

# The Wild Bunch: Scourges or Ministers?

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When *The Wild Bunch* first appeared in the summer of 1969, it created something of a scandal with its raw, unleavened violence and hyper-realistic treatment of the western subject matter.<sup>1</sup> This treatment seemed to scorn deliberately the usual dictates of the western genre, a traditional repository of American values which called for idealized if not mythological handling. Americans used to finding genteel gunfights and unambiguous morality in their westerns were shocked by Peckinpah's depiction of the west as a squalid, messily bloody place, marked not by the confrontation of good and evil but by layers of badness. Where the traditional western offered, at the safe distance of legend, a morality corresponding to the perceived moral clarity of the Second World War, Peckinpah's western reflected the moral ambiguity and discomfort of the war in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> Setting his film in the early twentieth century rather than the idealized post-Civil War period common in earlier westerns, Peckinpah suggested an incipient but recognizably modern world that is still very much with us.

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<sup>2</sup>The nature of this moral ambiguity was much debated at the time, and not always in the most helpful terms. A number of critics noted with some discomfort the aesthetic beauty of Peckinpah's violence. Comparisons were often made with *Bonnie and Clyde*, which made similar use of slow motion. Paul Schrader went so far as to argue that "in *The Wild Bunch* Sam Peckinpah stares into the heart of his own fascism....The Westerners of *The Wild Bunch* have lost their code—only the fascism remains. The power of *The Wild Bunch* lies in the fact that this fascism is not peculiar to Peckinpah, but is American at heart." See Paul Schrader, "Sam Peckinpah Going to Mexico," *Cinema* 5.3 (1969): 22. This seems much too glib an argument, however. One is reminded of the reasons George Orwell tried to kick terms like "fascism" into the dustbin of "meaningless words." Paul Seydor is certainly right when he notes that such critics commit the rather naive fallacy of "drawing a one-to-one relationship between the ideas that characters express and the artist's personal beliefs." See Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980) 102.

All this, of course, along with the Vietnam War, is no longer news. Since then a flood of such “modern” westerns has made graphic violence, moral ambiguity, and the twentieth century setting the virtual coordinates of a new genre, if not the clichés of our time. Certainly, *The Wild Bunch* no longer shocks us as it once did, and if anything its flaws reveal themselves in a sentimentality not unlike that of the traditional western. Much more apparent today than any revolutionary breaking with the past is the film’s evident nostalgia for the world of the nineteenth century, which as historians are quick to point out, ended not with the turn of the century but the beginning of the First World War.<sup>3</sup> The modern world depicted in the film is indeed brutal and seemingly Godless, with the appropriate ethical trappings, but it is counterpoised by the simulacrum of an earlier, morally simpler world.

One of the rather odd things about *The Wild Bunch* is its distinctly theological cast, permeating the film in spite of its realistic presentation. The society it depicts is obviously a modern Sodom and Gomorrah, whose ultimate destruction is made to feel at least divinely ordained. The famous violence takes on indeed an aura of ritual destruction or vastation, which is dramatically satisfying if morally ambiguous. The film suggests the paradox of a Godless world in which the divine nonetheless threatens to intercede. The form of this intercession, however, is not obvious—it is certainly not what the hapless fundamentalists at the beginning of the film expect.

It is worth considering the story in the light of Fredson Bowers’ discussion of the roles of “scourge” and “minister” as they obtain in *Hamlet*.<sup>4</sup> One might object that a constituent of Elizabethan cosmology is inappropriately brought to bear upon a modern story, but we should remember that the traditional western ethic, which Peckinpah ranges to some extent against the modern world, suggests a cosmology as elaborate in its way as that of the Elizabethans, and in certain respects remarkably similar. Like the Elizabethans, nineteenth century adherents of a “fire and brimstone” theology expected and looked for divine intervention in human affairs. Clint Eastwood’s film *Pale Rider* is a more recent and more obvious dramatization of such thinking. That this intervention should make use of an ironic instrument is more typical of the Elizabethans perhaps than western Americans, but it sorts well with Peckinpah’s twentieth century perspective. Peckinpah’s film at once satirizes western American religious belief in the form of the fundamentalist teetotalers and fulfills ironically its expectations with the

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<sup>3</sup>It would not be surprising if future historians argue that the “bad century” ended spiritually during the past year.

<sup>4</sup>Fredson Bowers, “Hamlet as Minister and Scourge,” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentiss-Hall Inc., 1968).

fiery destruction of a clearly sinful society, brought on by the wild bunch as God's scourges and ministers. (We will consider later which of these terms is most appropriately applied here.)

Bowers points out that both scourges and ministers are agents of God's external, as opposed to internal intervention in human affairs (85). Whereas internal intervention was appropriate for someone capable of being moved by conscience "to a state of grief and remorse" (85), external intervention, in the form of natural or human revenge, was appropriate for those so deeply dyed in their sins that no inner redemption was possible. According to Bowers, Elizabethan belief held that when God did choose to punish crime with human agents, He

chose for his instruments those who were already so steeped in crime as to be past salvation. This was not only a principle of economy, but a means of freeing God from the impossible assumption that He would deliberately corrupt innocence....only a man already damned for his sins was selected, and he was called a scourge. (85)

The position of the scourge, as Bowers notes, "was not an enviable one" (85); whether he realized his function or not—and as Hamlet's case suggests, this was not always possible—he was already condemned. The minister differs from the scourge in that he "is an agent who directly performs some good" which may indeed involve "a direct retribution for evil by overthrowing it and setting up a positive good in its place" (Bowers 86). According to Bowers, "a retributive minister may visit God's wrath on sin but only as the necessary final act to the overthrow of evil, whereas a scourge visits wrath alone, the delayed good to rest in another's hands" (86). Bowers' paradigms are Richard III as the scourge of an England corrupted by the overthrow and murder of Richard II and Henry Richmond as the minister "exact[ing] public justice in battle on the tyrant Richard" (86). Hamlet's case, of course, is more difficult to determine, but we will recur to it later in determining the status of the wild bunch themselves.

The first scene of the film leaves us in no doubt that the "bunch" are damned, and also that they are living in a world of the damned. We see them initially entering a small western town in Texas dressed as trail-worn soldiers. On their way to the bank, they pass a group of children seemingly engaged in innocent play, as well as a local temperance group holding a meeting, and their leader, in gentlemanly fashion, even offers assistance to a local woman. A sort of banal orderliness seems to reign in the town. Once inside the bank, however, they brandish their weapons with shocking suddenness. The seeming order breaks down into a vicious chaos. We realize also that the bandits have been led into a trap; bounty

hunters lurk in readiness on the rooftops. The scene erupts now into one of incredible violence (balanced in the film only by the apocalyptic scene at the end) as the bandits try to shoot their way out of town. One bystander is shown being shot in the street from several directions at once. A bandit and his horse crash through a plate glass window. Ruthlessly, the bandits take women hostages, shoot innocent people, and escape with their “loot,” which as it will turn out consists of washers planted by the bounty hunters. The lawmen, however, are shown to be equally vicious and destructive. And beyond this, they are possessed by *Schadenfreude*, gushing effusively at the evident sufferings of their victims. Even the children at the edge of town are seen now as vicious: they have been horribly enjoying themselves watching scorpions being overwhelmed and destroyed by red ants, and then burning them for sport. Indeed, women and children, the traditional innocents of westerns, do not fare well in this film. The chaos lingering beneath the surface of order touches everyone here.

The sense of a violent and corrupt world, which this scene so vividly evokes with its striking realism, is what seems to break with the tradition of the idealized western, but in cunning ways the film comments on this tradition and actually carries it on. Certainly, the protagonists of most traditional westerns are not villains, but as the subtle allusion to *Jesse James* (the horse and rider crashing through a plate glass window) suggests, this was not invariably the case, even in the days of the Hollywood studios. A certain anarchic freedom from bourgeois constraints was always part of the tradition of the western, though rarely displayed in such a violent form. Actually, the wild bunch are likeable enough if we consider them personally and apart from their vocation. This paradox is also an inheritance from films like *Jesse James* and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. The first scene of *The Wild Bunch* does not allow us, however, to sympathize completely with anyone. We must see the personal and likeable traits of the protagonists against the background of viciousness, and indeed only as they grow in contrast to the irredeemable viciousness and greed of many of those supposedly on the side of the law. Peckinpah intentionally muddies the moral waters, and in doing so he is able to disguise his continuance of the idealistic tradition. As failed bandits—the yardstick of the Puritan ethic is appropriate here—the wild bunch incur damnation; as *scourges*, they will ultimately effect God’s will, the only way justice may prevail in a society that is thoroughly corrupt.

Enclosed by the apocalyptic violence of the first and last scenes, the middle scenes of the film, in their relatively peaceful way, introduce us to the protagonists, suggest a human dimension, and set up the more precise moral distinctions that come into play at the climax. The “bunch” embraces really two generations:

the aging bandits Pike, Dutch, and Sykes, and a younger group composed of the Gorch brothers (Lyle and Tector) and the Mexican Indian Angel. A fourth younger bandit, the grandson of Sykes, received the death many of them might have envied holding hostages in town to let the others escape, while a fourth older bandit, Deke Thornton, has been forced by an unscrupulous railroad man Harrigan (perhaps a play on the notorious railroad financier, E.H. Harriman) to lead a scrofulous band of bounty hunters. The older characters appear to have lived too long, while the younger ones have been born too late. For all of them, however, the American frontier, on which their way of life depended, has closed. Their one alternative, as Richard Schickel puts it, is to “attempt to ride right out of our history and into Mexico’s, where they are not yet anachronisms.”<sup>5</sup>

That Mexico will offer a real solution to their predicament, however, is open to doubt. As they cross the border into Mexico, Angel reverently exclaims: “Mexico lindo!” He is immediately countered by the Gorches: “I don’t see nothin’ so lindo about it. It just looks like more of Texas.” To this Angel retorts: “Ah, you have no eyes.” As the product of a different culture, Angel is the only one with open possibilities. Where the others are politically indifferent, a condition of their situation as well as the anarchic western tradition, one part of Angel at least is politically committed to the still unsettled cause of his people. For Pike, loyalty does not go outside the family circle of the “bunch.” As he puts it trying to quell a rebellion of the younger men, “When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can’t do that, you’re like some animal—you’re finished...we’re finished.” His goal is “to make one good score and back off,” and he will not allow political or moral considerations to affect him. To Mapache’s German advisor, Commander Mohr, who would like to know “some Americans who did not share their government’s naive sentiments,” Pike comments: “We share very few sentiments with our government.” To Pike, Mexico is a last frontier with the anarchic freedom where he may attempt his “score.”

To Angel, who leads the bunch to the safety of his village, it is a homeland repressed by General Huerta and filled with political tensions he cannot resist. He insists that the bunch treat the villagers with respect, indicating a loyalty outside the group. Later, in Aqua Verde, the headquarters of the ruthless General Mapache, Angel refuses to help steal guns for the tyrant. When challenged by Sykes, who points out that there were no tears in his eyes for the ravaged American townsmen, he answers: “Ah, they were not my people. I care about my people,

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<sup>5</sup>Richard Schickel, “Mastery of the ‘Dirty Western,’” *Film 69/70*, eds. Joseph Morgenstern and Stefan Kanfer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 151.

my village, Mexico.” To Sykes’ comment that when “you ride with us, your own business don’t count,” he responds: “Then I don’t ride with you.” The others do not understand the positive force of Angel’s political attitudes. Pike, for instance, considers him “a pain in the ass.” When Angel challenges him (“Would you give guns to someone who kills your father? your mother?”), Pike answers simply: “Ten thousand cuts an awful lot of family ties.” And yet Pike protects him (as a gang member) from the general, and Dutch even sympathizes as far as possible (that is, up to the point of risking his own skin) with Angel’s cause. Indeed, it is Angel’s inability to accept the anarchic “brotherhood among thieves” ethic in a Mexican context that propels the “bunch” into their final conflict. He cannot resist shooting his former girlfriend who has become the mistress of Mapache, an act which introduces a deadly disequilibrium into the relations of the “bunch” and the Mexicans. After this, a confrontation can be postponed but not avoided.

The society composed of the Mexican soldiers and their camp-followers, like that suggested by the bounty hunters and the railroad representative, is perhaps best described as loathsome. We first see Mapache, a Huerta lieutenant who is trying to set up an independent fiefdom in northern Mexico, riding in a bright red convertible, the color suggesting immediately the salaciousness that accompanies and characterizes him. We know already that he has seduced Angel’s girlfriend after killing his parents. He is lecherous, murderous, and apparently in a constant state of drunkenness. Occupying himself with the whores and champagne, Mapache evidently leaves the details of command to such obsequious advisors as his aide-de-camp, his “accountant” (a snake-like fellow who orders one of his own men shot in cold blood to impress the “gringos”), and two German army officers who are testing the possibility of extending German influence (this several years before the infamous Zimmermann telegram). Thus, the American bandits have moved from a corrupt “western” situation into what is clearly a colonial one, even more corrupt and marked by modern political tensions. When the “bunch” first see Mapache, Dutch comments: “Generalissimo hell—he’s just another bandit grabbing all he can for himself.” Pike chips in cynically: “Like some others I could mention?” But Dutch refuses the comparison: “We ain’t nothin’ like him. We don’t hang nobody.” Mapache represents in an early form a type of petty tyrant all too familiar in the twentieth century, who may or may not be, as Roosevelt once characterized Somoza, “our bastard.” It is one of Peckinpah’s most brilliant strokes to bring a typical modern devil into conflict with the outlaws of a vanishing era. Before seeing Mapache, the “bunch” have never seen an automobile. They are looking over the fence into our world. Later, the car will be used to drag the body of the tortured Angel around the village square. Indeed, Mapache’s au-

tomobile is only one suggestion of the modern, industrial world which has closed the frontier and threatens violence on an industrial scale. The Maxim machine gun, which becomes the chief instrument of the apocalyptic finale, is another. The setting of *The Wild Bunch* touches the era of world wars, of mass torture, and of violent death as a commonplace.

As we mentioned before, women and children do not fare well in this film. In Starbuck, the scene of the first robbery attempt, the children delight in torturing scorpions and ants, while others imitate in their play the deadly violence of the adults. The Mexican children of Aqua Verde are also squalid and vicious. When the Americans first enter the town, Peckinpah has a close-up of a woman in military outfit suckling her baby under her bandolier. Virtually all the women, with children and without, are whores. Indeed, there is much joking about whores (the Gorches are comic boosters in this respect) throughout the film, but as the case of Angel's girlfriend suggests, the theme is also dealt with seriously. When Angel sees her making her way all gussied up to the general's table, he accosts her, but she rebuffs him, claiming that she is "very happy" with Mapache and laughing in Angel's face. Seeing her with Mapache, Angel screams "*puta*" (whore) and shoots her through the heart. It is clear that she represents the rule and not an exception in Aqua Verde. Mapache relaces her effortlessly with one of many look-alike prostitutes. At first, the Americans try to avail themselves of the services of these girls (of course, Mapache gives them the leftovers from the group), but eventually the prostitutes ignite their disgust. Forced to hide from Thornton and the bounty hunters, the "bunch" returns to Aqua Verde and despite the fact that Angel has been captured and tortured, Pike and the Gorches seek oblivion with some of the prostitutes. But the sight of a young whore with her baby crying in the next room turns Pike's stomach and confirms his decision to challenge Mapache. Even the Gorches are horrified by a girl who has apparently killed a small bird as part of her "act," and they assent to Pike's "Let's go" with "why not?" In the end, Pike is killed by shots fired by a prostitute and a small boy.

Peckinpah goes to great lengths to present Aqua Verde in terms of Sodom and Gomorah, a society so drenched in sin as to require violent retribution. The wild bunch, implicated in sin themselves, and with the exception of Angel uncommitted to any political cause, become ironically the instruments of retribution. As such, they clearly take on the roles of scourges. Not all the characters in the film are damned, however. The people of Angel's village, anxious to throw off the yoke of Mapache, are treated by Peckinpah with a reverence that many commentators have found overly sentimental. John Simon, for instance, calls the scene in Angel's village, where "everyone is singing a schmalzy Mexican song...pure

treacle.”<sup>6</sup> In his way Simon is right, of course, for Peckinpah does actually carry on the sentimentality of the traditional western, not only in this scene, but in the characters of Thornton, Sykes, Dutch, and even Pike himself to a degree.

Thornton, for instance, is the only one of the bounty hunters who can shoot straight, and we are left in no doubt that this is because, like his compatriots on the other side, he is of the old school and a real man. When Thornton and the bounty hunters find the bodies of the “bunch” after the slaughter, Thornton thoughtfully removes Pike’s familiar old Colt 45, ironically still in its holster and unused in the modern, technological battle. Sensing the futility and corruption around him, Thornton finally quits the company of the ravenous bounty hunters and lets them ride off to their deaths at the hands of the revolutionaries from Angel’s village. Sykes, who was left watching the horses during the Starbuck robbery because of his advanced age, quarrels frequently with the Gorches, but has the obvious respect of Pike and Thornton. “Dry gulched” by the bounty hunters, he does not participate in the bloody finale in *Aqua Verde*, but instead joins forces with the Mexican villagers, now in armed revolt because of the guns procured by Angel. The scene where they approach him with machetes drawn and Indian drums in the background is an obvious allusion to a similar scene in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. Like Walter Huston in that film, he finds unexpectedly a new life by attaching himself to a foreign cause. As he tells Thornton at the end of the film, inviting him to join also, “Me and the boys here got some work to do. It ain’t like it used to be, but it’ll do.” Thornton’s world weary laughter answers, in effect, “Why not?” As in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, a wind storm blows up dustily over the efforts and illusions of the dead.

The revolutionary villagers, Sykes, and Thornton are the inheritors of the devastated society left behind by the wild bunch, and in so far as they too deliver retribution (to the bounty hunters, for instance) may be counted as the ministers of the story. Attached to the cause of revolution, their means of retribution “lie in some act of public justice, rather than in criminal private revenge” (Bowers 86). Whether or not the rest of the “bunch” may be similarly redeemed as ministers is open to question. As we have pointed out, their actions in the first scene, as well as their continued assertions of amoral values, seem clearly to have damned them to the role of scourges. The manner of their deaths, however, may offer some expiation of these sins. Leaving the whores, they go to Mapache and demand Angel’s freedom. He responds by slitting Angel’s throat before their eyes.

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<sup>6</sup>John Simon, “Violent Idyll,” *Film 69/70*, eds. Joseph Morgenstern and Stefan Kanfer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 154.

At this point they finally act selflessly, turning their guns first on Mapache himself, and then interestingly on Commander Mohr, before beginning the general carnage. In the final gunfight, brilliant, beautiful, and devastating in its kind, the wild bunch and their enemies, the bad and the thoroughly evil, destroy each other. Stephen Farber, noting how this conclusion leaves us emotionally “drained” and arguing that Peckinpah “twists our response and forces us to pay a final tribute to [the wild bunch’s] irreverence and their resilience,” wonders what Peckinpah is saying here: “If he means to repel us by the life of violence, why that strangely sentimental finale?”<sup>7</sup>

Again, Bowers’ discussion is illuminating. He points out that Hamlet, that ever difficult case, may be seen as both a scourge and a minister:

By stage doctrine [Hamlet] must die for the slaying of Polonius, and...for that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern perhaps, the first in which he was inadvertently and the second consciously a scourge; and the penalty is being exacted. Since he cannot now ascend the throne over Claudius’ body, all self-interest is removed. He has not plotted Claudius’ death in cold blood, but seized an opportunity which under no circumstances he could have contrived by blood-revenge, to kill as a dying act of public justice a manifest and open murderer....The restitution of right lies only in him. (91)

Hamlet, through the final manner of his revenge and death, becomes, in Bowers’ words, “a minister of providence who ... like Samson, was never wholly cast off for his tragic fault and in the end was honored by fulfilling divine plan in expiatory death” (92). Taking all relevant differences into consideration, we may still say something similar about the wild bunch. Their manifest faults condemn them as scourges, but they are at once redeemed by the selfless manner of their deaths and attain a tragic status. Indeed, the justice Peckinpah lets reign at the end of his film, bitter as it is in the best modern fashion, looks backward to a purposeful world where tragic sacrifice was possible rather than forward to the meaninglessness of a century where God has been little in evidence and everything has been permitted.

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<sup>7</sup>Stephen Farber, “Peckinpah’s Return,” *Film Quarterly* 23.1 (Fall 1969): 6.

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