

Archetypal Motifs, Icons And Antinomies in The Wild Bunch

by

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss archetypes, icons, and antinomies, and the way in which they are communicated through plot, imagery, and various stylistic devices (such as composition and editing) in The Wild Bunch.

The plot of The Wild Bunch contains two archetypal motifs. The first is referred to as the Brother-Battle motif, and it is usually incorporated into the second, <sup>how?</sup> which is called the Hero as redeemer. Literally, Pike and Thornton are not brothers, but the film suggests that at one time they were as close as any two brothers can be. This is suggested through the use of flashback, something which only the two men are allowed to do, thereby reinforcing their association. When Pike first sees Thornton (during the ambush scene at the beginning of the film), a close-up of Pike cuts to a close-up of Thornton as their eyes meet (and they hesitate)<sup>t</sup> tells us that these two men are not on opposite sides by choice; in fact, they aren't even on opposite sides. Thornton gives this away when he says (about Pike and his bunch): "They're real men, and I wish to God I was with 'em." Thornton is always shown in one-shots, reinforcing his separation from the men he is commanding. Pike is also frequently shown in one-shots, emphasizing his separation, the difference being that Pike's separation is merely physical (he is getting too old for this sort of thing and he knows it) while Thornton's

good-

excellent observation

separation is much deeper; not only is he morally and physically separated from his "men", he does not really want to do what he is doing and he is only doing it because of a twist of fate, and because "he gave his word" (Pike defends him to Dutch with this statement), and a "real man" never goes back on his word. The question of "what is a man?" is asked quite frequently in the film, and in one scene Pike's answer to this question is juxtaposed with a one-shot of Pike (as a man who "ain't gettin any younger"):

*you stay with him or*  
When you side with a man, you're like an animal, and if you aren't you're finished.....we're all finished.

Pike then falls down as he is trying to get on his horse; dialogue ("we're all finished") and image are linked and transformed into a self-reflexive vision of the vulnerable western hero. We then get a one-shot of Pike riding off into the distance (the sunset), intercut with one-shots and two-shots of the men as they watch with sympathetic reactions. Toward the end of the film Pike chooses to go into the Mexican military village rather than confront his brother; after Pike is killed the conflict between the brothers is automatically resolved--Thornton takes up with one of Pike's men (a cohort from the old days).

The second archetypal motif is that of the hero as redeemer. Pike's journey loosely follows this motif, although there is some mutation. To summarize, Pike

these are very perceptive ideas + you have good analyses of shots + scenes - you just need to follow through a little bit more on them: does the film give an answer to "what is a man?" what does it mean for a Western hero to be vulnerable? Why + what is the significance of Pike's refusal to confront Thornton

crosses the border into a foreign land, obtains a boon (the guns), and frees the people from a blight upon the land (the corrupt leadership of the general's regime). The mutation occurs in the fact that the hero usually returns to his own land with the boon, in order to free his own people. In The Wild Bunch, Pike does not return, and Pike has no people. In a way, the fact that there is no return is a self-reflexive comment on the western, as well as a reflection of one of the main themes of the film, (past and future), underlined by the hero's line "we gotta start thinkin beyond our guns--those days are closin' fast." Both of the aforementioned archetypal motifs deal with conflict, and this leads us into the discussion of icons and antinomies.

This is very interesting. Could it be that Pike's people are not Americans but are the oppressed peasant? What is the significance of Pike's isolation in terms of the mutation of the archetype? What does this mean here?

How does this relate to the hero as redeemer?

In The Wild Bunch, icons and antinomies are interrelated due to the fact that many of the icons which are presented form antinomies, through the use of composition and dialectical editing. For example, the film opens with a full shot of the wild bunch riding together, framed by railroad tracks (at screen left and right). While the horses are iconographically suggestive of the past, the tracks suggest progress and the future; the bunch is framed in by progress and the future. Compositionally, the two icons juxtaposed gives us an antinomie in the first shot of the film. The shot then cuts (amidst freeze-action titles) to a full shot of a group of children playing by the tracks. We then see

Excellent analysis very well-stated

individual one-shots of the men cut against individual one shots of the children. While the collective identity of the bunch signifies the past, the children are an icon suggestive of the future. Through editing, opposing icons (antinomies) are juxtaposed, creating tension. Throughout the entire film, different groups of people in different uniforms seem to bear different iconographic significance; for every group there is an opposite group. Uniforms emphasize the collective identity of the different groups. Groups of people (collective icons) as antinomies are:

*Very, very good*

The Wild Bunch/The Children

The Temperance Union / The Native Mexicans (Angel's people)  
(black uniform) (in white)

The Wild Bunch/Thornton's Men

The Wild Bunch / The Mexican General & His Men  
(military uniform) (military uniform)

*What do you make of all this group identity?*

Almost every group of people (except for the Mexican natives) are in iconographic opposition to the wild bunch. The wild bunch as an icon is suggestive of the past, the children are suggestive of the future; the wild bunch as unrepressed nature, the temperance union as repressed civilisation; the temperance union as cold civilisation, the Mexican natives as warm, sensual nature; the wild bunch as good bad guys, Thornton's men as evil bad guys; the bunch as a brave, unified fighting unit, the Mexican Military as a cowardly, disunified unit.

In The Wild Bunch, groups of people become icons, and these icons form antinomies. The antinomies create tension, which

*Very low then out! accurate + perceptive*

is finally released at the end of the film. After the massacre, we get a typical example of associative editing. First we see a shot of vultures on the wall, which then cuts to a shot of Thornton's men entering the village.

*comment on the effect + significance of this structure (since you mentioned it)*  
*what point are you making here?*

Music is also used in opposition, in order to create tension. At the beginning of the film, the band music of the temperance union is juxtaposed against ominous score music, creating a strange, foreboding dissonance. At the end of the film, as the bunch march toward the final massacre, the Native farewell song (sung earlier in the film) is juxtaposed against the military-icon drum music (also heard at the beginning of the film). Two different musical icons are again opposed, creating tension.

*this is an excellent observation - often we're not aware of music's iconic & structural use*

Objects are also used as icons which form antinomies. When the bunch first enters the Mexican village we get a tight shot of a baby sucking milk from it's mother's breast; next to the breast, hanging over the mother's shoulder, is a bullet strap exhibiting three huge shells. The composition of this shot gives us two icons (one suggesting life, the other suggesting death) juxtaposed to form antinomies. The machine gun, & the car (and the mention of airplanes) are objects which, as icons, suggest the dawning of a new age, progress, and the future. The importance of the car is stressed because we get shots of it from every possible angle. Finally, the Holy Cross, although not seen that many times, appears to bear an important iconographic sig-

*he*  
*good point*

nificance. It is no coincidence that the first dialogue spoken is a quote (given by Mr Benson to the temperance union via editing structure which parallels it with the bunch robbing the railroad office) from the Bible about drinking and wild behavior in general. Religious restraint is <sup>ironicized?</sup> ironized by the fact that one of the most evil characters in the film wears a cross around his neck. But the Cross seems to have a deeper iconographic significance than restraint and worship--at the beginning of the film we see children playing with two scorpions and an ant hill. After covering the two scorpions with ants (Pike and Dutch vs The Mexicans?/Pike and Thornton vs society?), the children light the entire thing on fire (this part occurs after the bunch have robbed the office). The children, as an inescapable force, manipulate the fate of the scorpions and ants. Ironically, the bullet that finally kills Pike is shot by a child (again, future vs past). Just before Pike goes out to die we get a close-up of him (in the Mexican girl's room) with a Cross in the background, just above his shoulder. The part that the children play out with the ants and the scorpions seems to mirror the iconographic significance of the Cross; namely, that of fate and divine providence.

In conclusion, The Wild Bunch gives us The Hero as Redeemer and Brother-Battle Archetypal motifs (which are much more specific than archetypal images) played out amidst opposing Icons, which, through editing and composition, are juxtaposed to form antinomies.

this is a sharp observation - I'd like to hear your analysis of it

good

good

good analysis  
this is a subtle & interesting reading of these icons

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