

# Gathering at the River: Ford, Peckinpah and the Failure of the Communal

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That the western as a genre underwent immense transformations of rhetoric and style in the 1960s is certainly not a controversial statement. The passage from the “affirmative” westerns of directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks and Fred Zinnemann to the “apocalyptic” westerns of someone like Sam Peckinpah has been generously documented in numerous articles.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, what has rarely been addressed is the significance of extra-narrative citation for the articulation of this transition. As far as the subversive western – or the post-western – is concerned, most studies have been content to analyze either large-scale narrative structures, characterization, or thematic content. But in *The Wild Bunch*, for example, the undermining of the myth of the Old West is operative also on much more discreet textual levels, the rhetoric of which tends to be more subtle yet no less forceful than that of the grand narrative itself. In this essay I would like to explore the extent to which local filmic elements, functioning as symbolic arbiters, affect the entire ideological and global structures of two key westerns. Local elements, in contrast, imply the use of motifs through which the text is able not only to communicate certain ideas but also to crystallize them in a more circum-

1. See for instance Richard Schickel. “*The Wild Bunch*.” *Second Sight. Notes on Some Movies 1965-1970* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972) 244-246, and Bernard F. Dukore. *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1999.

scribed and compact fashion than is possible in the text as a whole. The saliency of any such local element, however, does not arise from any quality inherent in the motif alone, but from the dialectic meaning which is the result of the encounter between the motif and its global context. In the following, I want to consider the textual metamorphosis of a specific motif whose defining nature is aural – or musical – rather than visual.

There is hardly a more revealing image of the bankruptcy of the Western myth than Bo Hopkins' performance in an early scene in *The Wild Bunch*, in which John Ford's anthem "Shall We Gather at the River"<sup>2</sup> – a melodic emblem of the values of community throughout his films<sup>2</sup> – is transformed into a grotesque travesty by the psychotic histrionics of the Crazy Lee character. My informing thesis is that the different sets of beliefs about the West underlying films like *Stagecoach* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *The Wild Bunch* find an eloquent and pure manifestation in the appropriation of the hymn alone.<sup>3</sup>

Among America's most popular hymns, "Shall we Gather at the River" was first published in 1865 under the title "Mutual Recognition in the Hereafter" in the collection *Happy Voices*. Robert Lowry,<sup>4</sup> its author, claimed that he found the inspiration for the hymn in an apocalyptic vision he had while lounging in his house in Brooklyn a July afternoon in 1864. The allusions to Book of Revelation represent the writer's response to this benign apparition, and are also a rejoinder to earlier hymnographers who tended to emphasize death rather than life as the overall connotative content of the image of the river. The first biblical reference is incorporated into the first stanza, which reads "Shall we gather at the river/where bright angel feet have trod/with its crystal tide forever/flowing by the throne of God?" Passages from the Book of Revelation

2. The hymn's celebratory function in Ford has also been appreciated in the critical work on the director, for instance in Tag Gallagher's *John Ford. The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 446.

3. The only intimation of the nature of Peckinpah's use of this hymn is Christopher Sharrett's vague hint that the filmmaker is "deft in playing with the 'Gather at the River' convention, as the song annotates the tension rather than the tranquility of the frontier community." Christopher Sharrett, "Peckinpah the Radical: The Politics of *The Wild Bunch*, 96.

4. A Baptist minister, Robert Lowry (1826-1899) was also a professor of literature at Bucknell University between 1869 and 1875. He served as a pastor and a preacher, acted as a music editor for the Biglow Publishing Company in addition to editing a number of Sunday School song collections, and wrote about 500 Gospel tunes himself.

contain the following formulations: “And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb” and “And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things”.<sup>5</sup>

Structurally, the textual composition of “Shall we Gather at the River” follows a simple question-answer pattern, in which the first stanza introduces a Christian inquiry – “Shall we gather...?,” while the refrain responds affirmatively in a “Yes, we’ll gather ...” The social context for Lowry’s hymn appears to have been the death of many members of his congregation in an epidemic. It is plausible that the hymn’s speaking voice calls out to mobilize and consolidate the worshippers in the face of disaster, as well as to reinforce the belief in a benevolent and merciful God. The prime sensibility that the words of the hymn invoke may therefore be that of the communal, not only in a strict congregational sense but with a broader application that engages the collective’s commitment toward a social ethics. It is clearly the river itself that constitutes both the topographical and spiritual conference to which the collective is drawn and which also energizes the sense of communal cohesion among the worshippers. Even though the characters in the text approach the river together, it is only there that they attain complete integration, as the key verb “gather” in the hymn’s title and refrain suggest.

Lowry’s text is still a popular choice in religious ceremonies, particularly funerals, and it has formed part of the soundtrack of numerous movies.<sup>6</sup> No doubt most viewers associate the hymn with the westerns of John Ford in which it is a commentative staple,<sup>7</sup> functioning almost like

5. *The Holy Bible*, Rev. 22.1,8.

6. A broad though probably not finite selection would include William Beaudine’s *Sparrow* (1926), the musical *Sing You Sinners* (Wesley Ruggles 1938), *Trip to Bountiful* (Peter Masterson 1985), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff 1990) and *Bad Girls* (Jonathan Kaplan 1994). In Ford’s oeuvre alone, the song features in seven films, *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine* excepted: *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *Tobacco Road* (1941), *3 Godfathers* (1948), *Wagon Master* (1950), *When Willie Comes Marching Home* (1950), *The Searchers* (1956) and *7 Women* (1966).

7. In her doctoral dissertation on the narrative structure of film music, Kathryn Marie Kalinak calls attention to the way in which the soundtrack may help establish “a network of thematic associations.” Kathryn Marie Kalinak, “Music as Narrative Structure in Hollywood Film,” 2. When “Shall we gather at the river” is used in a Ford film, the melody becomes a vehicle for a whole taxonomy of interfilmic meanings and vestiges from individual works in the director’s oeuvre.

an auditory counterpart to his visual fascination with Monument Valley.<sup>8</sup> In *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine* the performance of the hymn is a diegetic act which signifies the ethical bond that defines the relationship between the hero and the township to which he offers his services. However, in the case of Ford the meaning of "Shall We Gather" suggests an additional dimension, in that the transtextual recurrence of the hymn becomes an authorial motif in itself.<sup>9</sup> Lowry's entreaty thus participates in two circuits of signification; both a textual and an extra-textual.

When the same hymn is heard in one of the opening sequences in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, it has taken on an associative register which represents a thematic inversion of Ford's inflections. Sung both by Crazy Lee – the Bo Hopkins character stationed inside the bank – and the temperance union marching outside, the hymn becomes perversely an accompaniment to the whirlpool of violence which destroys the town of San Rafael. As in Ford's film, the impact of the singing derives in part from its status as a diegetically generated "event." The function of the piece, I would argue, depends crucially on the fact that it is *not* a superimposition on an extra-diegetic level, which would indicate both a too willing admission of the text's own self-consciousness *and* an almost bathetic rehearsal of the seriously clichéd device of dramatic-ironic counterpoint.<sup>10</sup> In *My Darling Clementine* and particularly in *The Wild Bunch*,

8. In his book on Ford, Andrew Sarris describes the director's filmic documentation of Monument Valley as "not so much a locale or even a subject as a stylistic signature." Andrew Sarris, *The John Ford Movie Mystery*, 83. One may contend that Ford's use of "Shall we gather at the River" approximates the same position.

9. I must at this point emphasize that my essay does not in any way attempt to conform to the doctrine of auteurism. When I discuss Ford and the rehearsal of repeated imagery or motifs across his films, I have in mind not the real author but rather a narrational agency akin to Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author.

10. The idea of fusing opposing moods by combining divergent qualities in sound and image was common among some classical film theorists like Sergei Eisenstein, V.I. Pudovkin and G.V. Alexandrov, who called the technique *contrapuntal*, and Siegfried Kracauer, who preferred the term counterpoint. In *Deserter* (1933), his first sound film, Pudovkin himself deployed music contrapuntally, as he juxtaposes a workers' disheartened demonstration on the image-track with vivacious music on the soundtrack. Kracauer observes that Pudovkin used the music as "a carrier of a message entirely unrelated to the actual situation." Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality*, 142. The critic Leonard Engel uses the term to describe the "Shall we gather-" sequence in *The Wild Bunch*, which he calls "a darkly humorous, ironic counterpoint." Leonard Engel, "Space and Enclosure in Cooper and Peckinpah: Regeneration in the Open Spaces," 89. However, it is not immaterial that the hymn segment is a diegetic rather than an extra-diegetic entity in Peckinpah's film, since the narrative placement of the song at a level co-existent with the story world forges a much more intimate (and less self-conscious) relationship between the action and the music than would have been the case if the hymn played non-diegetically.

the seamlessness with which the performance of the hymn is integrated into the story world of the films bolsters the unity of ethics and action/form and content. In *The Wild Bunch* the hymn *becomes* the setting, suffusing the space of the narrative and forming a musical topography which encapsulates a divergent manifestation of the morality of the western.

While the enactment of the hymn in Ford signals an acknowledgment of its communal significance as defined in Lowry's original text, in Peckinpah's film the song seems to reference Ford specifically. When the younger director made *Ride the High Country* in 1962, many considered him as Ford's progeny, the film artist destined to preserve and refine the humanist vision of the West that was the indelible achievement of Ford's cinema. Writing in 1969, the same year that saw the release of *The Wild Bunch*, Jim Kitses confirms this genealogical relation when he writes that "If Peckinpah is progressively emerging artistically as John Ford's bastard son, it is because as an artist he is caught between the dream and the mango, the vision and the violence."<sup>11</sup> However, as the cataclysmic exorcism in the 1969 western was succeeded by even darker visions like *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) and the unendurably misanthropic *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), disturbed and alienated the audience that had celebrated Peckinpah as the new John Ford. Evidently, this pessimistic streak was already highly developed in *The Wild Bunch*, whose elegiac sensibility nevertheless shares an affinity with Ford's last westerns, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964).

Does Peckinpah's complexly modulated use of "Shall we gather at the River" permit us to invoke the notion of subversion with regard to Ford's use of the hymn? I suggest no. Peckinpah certainly challenges the emblematic quality of Lowry's verse as an index of communal integration, but he does not really subvert Ford's use of the hymn. Intrinsic to Peckinpah's treatment of the west and the western is a deep reverence for his material; the mourning over its passing is the chief emotion informing his oeuvre. Although his depiction of violence was the expression of an unambiguous deliberation to undermine the sanitized representations of pre-1967 Hollywood westerns and action movies, Peckinpah did not

11. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*, 169.

attempt to challenge the entire tradition of the western accordingly. I would like to propose that the filmmaker's dramatization of "Shall we gather" in *The Wild Bunch* is both an homage to Ford and a symbolic inversion of the meaning and function of the use of the hymn in *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*.

The fourth stanza of "Shall we gather" reads: "Soon we'll reach the shining river/soon our pilgrimage will cease/soon our happy hearts will quiver/with the melody of peace." Every single item in this stanza is ironically overturned in the course of the bloodbath outside the bank in *The Wild Bunch*. When read in the context of the film, the temporal adverb "soon" no longer functions solely deictically in the verbal sense; the images that ensue after the performance of the hymn specify the temporality suggested by the adverb. Furthermore, the sense of pilgrimage reaches an abrupt and savage conclusion in mutilation and death as the members of the temperance union are shot down by the bounty hunters and the bunch. There is yet another allusion to pilgrimage in the bunch's trek to Mexico, which to them symbolizes everything they are losing with the closing of the frontier. Moreover, in the Mexican village of Agua Verde they encounter extinction in an even more violent form than that which befalls the temperance union, thus reinforcing the film's association of pilgrimage and death. Finally, "our happy hearts will quiver" is subject to the perhaps most macabre play of imagery in the San Rafael slaughter. The resultant spasms of the body become a dance of death scored by a song of violence. By intimately connecting the hymn (spatially as well as temporally) with the massacre, Peckinpah has in fashioned a blood poem out of Lowry's Baptist hymn.

Perhaps more significant than the morbid correlation between the hymn text and the narrative action in the Starbuck scene is the compositional centrality assigned to the music in the sequence immediately anteceding the shootout. The singing is the one element that connects these parallel and synchronous plot events; shots of the progress of the temperance union are interspersed with shots of the bunch inside the bank, of the Ben Johnson character keeping vigil outside, of the snipers on the roof and of the children marching behind the union. In narrative terms it is the performance of "Shall we gather" that provides coherence and unity to the dramatic structure of the scene. Peckinpah's editing is characteristically frenzied and feverish, but his orchestration of the soundtrack

smoothly sutures the spatio-temporal gaps caused by the unruly pace of the cutting. The stylistic welding of the four local narrative strands, or events, through musical means intensifies our nervous anticipation of the outcome of the scene and produces a climactic build-up of tension. But Peckinpah may at the same time be paying tribute to Ford, since, as Edward Buscombe points out, "Shall we gather" is "often played at moments of intense emotion in Ford's films ... as a kind of comic funeral march."<sup>12</sup> Whereas the cinematic principle underpinning the composition is simple Griffithian crosscutting, Peckinpah increases the suspense by multiplying the number of narrative situations involved and by adding the music. What the director's diegetic soundtrack of suspense accomplishes is a congress of violence. They may not gather at the river, but they certainly congregate within a filmic topography whose spatial parameters are outlined by the apocalyptic. Grotesquely, the seemingly endless repetition of the hymn is only disrupted when the killing starts.

The temperance union, however, is not the only performer of Lowry's text. As Crazy Lee – left to look after the hostages in the bank – becomes aware of the singing outside, he asks his victims: "Hey, they're playing 'Shall we gather at the river.' Do you know that one? Sing it!" Forcing the customers to parade before him, Crazy Lee soon joins them in a mock procession as pathologically irreverent as his name suggests. It is especially notable that it is *he*, the savage, who asks *them*, the alleged representatives of culture and tradition, if they are familiar with the words of Lowry's song. So engrossed in the hymn is he that he nearly lets his hostages escape, though when he eventually realizes what is about to happen he suddenly turns and shoots them in the back. Like the structural transposal practiced in the Roman travesties, Peckinpah upsets conventional conceptions of values (one may also note that the bunch are dressed up in army uniforms, and that Pike Bishop gallantly escorts an old lady across the street before he enters the bank and utters the line "If they move, kill 'em"), implying perhaps that the distinction between civilization and savagery may not be as clear-cut as the long tradition of the Western would have us believe.

In a polemically pivotal exchange between Pike Bishop and Dutch Engstrom, his right hand, they contemplate the part their former ally

12. Edward Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 47.

Deke Thornton plays in Harrigan's attempted capture of the bunch: "Pike: What would you do in his place? He gave his word. Dutch: Gave his word to a railroad! Pike: It's his word! Dutch: That ain't what counts – it's who you give it to!" The confused ethics at the center of the men's conversation is indicative of the larger shift in social and ideological orientation that can be traced from Ford's to Peckinpah's westerns. It is this substitution of values that the latter's use of "Shall we gather" mediates; the film's treatment of the hymn comes to epitomize the inexorable transition from community to corporatism in the genre.<sup>13</sup> In *The Wild Bunch*, Harrigan's railroad and Mapache's and Mohr's arms trade are palpable evidence of the intrusion of capital and enterprise into the social sphere, and the Bunch's violent reactions against the infrastructure of these institutions are interpretable as the symbolic death throes of a communal (as opposed to a corporate) form of individualism. In "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner refers to a book named *Peck's New Guide to the West*, in which the anonymous author sees westward expansion as taking place in three stages. After the pioneers follows a wave of cultivators of the land, who build bridges, schools and churches, and who in turn are succeeded by the onslaught of entrepreneurial fervor. Each phase positions the individual within different social relations and parameters. The society of the West in the textual universe of *The Wild Bunch* is irreversibly in the grip of aggressive corporate structures that are also the implicit targets of Peckinpah's violent critique.

Whereas Ford's cinema is mainly concerned with Turner's second stage, Peckinpah's dramatizes the last. *My Darling Clementine* focalizes the mutual attachments of responsibility which define the transaction

13. That much of Peckinpah's cinema is informed by an aggressive vilification of corporate power is an observation I owe to Stuart Kidd, who pointed this out at the 25<sup>th</sup> American Studies Seminar "The Town and the Country," held at Telemark University College, Bø, Norway, 22-24 Sept. 2000. In his over 70-pages long article on *The Wild Bunch*, Paul Seydor makes a similar observation when he proposes that Harrigan "could represent every greedy producer Peckinpah ever had as a partner. And Mohr... could become a surrogate for studio executives like those at MGM or Columbia." Paul Seydor, "Men Without Women. *The Wild Bunch as Epic*," 172. Peckinpah's dislike of the studio executives is also emphasized in a recent book by Richard Luck, who claims that the director "spent his entire life doing the things he loved most with the people he liked least." Richard Luck, *Sam Peckinpah*, 8. See also Stephen Prince. "Introduction: Sam Peckinpah, Savage Poet of American Cinema." In Stephen Prince. Ed. *Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 22.

between the individual and the group. When Wyatt Earp takes on the assignment as town marshal in Tombstone, he acts not so much out of self-interest as out of social commitment, thereby revealing an internalization of a sense of communal imperative that is virtually absent from any of the protagonists in *The Wild Bunch*. Peckinpah's characters discount the value of such obligations, though such a consistent rejection of anything but solipsism enables his films provocatively to explore the relationship between the individual and the collective. Jim Kitses has expressed an early though perceptive intimation of this when he describes Peckinpah's "metaphysical dialectic," arguing that "his vision forces a confrontation between what he feels to be essential drives in human nature, and the *social* costs of a failure to understand and control them."<sup>14</sup> The choreography of the social in *My Darling Clementine*, on the other hand, is essentially integrative. Andrew Sinclair examines the film as "a Western about the adjustment of natural outsiders to the rule of law and church and family,"<sup>15</sup> in the light of which *The Wild Bunch* can be read as a narrative which foregrounds its protagonists' inability and unwillingness to adjust and conform. The conflict in Peckinpah's film is disintegrative, and thus antithetical to Robert Lyons' cognizance of *My Darling Clementine* as Ford's "most confident affirmation, of American moral values and social purpose."<sup>16</sup>

How does one then explain the traumatic collapse of this "social purpose" from the cinema of Ford to that of Peckinpah? Dramatic alterations in historical circumstances from the 1940s to the 1960s are evidently of paramount significance in this respect, and the influence of political and social upheavals on Peckinpah's art has been richly documented by among others Stephen Prince.<sup>17</sup> I will therefore not delve into a discussion of this particular context here. In accounting for Peckinpah's disenchantment, what seems to override even the dissolution of cultural consensus in the 1960s is as previously stated the political economy of cor-

14. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*, 162.

15. Andrew Sinclair, *John Ford*, 129.

16. Robert Lyons, "Introduction. *My Darling Clementine* as History and Romance," 17. Similar sentiments have also been voiced in the critical assessment of Ford's previous Western, *Stagecoach*, in which, as J.A. Place asserts, "the goal is group interaction, which affirms the group over the pettiness of the individuals." J.A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford*, 32.

17. For a detailed exposition of this relationship, see "Peckinpah and the 1960s," in Stephen Prince, 1-45.

poratism. In *The Wild Bunch*, this is rendered the chief nemesis of communal value. As we might recall, it is ultimately not the Bunch but Harrigan's railroad company that is responsible for the massacre in the film's beginning.<sup>18</sup> Despite the men's brutality, the attitudes of Pike Bishop and his cohorts are unambiguously adversarial vis-a-vis the institutions of finance; their criminality exceeds notions of greed and self-interest in the sense that their activities first and foremost are deeply coercive of corporate establishment.<sup>19</sup> When they rob the US Army's ammunition boxes, for instance, Angel re-allocates his share to the Mexican insurrectionists.

The anti-corporate rhetoric that runs through nearly all of Peckinpah's films has a biographical precedent in the director's permanently hostile relationship with producers and studios. Unlike Ford, who generally seemed to have been in charge of every aspect of his filmmaking and who was too respected in Hollywood to experience much studio interference,<sup>20</sup> the younger artist spent much of his career fighting the industry. After he was fired from *Major Dundee* (1965), Peckinpah was unemployed for a full three years before he was hired to make *The Wild Bunch*. Of the fourteen features he directed between 1961 and 1983, he claimed to have had final cut on only one (*Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* 1974).<sup>21</sup> Films such as *The Wild Bunch*, *Junior Bonner* (1972), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), *The Killer Elite* (1975) and *The Osterman Weekend* (1983) can all be studied as cinematic fulminations against the evils of corporatism. The deal that Pike Bishop makes with Mapache in *The Wild Bunch* is one manifestation of this reciprocity of biography and fiction, as it reads as a "reflection of Peckinpah's compromises with the studio executives."<sup>22</sup>

18. Michael Bliss has even suggested that all the killings in the film represent "capitalist violence." Michael Bliss, "'Back Off to What?' Enclosure, Violence and Capitalism in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*," 124.

19. The same political slant can be also found in a number of other American films of the same period, notably, of course, in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). In a scene in the film Clyde Barrow introduces his partner and himself to a destitute farmer with the smug remark "We are Bonnie and Clyde. We rob banks."

20. For additional information on Ford's position within the Hollywood system, see Robert Lyons' interview with Winston Miller, who wrote the script for *My Darling Clementine*. According to Miller, Ford once told him that 'Producer credit on a John Ford production means nothing.' Robert Lyons, "Interview With Winston Miller," 147.

21. Besides *Major Dundee*, the films that were most abusively recut by the studio were the original version of *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973).

22. Michael Bliss, 114.

According to Stephen Prince, Peckinpah repudiated what the critic refers to as “the possibilities for progressive social change because, like Marcuse, he considered Americans to be brainwashed by the media and lulled into a spiritual torpor by an abundant but deadening consumer culture.”<sup>23</sup> If Prince is correct in his assumption, the director’s canon can be comprehended as one that depicts a society in both moral and cultural decline, a celluloid misanthropy in stark opposition to the ethics of Fordian cinema. Michael Bliss even espouses the view that *The Wild Bunch* allegorizes the state of the nation in the late 1960s: “In the Bunch’s failure to reach self-awareness, we see the failure of contemporary capitalist America.”<sup>24</sup>

Whether or not Peckinpah when shooting the “Shall we gather” sequence was consciously citing Ford – and *My Darling Clementine* specifically – is not only difficult to establish; it is also wholly irrelevant.<sup>25</sup> In the present context, it is more than sufficient that *The Wild Bunch* itself alludes to the earlier film. To illustrate the nature of this textual relationship for which “Shall we gather” is the semantic matrix, we may start with the way in which *My Darling Clementine* engineers the communal in the dance scene.<sup>26</sup> The following is an excerpt from Winston Miller’s and Sam Hellman’s script where Clementine inadvertently makes Wyatt Earp accompany her to the church dance:

Clementine: Marshal, may I go with you? (*Distant voices singing ‘Shall We Gather at The River’ join the continuing sound of the church bells; Wyatt looks blank.*) You are going to the services, aren’t you?

Wyatt: (*recovering himself*): Yes, ma’am. I’d admire to take you.

Clementine: Thank you.

*Wyatt offers his arm, she takes it, and they turn and walk out of the frame. Long shot down the porch from the corner. Wyatt and Clementine slowly advance toward the camera as the hymn grows slightly louder ... Long*

23. Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 41.

24. Michael Bliss, 126.

25. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith promulgates the idea that some directors possess an ‘authorial signature,’ which is made manifest in ‘a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs... is what gives an author’s work its particular structure.’ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, quoted in Robert Lyons, 168. However, I do not see why the function of such motifs, as well as the patterns they generate, could not as readily be ascribed to the text as to the author.

26. In *Stagecoach*, the hymn is performed as an instrumental background to the passengers boarding the coach. As in *My Darling Clementine*, the motif of coming together – explicitly proclaimed in the hymn text – is being reenacted visually by the movement of the protagonists.

shot of the shell of the church, with the skeleton of a church tower outlined against the sky. American flags fly in the breeze, and people and horses and wagons are clustered below.<sup>27</sup>

After the speaker announces that the music may commence, a succession of shots of the dancers follows, while Clementine and Earp watch the scene in silence. Eventually the marshal resolves to escort Clementine to the floor, upon which Elder Simpson, the speaker, interrupts the music and clears the space for the two new dancers. That Earp, who only moments earlier had decided to while away his time sitting on the porch rather than to go to the ceremony, thus comes to take part in the church dance inaugurates a salient moment in the narrative. Sinclair interprets this as a gesture which marks "the free man's acceptance of the confines of social rituals,"<sup>28</sup> while Place similarly conceives of the scene as the perhaps most narratively prominent, claiming that "The dance on the foundations of the church is the culmination of all the strains of the film. It is the physical expression of the society the West can support."<sup>29</sup> Both from the song, the movements of the dancers and the setting it is clear that Ford has turned this sequence into a performance orchestrated to regenerate and fortify the process of community-making. Tombstone, Michael Budd submits, becomes a "newborn community"<sup>30</sup> in this process, one into which even outsiders like the marshal may enter harmo-

27. Robert Lyons, *My Darling Clementine. John Ford, Director*, 81.

28. Andrew Sinclair, 130. Sinclair is not the only critic to emphasize the importance of rituals in Ford's films. Ronald Lloyd claims that the director's moral sensibility revolves around the value of social commitment through custom and ritual. Ronald Lloyd, *American Film Directors. The World as They See it*, 28. Andrew Sarris claims that "Ford's westerns never depended excessively on the machismo match-ups of quick draws, but rather on the normally neglected intervals between the gun-shots when men received haircuts, courted their sweethearts, and even partook of fragments of frontier culture." Andrew Sarris, 117. In a recent book Sam B. Girgus even develops the idea that Ford's preoccupation with community evinces what he terms "a democratic aesthetic of film." Sam B. Girgus, *Hollywood Renaissance. The Cinema of Democracy in the Era of Ford, Capra, and Kazan*, 23.

29. J.A. Place, 70.

30. Michael Budd, quoted in Robert Lyons, 164. The scene's accentuation of social and spiritual renewal accords pertinently with the thematic emphasis of the hymn, as well as with the meaning of the religious rituals central to Baptist doctrine. For the nascent community of Tombstone, the founding of the church is a symbolic act which, like the Baptist's ritualistic immersion in water, signifies the dying of the old life and the rebirth of the new. The image of the river, furthermore, is a salient metaphor in other John Ford films like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), where, John Baxter explains, it is "an almost Biblical symbol of relaxation and cleansing." John Baxter, *The Cinema of John Ford*, 70.

niously. Moreover, the shared endeavor of the townspeople to build a civilization in Tombstone is a markedly participatory, communal affair that epitomizes industriousness before corporatism.

Ford's vision in *My Darling Clementine* may have been audaciously celebratory and maudlin,<sup>31</sup> but even a less glorifying image of Western community would have created an astonishing contrast to a film like *The Wild Bunch*. Obviously the texts represent two irreconcilable approaches to their subject matter *irrespective* of their inclusion of "Shall we gather at the river," though this is hardly the point here. What is significant is the rhetorical impact Peckinpah achieves by irreversibly inverting the cultural value of Lowry's song. Movies are continuously engaged in processes of revision, were they historical, generic or stylistic. That the politics of the classical Westerns of the studio era were eventually challenged was inevitable. Notwithstanding, that someone like Peckinpah would deconstruct and rework a musical icon such as this hymn is a symptomatic act whose meaning transcends the oppositional parameters introduced by the text as a whole. Symbolically, Peckinpah's version of "Shall we gather" is an act of disfigurement, though one doubly problematic because it also subsumes traces of the homage.

As Robert Lyons underscores Ford's "strong sense of community," he notes that this quality is not only thematic but also has an additional stylistic resonance. This particular aesthetic is captured for instance in the way the filmmaker delineates his *mise-en-scene*, which reveals a preference for long-to-medium shot compositions rather than close-ups. Ford's choreography, Lyons writes, allows the characters to "cluster together in moments of rejoicing, suffering and death," which becomes a visualization of "human interdependence."<sup>32</sup> In Peckinpah, on the other hand, the facilitation of positional togetherness through spatial continuity is rendered impossible by the incessant montage sequences that organize the film's editing pattern. The fragmentation of space is one of the key hallmarks of Peckinpah's visual style. When people do convene in an image or shot, the encounter is typically confrontational. Characters become

31. Wheeler Winston Dixon is one of the rare critics who is openly critical of what he perceives to be the "forced sentimentality" of Ford's cinema. Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Re-Visioning the Western: Code, Myth, and Genre in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*," 156.

32. Robert Lyons, 15.

forms of energy that act and react within the same topos. Discussing this phenomenon in *The Wild Bunch*, Paul Seydor writes that “the theme is not of diminishing space, but of fixed and limited spaces becoming increasingly crowded, which then only multiplies the possibilities for conflict and violence.”<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion I will briefly outline the ways in which the stylistic unification of image and music widely differs in the two films under examination. In *My Darling Clementine*, the sound of “Shall we gather at the river” gradually intensifies as Cathy Downs and Henry Fonda approach the crowd. The singing provides a seamless spatio-temporal and narrative bridge from the scene with Downs and Fonda on the porch to that of the church dance. Like the notion of the choreography of the social that I have mentioned above, the function of the music is integrative. It augments the dominant mood of the visual narration; the soundtrack, as it were, complements the image track and vice versa. When the song is heard in *The Wild Bunch*, its narrative function is considerably more complex. On the basic level of continuity, the music serves to paste together the fractured series of images that constitutes the scene,<sup>34</sup> but on a discursive level the effect is disintegrative. What complicates the relationship between sound and image is precisely that in this particular scene the music does not only promote visual cohesion. More importantly, it launches a competing discourse which, upon merging with the montage, produces an entirely new implication. With Dominique Nasta, one might claim that the music is *foregrounded*: “While in the background, music illustrates, accompanies, fills in screenplay gaps, situates the viewer in a spatio-temporal continuum – but does not *create* a meaningful cinematic whole.”<sup>35</sup> For a musical motif to be sufficiently foregrounded, the audience must perceive it as such (the intention of the composer/director does not qualify in this respect), and the motif itself should interact relationally and dynamically with the image. If one evokes Michel Chion’s distinction between *empathetic* and *anempathetic* music

33. Paul Seydor, “*The Wild Bunch* as Epic.” 136.

34. A use of film music for this purpose in heavily edited sequences is no unusual strategy. Roy M. Prendergast writes that “In a montage... music can serve an almost indispensable function: it can hold the montage together with some sort of unifying musical idea. Without music the montage can, in some instances, become merely chaotic.” Roy M. Prendergast, *Film Music. A Neglected Art. A Critical Study of Music in Films*, 222.

35. Dominique Nasta, *Meaning in Film. Relevant Structures in Soundtrack and Narrative*, 47.

in film, the nature of foregrounding may become clearer. Chion argues that the former “participat[es] in the feeling of the scene, by taking on the scene’s rhythm, tone, and phrasing,” whereas the latter displays a “conspicuous indifference to the situation, by progressing in a steady, undaunted and ineluctable manner.”<sup>36</sup> In *The Wild Bunch*, sonic space in the Temperance scene seems to behave anempathetically, neither in text nor in tone acknowledging the violence that awaits the protagonists. However, contrary to what the name of the term might lead us to believe, Chion writes that “This juxtaposition of scene with indifferent music has the effect not of freezing emotion but rather of intensifying it,” and that “[anempathetic music creates] a strong sense of the tragic.”<sup>37</sup> This tallies well with the anticipation of impending disaster in the seconds leading up to the massacre. Finally, Chion’s comprehension of anempathetic music – and the filmmaker’s reliance upon it in *The Wild Bunch* – agrees with Robert Bresson’s well-known axiom as regards the relation between sound and image in a film segment: “What is for the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear.”<sup>38</sup>

In his study of authorship in the Western, Jim Kitses declares that “Like Scripture, the western offers a world of metaphor, a range of latent content that can be made manifest depending on the film-maker’s awareness and preoccupations.”<sup>39</sup> *My Darling Clementine* and *The Wild Bunch* disclose two radically different ways of re-animating – as well as politicizing – such content so that it comes to reflect the filmmakers’ contemporary moment. Nowhere do the films’ thematic discrepancies become more incisive than in the respective textual appropriations of Robert Lowry’s hymn.

36. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision. Sound on Screen*, 8.

37. Chion, 221.

38. Robert Bresson, quoted in Weis & Belton, *Film Sound. Theory and Practice*, 149.

39. Jim Kitses, 22.

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