their own personal notion of reality for the particular film, the director is essentially taking the hand of his viewer and leading him to the threshold of a meticulously methodical construction of a personal artistic vision: in 8 1/2, Fellini draws us into the psychological realm of a self-questioning individual, immediately illustrated by beginning the film in a P.O.V. within the protagonist's dream; in The Wild Bunch, Peckinpah introduces us into a newly conceived western portrayal of indulgent and explicit violence which only seems normal and acceptable in light of the intrinsic savage qualities illustrated by Peckinpah's use of the children; in Apocalypse Now, Coppola depicts a destructive communion of Nature and Man enshrined in inharmonious chaos. Ultimately, all three directors preserve a similar cinematic form in the sense that they each acknowledge and make use of the provocative power of immediately *directing* the audience into a specific artistic reflection of reality.