

# The Occult Text

*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and the Alchemy of Individuation

By Jason Horsley, from *The Secret Life of Movies*, 2010

The whole subject of schizophrenia is, for obvious reasons, one that has for the most part only been addressed *indirectly* by American movies. Schizophrenia is a subject that modern science and psychotherapy has yet to come to grips with, much less the culture of mass entertainment. Above all I believe this relates to our insistence on designating it as something *outside* the average person's experience, something that is by definition abnormal and so beyond the understanding of most moviegoers. This is an error. Fragmentation of self, disassociation from reality, loss of identity, are all symptoms of the modern age. As such, they form the inevitable subtext of popular modern movies, at least the most interesting or progressive (though not necessarily best) of them. As I shall presently argue, these hidden themes or occult texts often come into being—aptly enough—quite *unconsciously*, as it were in spite of the filmmakers' conscious intentions. This is evident in the case of genre movies (horror and sci-fi, for example) that on the one hand deal with quite foreign (even alien) external characters and events, while on the other—thematically speaking—address all-too familiar, *internal* conditions common to us all.

The whole notion of an occult text in popular movies is one that (again for obvious reasons) is lost upon the majority of moviegoers. It is a concept that remains largely academic, and for this reason one that even many filmmakers (at least those of the Hawks/Ford, no-nonsense school) have little time for. In tracing what I might (for the purpose of the thesis) call “the hidden personality” of popular movies, I have of necessity had to look at these movies with something other than your average (casual) moviegoer's eye. Instead of merely seeking to be entertained by the stories, I have taken to reading between the lines in order to analyze these stories (and the protagonists that move them forward) for hidden meanings that, quite possibly, the original storytellers never intended. This is not so different from the psychoanalyst's approach to his patient. Obviously, the therapist is not seeking amusement or distraction by listening to his patient; rather he is

seeking for some *clue* by which to unravel the secret workings of the patient's unconscious mind. At this juncture, the argument might well be raised that a popular movie is not a human being but merely an artifact created by human beings, and as such vastly more limited. One could argue that a movie, like any other artifact, is only and precisely what it appears to be, that it *has* no unconscious to speak of, and that any meanings that are hidden at all are only so because of being consciously *put there* by the filmmakers. Such an argument is naïve, and I sincerely doubt that anyone inclined to raise it will have made it this far; so let us move on.

So just how is it that certain artifacts may be found to contain so many hidden layers of meaning? How is it that something that might once reasonably have been assumed to be no more than an exciting shoot-'em-up Western is now being touted as a profound and intricate study of the secret workings of the schizophrenic mind? Surely not merely by the conceit of the author? I contend that *the dual nature of every enterprise relates to the dual nature of Nature (the psyche) itself.*

For example, as regards movies, the eternal question is: art, or entertainment? And then, following this, what exactly is the difference, and can the two not happily co-exist? As Pauline Kael once noted, while all art must, ipso facto, be entertainment, not all entertainment is necessarily art. So where does the distinction lie, and how can the two functions (if such they be) be found to complement and enhance one another? Here I am indebted to Neal Gabler and his insightful work, *Life: the Movie, How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. Gabler traces the word "entertainment" to Latin roots *inter* (among) and *tenere* (to hold) and writes how entertainment "sinks its talons into us and pulls us in, holding us captive, taking us both deeper into the work and into ourselves, or at least into our own emotions and senses, before releasing us." He goes on to state that "Art was said to provide *ekstasis*, which in Greek means 'letting us stand outside ourselves,' presumably to lend us perspective."<sup>1</sup> As such, he posits art and entertainment as, if not mutually exclusive, at the very least *diametrically opposed*. And yet, since Gabler is (quite correctly) talking of the *effects* of the two modalities and not their intrinsic natures, the fact remains that whether an artifact be art or mere entertainment *depends to a certain extent on the response of the viewer*. In the case of art, the relationship between the artifact and the observer is indeed a one-on-one affair, much like a dialogue between a

teacher and a pupil. In the case of entertainment, the relationship is profoundly, if subtly, different; it is a relationship between a collective body and its chosen distraction, and is not a dialogue so much as a diatribe. If art appeals to the individual in us, entertainment reduces us to one more ass on the seat, another unit in the mass, the collective. Art awakens, while entertainment relaxes, stupefies, or puts us to sleep—it is the difference between a psychedelic effect and a narcotic one. The question then arises: how exactly can art also serve the secondary, apparently counteractive purpose of entertaining us: how can it take us outside ourselves to give us new perspective while at the same time taking us deeper into ourselves, so denying us such a perspective? Herein enters the essentially divided nature of movies, the most entertainment-based of art forms, and consequently the most schizophrenic medium ever conceived.

A movie such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* does indeed serve two apparently opposed functions; it exists in two seemingly separate forms, if you will, and is possessed of a dual personality. On the one hand, we have a rousing, seemingly mindless action cowboy movie for boys, full of sadistic violence, crude humor, and bombastic set pieces. On the other hand, there is a graceful, operatic, and fairly obscure (though also profound) meditation on the pitfalls of mercenary behavior and the dynamic interactions between the ego and the Id. On the one hand, we are swept away by the sheer sensation of the spectacle, entirely oblivious to the film's deeper meanings (even perhaps gaining impressions quite contrary to them). On the other hand, so far as we are sensitive to the hidden personality or occult text of the movie, we are allowed to step outside ourselves (along with the other characters in the movie) and perceive the absurdity, pathos, and mythic beauty of it all. Plainly, it is possible to enjoy the movie at both levels, as both profane entertainment and sublime (or mythic) art, just as it is possible to be inside oneself and outside at the same time, to experience enthrallment and ecstasy simultaneously. And this, I would wager, is the true art of the motion picture (natural heir to the stagecraft of Shakespeare), and the final, transcendent (shamanic) meaning and function of the schizophrenic experience.

Now our premise has been addressed, let us move on. In most cases in this present work my approach has been to analyze the characters and their specific actions within a movie's narrative, not merely as *if* they were real, but *as* real (just as a psychotherapist

would analyze his patient's actions in relation to the greater unfolding of his psyche, with all the complexity and ambiguity this implies). This is a conceit, but a necessary one, just as it is necessary for a therapist to attribute wisdom and depth to his patient that the patient may not necessarily be aware of himself: in order to tap this potential. Obviously, for this to pay off at all, the movies (and patients) in question must possess (however "unconsciously") a sufficient degree of creative insight, philosophical depth, emotional maturity, and so forth, *themselves*. Otherwise we will be seeking in vain for pearls in pig food.

It is my contention—because it is my experience—that there is *invariably* an under layer of meaning, an occult text, to the actions and events of everyday life. This under layer (the mythic dimension of life) is what serves to instruct us as to the nature not only of ourselves and those involved with us but of reality itself. In a nutshell, I believe that there is always (though with varying degrees of clarity or significance) a *metaphorical* quality to events which allows us to grow and learn *from* them, and not merely succumb *to* them. As Jung and Campbell approached ancient myths—as psychological blueprints that map an evolutionary design—so I approach movies, that is to say, *schizophrenically*.

It follows that, the closer movies approximate or emulate such ancient myths (not in content, necessarily, but in style), the better they will justify and vindicate this approach. The proof will ever be in the pudding, in any case. My idea is that, through such an approach, these movies (like the ancient myths we are now deprived of) will provide us with *information* about our current state of development as human beings. With few exceptions, the movies that most deserve the term "great," those that have become enduring classics beloved by many, are not the movies that realistically depict life as it "is" but rather those that successfully reveal life's mythic qualities to us. However, if life itself is a myth—a blueprint—by which we may some day access a greater Reality, there *are* cases of movies that so effectively depict realistic scenarios that they do achieve mythic dimensions (greatness) without ever actively aspiring to them. (*Taxi Driver* is a leading example; also *The Godfather Part Two*, which to a large part renounced the mythic underpinnings of the first film but did not diminish its power for that.) But for the most part, those movies that are dear to my heart, and those that (to me) successfully

encapsulate some facet of our nature and predicament, are often as not those that are most unabashedly mythical in design.\*

*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* is a film I saw perhaps a dozen times before its “occult text” ever occurred to me. It is entirely unnecessary to observe the film’s “deeper” (i.e., buried) meanings to appreciate its beauty and grandeur (its greatness) *as a movie*. There is even something rather simple-minded about Leone and Eastwood’s final Western together, the last and most ambitious of their “Dollar” trilogy. Certainly, if one takes it at face value as a simple action adventure comedy, it’s pretty basic. It is rather as an absurdist character study and an epic piece of surrealist/revisionist history that the film stands out from other Westerns. Yet what gives this movie its resonance and endurance as a work of art must finally be measured by its relevance to our times; and this in turn depends on just how well it holds up as a mythic artifact, a mirror through which we may glimpse, in part, the condition of our collective psyche, in all its fragmented and bloody intricacy.

I am fully aware of the arbitrary, game-like nature of the following analysis, and of the fact that, with sufficient passion, diligence, and prejudice, *any* movie at all can be made to render up a subtext to fit the scholar’s thesis. (This is not to say it is easy, only that it is *possible*.) Umberto Eco, in his groundbreaking conspiracy novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*, included just such a chapter that demonstrated how the parts of an ordinary car engine might be found to correspond with the various Keys of the Kabbala. Eco (besides proving his intellectual gamesmanship) was here demonstrating the universality of the Kabbala and not the hidden order of car engines; but of course, the two facts are inseparable. Just so is it here. Aleister Crowley performed a similar exercise in his *Book 4*, when he analyzed children’s nursery rhymes for their “occult” content and found them to yield quite solid esoteric meanings. I feel that I am in sufficiently reputable company, then, and upholding a not overly frivolous tradition, by subjecting Sergio Leone’s greatest Western to the same treatment. Those readers who are anything less than (at least mildly devoted) aficionados of the movie, however, might want to skip to the next chapter.

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\* To give a few examples of American movies that qualify (not all great ones but certainly beloved, and hence enduring): *Frankenstein*, *King Kong*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Harvey*, *The Searchers*, *Vertigo*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Jaws*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Brazil*, *Blue Velvet*, *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *The Lord of the Rings*,

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It's no joke it's a rope, Tuco

—Blondy

*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* is a schizophrenic journey. As briefly as we can, then, let us map this schizophrenic journey. First off, it is interesting to note that Leone poses not dual but *triple* consciousness, a three-way split by which the psyche is torn, not between good and bad, but between bad and ugly (a double negative, ugly being only partially redeemed evil). It is the friction between the two “evils” that potentially allows the psyche to attain the “third state,” a state of grace beyond duality, that of “the good.” In such an arrangement, goodness depends not on opposing badness but on transcending such oppositions entirely, pitting “bad” against “ugly,” and so weaseling between the two.

The ugly is Tuco (Eli Wallach), also known as “the Rat.” A crude, mercenary opportunist bent on personal advantage at any cost, Tuco also happens to be a “devout” Catholic who crosses himself whenever he kills someone. Tuco is pure survival instinct: wits, cunning, deviance, persistence, and durability. What he lacks in finesse or intelligence, he makes up for in guile and adaptability. “Ugly” refers to his brutish nature, his uncouthness and physical slovenliness, his lack of *grace*. Although crude, Tuco is anything but incompetent, however. He is a skilled gunfighter, an accomplished tracker, and a professional thief and bandit.

The bad is Angel Eyes (Lee Van Cleef), cold, cruel, calculating, a killer with a vicious bent and a perverse mercenary’s code of “honor.”\* Even more than Tuco, Angel Eyes is in it wholly for the money. Seeking a cache of gold stolen by infantryman Bob Carson, Angel Eyes is a precisely tuned machine programmed for one thing only; the only human emotion he betrays is a sadistic relish in the heinousness of his actions. Tuco

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\* In his first scene Angel Eyes arrives at a large family home (where he first hears about the cache of gold that is the plot’s ostensible motor), and accepts the food he is offered by his prey. The man, knowing why Angel Eyes is there, offers him double his money if he’ll leave him alive and kill the man who hired him instead (Baker). Angel Eyes laments that, “I always see the job through,” shoots the man, and kills his son when he comes to the rescue. He then returns to collect the rest of his payment from his employer Baker, a sick, bed-ridden old man. Angel Eyes informs Baker that before he killed him, his victim gave him money. “I think his idea was that I kill you.” The two men laugh over the absurdity of this; Angel Eyes’ smile fades and his eyes grow hard. “Only trouble is,” he says, “when I get paid, I always see the job through.” Whereupon he kills his employer.

may be an unprincipled scoundrel, but Angel Eyes is completely devoid of conscience. He is every bit as cunning and deviant as Tuco (and far more intelligent and ambitious), but he lacks imagination, spontaneity, initiative. He is never seen to be alone but is always affiliated in one way or another, always working for or with someone else. A “freelance” killer, he is nonetheless a slave to his own mercenary nature. When we first meet him, he is working for Baker, a sick old man confined to his bed (Leone frequently associates evil with sickness in his films). Hence Angel Eyes is affiliated from the start with disease and decay. Of course, Angel Eyes soon kills Baker (on assignment from the man he just killed *for* Baker), and so he is seen as perennially masterless: a ronin who murders his own master.

The good, Blondy (Clint Eastwood), is a far more enigmatic character. Stealthy, silent, and graceful, Blondy remains curiously aloof most of the time, as if enjoying his own private game; it is this detachment, or irony, that separates him from the others. Though apparently motivated by the same base needs and material desires, this is (as we shall see) an illusion, a ruse. Blondy is driven by altogether different needs. He is—unbeknownst to himself and maybe even to Leone (ah, but *we* know better!)—on a schizophrenic journey for self-knowledge. Blondy is the only character of the three who undergoes profound changes through the course of the movie. His nature as “the good” is anything but a given; Blondy only *becomes* good—heroic—by overcoming the respective “bad” and “ugly” sides of his nature. He confronts, overcomes, integrates, assimilates, rejects, and destroys the various facets of personality that impede him on his quest. This quest is ostensibly for buried treasure, but again—we know better. In terms of our occult text, the buried treasure is code for the hidden self, the alchemical gold.

When we first meet Blondy<sup>\*</sup> he is saving Tuco from three bounty hunters eager to collect the reward money. Blondy kills the three men with his usual aplomb, then turns Tuco in himself. When Tuco is about to hang, Blondy, from a safe distance, shoots the rope and so rescues him a second time, thus forming a profit-based partnership in which Tuco is the perennial fall-guy and Blondy his betrayer and savior, both in one. Here is the

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<sup>\*</sup> Of all the three dollar movies, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* comes the closest to ever officially naming the Clint Eastwood character; and yet, conversely, it is only in this film that he can really be said to be nameless. In *A Fistful of Dollars* his name is revealed at the very end as “Joe.” In *For a Few Dollars More*, he is briefly identified as “Monco.” But in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* it is only Tuco’s labeling him after his most obvious attribute (his golden hair) that effectively names him. After all, if Blondy has an actual name beyond this, why would he put up with Tuco’s epithet? It stands to reason that Tuco only uses this label because he lacks any other name by which to address him.

essential nature of Blondy's dilemma, his conflict. His line of work (his choice of profit) dictates that he be in constant duplicity—he is divided. When Tuco tries to haggle for a larger slice of their profits, insisting that the risk is his, Blondy tells Tuco, “You may run the risks, my friend, but I do the cutting. If we cut down on my percentage, it's liable to interfere with my aim.”

The next time we see this uneasy alliance at work, Blondy's aim—his focus—has indeed been thrown off, not by a cut in his profits but by the intrusion of *a third element*: the bad. Angel Eyes just “happens” to be at the scene of Tuco's most recent hanging; somehow he intuitively *knows* that “not all men with a rope around their neck get to hang.” Leone here unambiguously suggests a telepathic link between the three men, specifically between Blondy and Angel Eyes. Otherwise how could Angel Eyes know that “even a filthy beggar like that has got a protecting angel: a golden-haired angel watches over him”?<sup>\*</sup> Somehow, by spotting this arrangement between Tuco and Blondy, Angel Eyes throws it off balance and upsets Blondy's normally impeccable aim. This—according to our esoteric reading—is the moment at which “the bad” infiltrates the psyche of “the good” and so unbalances it (cuts its “percentage”), causing it to falter. It is also Blondy's first temptation.

His missing of the mark (he has to shoot a second time and Tuco almost hangs as a result) gives Tuco understandable misgivings about their deal, and he harangues Blondy until Blondy loses all patience and “unties” their partnership. Tuco snaps, “When you feel that rope around your neck, you can feel the devil bite your ass!” Blondy thinks this over. “You're right,” he says, pulling Tuco off the horse by the rope. “It's getting tougher.” His “protection” is no longer “good.” Blondy can feel Tuco like the devil at *his* ass and wants to be rid of him; without further ado he leaves him in the desert. Ironically, it is with this callous act (prompted by mercenary greed, his “percentage”) that Leone chooses to introduce Blondy to us, as “the good.” No protecting angel he, “the good” has just failed the first temptation. Nothing we have seen so far can justify such a designation.

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<sup>\*</sup> It's an unwritten tradition in genre movies that certain characters—in certain circumstances—are possessed of all-but-supernatural powers of intuition. This sixth sense is what makes them the protagonists, after all—they are “the best” at what they do, be it good or be it evil—and it serves to up the ante of the melodrama by making its players all-but superhuman in their skills. But in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* it is less a generic device and more a genuine indicator of Leone's subtext—that of schizophrenia. The characters' uncanny intuition allows them to be aware of one another's movements and makes them appear to be eerily connected, like different sides of a single psyche.

Having experienced a “glitch” in his own performance (by which self-doubt has entered into his psyche), Blondy reacts defensively and attempts to extricate himself from the partnership with perhaps excessive zeal. Blondy senses something is amiss, but fails to correctly identify the cause of his misgivings (which is not Tuco but Angel Eyes). At a simple level, Blondy is sick and tired of this uncouth, “sawed-off runt” whom he feels is cramping his style, and who “will never be worth more than \$3000.” At a deeper, unconscious level, however, Blondy is pushing him away because Tuco—the trickster figure who tests and undermines (by mocking) the hero’s integrity—is exacerbating his own flagging confidence. Blondy feels that if he gets rid of Tuco—his own distorted reflection—he can effectively deny the very weaknesses that got him tangled up with him in the first place (above all, his mercenary qualities and his duplicitous nature). This is the reason Blondy’s treatment of Tuco is so unnecessarily brutal, when he abandons him in the desert (his hands still tied) to die.

When Blondy tells Tuco, “Back to town is only a hundred miles or so. If you save your breath I feel a man like you can manage it,” he is clearly putting Tuco’s capabilities to the test. This is part of their (unconscious) understanding as “partners,” as different sides of a single psyche vying for power. But above all, Blondy is trying to free himself of his “ape,” and this of course he cannot do, at least not so easily or so callously. Blondy’s “fall from grace” sets off a chain reaction. The next scene after this is of Angel Eyes viscously beating Bob Carson’s Mexican girlfriend so as to discover Carson’s whereabouts. The woman is introduced as the local soldiers’ whore, and seen cursing them as they leave her in the dirt: “You filthy rats!” she shouts. Tuco, the “filthy beggar,” “known as the rat,” has been sentenced, among other things, as a rapist. When Angel Eyes beats the woman (this being his own preferred brand of kicks, apparently), the association of words seems to make Tuco complicit in the beating, and by extension Blondy also, whose own “fall from grace” can be seen as not only precipitated by but also “unleashing” Angel Eyes, the bad (that damn percentage again!). The ego is now running amok.

Tuco survives Blondy’s “test,” and proceeds to hunt him down for revenge, becoming Blondy’s shadow, the monkey on his back. He tracks Blondy first of all to a hotel room in town, then pays three gunmen to distract Blondy by coming through the

door (Blondy is ready for them of course: the canon fire eases off at a critical moment and Blondy hears their spurs), while Tuco comes in by the window. (There is a variation of their recurring dialogue: “There are two kinds of spurs in this world, my friend. Those who come in by the door, and those who come in by the window.”) Tuco arranges Blondy’s ceremonial execution by hanging: a symmetrical and theatrical justice by which he unconsciously buys Blondy the time he needs to escape. In fact, Blondy is saved by divine intervention (a canon ball hits the hotel), thus proving his angelic properties to be anything but figurative.

Not one to give up so easily, Tuco trails Blondy a second time. This time he literally “apes” him; rooting out the remains of Blondy’s campfires, each time getting closer and closer to his prey, until he finally finds a cigar butt still smoldering; he puffs triumphantly on the discarded cheroot, knowing his prey is close. Tuco finds Blondy up to his old tricks with a new partner (Shorty), preparing to shoot the rope. Still caught in the same line of work, Blondy is plainly in need of “guidance” from his trickster-shadow partner Tuco. At Tuco’s decree, Shorty hangs, and Blondy is led at gunpoint into the desert. “Where we going?” he asks. “Where *I’m* going,” Tuco corrects him. Riding his mule, obscenely content with his own sunshade and water supply, he shoots a hole in Blondy’s gourd, then shoots his hat off for good measure. “Like that you won’t have to carry so much!” He explains how they are going to cross a desert that even the army is afraid to venture into. “No one will set foot in this hell, except you and me.” “Only a hundred miles through this desert,” he mocks Blondy. “If you save your breath I feel a man like you can manage it. And if you don’t manage it, you’ll die.”

Blondy is getting his comeuppance, and there is nothing here in Leone’s staging to suggest that Tuco is acting out of excess vindictiveness. Blondy has to prove he can take as good as he gives; this—the walk through the wilderness—is his trial by fire. In psychological terms it signifies what Aleister Crowley referred to as a period of “dryness,” in which the soul thirsts for fulfillment but is unable to find satisfaction or relief, being a barren wasteland unto itself. The desert signifies the id—the unconscious—through which the ego must journey in order to be purged. In occult terms, it is “the crossing of the abyss.”

What is Blondy's downfall is also Tuco the trickster's finest hour. The roles are reversed: the ego (hero) has been overthrown by the crude usurper. Yet, as a result, a new balance is struck between the two men, between the "good" and the "ugly." No longer superhuman, Blondy cannot endure his trial and must again be saved by divine intervention. At the precise moment Tuco is about to put Blondy out of his misery, again comes the sound of distant thunder. This time it is not canon fire but a runaway stagecoach, thundering riderless through the desert and arriving with a Morricone choir of trumpets. Tuco reins it in and (forgetting all about Blondy) finds a dying soldier among the other dead bodies. Tuco is about to finish the soldier off when the man, in a desperate bid for life, promises Tuco the secret of buried gold. He begs for water but Tuco only wants to hear about the gold; the man—who gives his name as Bob Carson—tells Tuco the name of the cemetery where the gold is buried, but before he can give Tuco the name on the grave, still pleading for a drink, Carson loses consciousness. Tuco goes off furiously to find water, telling him "Don't die till I get back!" While Tuco is gone, Blondy, supernaturally inspired, crawls over to Carson and gets the name on the grave; moments later Carson dies.

Tuco in a rage threatens to kill Blondy, who gasps, "If you do that you'll always be poor, just like the greasy rat that you are." "Don't die like that pig!" wails Tuco. The two men are now allied by circumstance. Their new partnership is still founded on mercenary greed, but the stakes, and the rewards, are considerably higher. Blondy, for his part, has passed the second temptation. He has faced the Adversary and heard the voice of God: a dying man who gives him the name of a dead man, a name that is the key not only to his continued survival (against all the odds) but to his future wealth and empowerment. The trip to the abyss has not been a total loss. Tuco—now Blondy's best friend—takes him to a nearby monastery to recuperate, and there confronts his own brother. This is the emotional centerpiece of the film, and the funniest and most touching scenes are here. Tuco, hovering about, asking the monks if Blondy has spoken yet ("He's like a brother to me!"), uses all his wiles—and his considerable acting ability—to try and trick the name out of Blondy (he tells him he is dying, so he may as well unburden himself); but even delirious, Blondy is too shrewd to fall for Tuco's tricks. He gasps out: "I'll sleep better . . ."

. knowing . . . I have my *good* friend . . . to protect and . . . watch over me.” With these words, their uneasy alliance is cemented.

Tuco not only lies to the monks about Blondy being “like a brother,” he also lies to Blondy that he has no family, that he is, like Blondy, “all alone. I have you, you have me.” In actual fact, Tuco only *thinks* he is lying. In the following scene, when he confronts his brother, he discovers that he is indeed without family. His brother stands in pious judgment on Tuco (“Outside of evil what else have you managed to do?”), telling him bitterly that their mother has been dead for years, while their father died just a few days ago, asking for Tuco on his deathbed. Tuco accuses his brother of being a coward, claiming that he became a priest because he was too afraid to choose Tuco’s path (“the hard way”). The priest loses his saintly cool and slaps Tuco, who punches him and knocks him to the ground. Tuco helps him up and leaves, rejecting his brother’s belated attempt at reconciliation. He has severed all family ties now, replacing his blood brother with a spirit brother, Blondy. By “killing” his own family, Tuco has aligned himself with the self-determining path of the warrior (or bandit). As such, Blondy is Tuco’s only remaining link to humanity, but also to “the divine.”

Family of course is central to Leone’s vision, and a large part of how he *identifies* his characters (and their “virtues”). Angel Eyes is literally a family killer: he is the negation of all life, pure self-preservation and mercenary instinct. He is decay. Tuco is only figuratively a family killer (though he may be a real rapist). We learn that he did indeed have a family (despite denying it) but that he has now lost it, partly by choice; and Leone conveys the sorrow of his aloneness more acutely than anything else in the film. Tuco’s confrontation with his brother may soften him up some, but in any case he forms a new kinship, or at least affiliation, with Blondy, his surrogate brother. From here, they embark on their quest together. Blondy’s past is never disclosed, nor is he ever associated with family in any way. He is an immaculate conception, and from this comes his impeccable “aim,” his detachment, his ironic grace, and his “goodness.”

Once Blondy has recovered sufficiently, the two men ride off in search of the cemetery (since he knows the destination, Tuco, the ape, is leading); before they get far, however, they are intercepted by a wagonload of soldiers. Tuco’s function in the movie, by and large, is to put his foot in it; on this occasion, seeing the soldiers from a distance,

he assumes them to be grays and shouts out “God is on our side!” Realizing (when it is already too late) that they are in fact dust-covered blues, Blondy quips, “God is not on our side cuz he hates idiots,” whereupon they are taken as prisoners. They arrive at a concentration camp run by a dying captain unable to keep his second-in-command, Angel Eyes, from taking over. When Tuco answers to the name of Carson (since it is at Blondy’s own prompting that Tuco does so, Blondy is perhaps unconsciously trying to rid himself of Tuco), Angel Eyes twigs that the two men are on the trail of Carson’s gold, and takes Tuco off to be tortured. While Tuco is being viciously beaten by Wallace, the prisoners’ band plays a melancholy dirge, knowing full well that the music is expressly to cover the sounds of torture.<sup>2</sup> Tuco finally succumbs at the point where he is about to lose his eyes, and gives up the name of the cemetery.

Angel Eyes then takes Blondy into the torture chamber, not to torture him (“Not that you’re any tougher than Tuco, but you’re smart enough to know that talking won’t save you”), but to offer him a partnership. Blondy, with his options severely limited, agrees. Tuco meanwhile (now of no use to Angel Eyes) is taken off by Wallace to be executed. Blondy is finally free of his “ape”—but at a price. He must form a new alliance with the dark side of his psyche—“the bad”—and so undergo the third temptation. If Blondy is the angel, Angel Eyes at this point becomes his means for *seeing* the truth. And the truth is that he—Blondy—is little different from his enemy. Blondy’s third temptation is to temporarily *align* himself with “the bad,” in order to eradicate it once and for all. Only so can he discover the buried gold (the higher self of alchemy) and be free of his ape, Tuco. Free to become, finally and forever, a force of “good.”

A pause here to consider what I have (perhaps fancifully) cited as Blondy’s “three temptations.” To clarify this idea, I will borrow some terms from Carlos Castaneda and his hidden personality, don Juan Matus (the greatest double act in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature<sup>3</sup>). Don Juan cites four enemies of the man of knowledge: fear, clarity, power, and finally, old age. We are concerned only with the first three here, however, and how they appear to synchronize with the three temptations of Christ in the desert.

The first enemy (temptation) is fear. Blondy misses his shot. The ego recoils from its negative aspects (Angel Eyes), pushing them away into “unconsciousness,” repressing them (Blondy dumps Tuco in the desert). Like Christ tempted to turn stones into bread,

Blondy abuses his power through fear of his own weakness: he's thinking only of mercenary things (i.e., hunger for bread) and this is his weakness, his ugly side. Unlike Christ, Blondy fails the first temptation, succumbing to fear of the unknown, which is but his own reflection (his ape), and turns Tuco into "Shorty." But the battle is still on. The ape, Tuco, persists and eventually confronts Blondy, enabling the ego to conquer its fear of the unknown by forcing it to confront the barren waste of reason (what Morpheus in *The Matrix* calls "the desert of the real").

The second enemy of the man of knowledge is clarity. By thinking he could see everything clearly and dumping Tuco (repressing his "ugly" nature, as if it were that simple), Blondy has wound up dying of thirst in the empty desert of his own solipsism. He succumbs to despair, but is saved at the last minute by divine intervention. For Christ, the second temptation was to cast himself down so the angels would lift him up. Blondy in the desert gives in, surrenders to death, and forces the angels to intervene (the chariot of the dead arrives). Blondy is giving in to his own virtue, his "goodness" or passivity, too early. He's no angel yet, and in his "clarity" he has seriously overestimated his infallibility. Blondy thought if he was rid of Tuco, his percentage would go up and his aim would improve. But his aim didn't improve because he couldn't get rid of his "ape" (shadow) that easily. His falling back on his "goodness" (his sense of professionalism, rather than real virtue) was the equivalent of jumping into the abyss: his clarity let him down, he just wasn't that *good*. So he dies in order to be reborn, meaning that the ego is both parched and *flooded* by exposure to the desert sun (the Self). In this state, Blondy's consciousness is such that he can retain only a single idea: the name of a dead man (which, as it turns out, is "unknown"! ). The ego's greatest fear is thus confronted: it is reduced to nothing.

The third enemy (temptation) of the man of knowledge is power. When Blondy aligns himself with Angel Eyes, he has a sweet deal. He is rid of his ape Tuco, he has his split of the money, and an easy, swift passage with Angel Eyes and the "bad men" at his side. But Blondy forgoes this power for, one presumes, the more attractive (and reliable) option of hanging out with Tuco, his "ugly" side. (Compared to Angel Eyes, Tuco doesn't look so bad.) Blondy has power enough now with Tuco by his side. (Tuco helps Blondy dispose of Angel Eyes' flunkies, those faceless demons, and is then disarmed, or

retired, when it comes time to dispatch Angel Eyes himself.) Blondy's actual turnaround, we might note, coincides with his one and only tender moment until now, when he is seen stroking a kitten in an abandoned building, so acknowledging his capacity for *kindness*. The kitten as it were awakens Blondy's conscience as to the destructive dangers of power, the need to apply tenderness to keep a balance. He foregoes mere mercenary (ego) convenience for the chance of a little camaraderie with Tuco. Hence he finds his true power. For Christ, the third temptation was when Lucifer offered him the world if he would only bow down to him. This is the test of power. If Blondy gives in to his mercenary nature (once his goodness has failed him), though he will gain power, it will corrupt him. This trap Blondy falls into only momentarily—strategically—before the kitten and Tuco's gunshot awaken his conscience.

To return to our narrative: through ingenuity and ruthlessness, Tuco escapes the clutches of Wallace and so evades execution one more time. He makes his own way towards their shared destination, while Blondy suffers a little longer the company of Angel Eyes and his men, maintaining the illusion of being one of them. (It is only by acting as the bad man that he can discover how against his nature it is.) Significantly, the only time we see Blondy as part of the group is when he is holding the kitten, thus demonstrating (to us, though not to Angel Eyes) just how *unlike* the other men he is. Blondy hears a gunshot and recognizes it at once as Tuco's. (Actually this is impossible, since Tuco is an escaped prisoner and must just as surely have been separated from his guns while in the POW camp. But it only further confirms the existence of a telepathic link between the two men.) "Perfect timing," Blondy says, speaking to the kitten (to which he has even given a name).

Tuco is taking a bath on the other side of town and is ambushed by an old enemy he mistakenly left alive; Tuco—rather improbably—shoots the man with a gun submerged in bath water, concealed by the bubbles. Blondy wanders casually off to find his real partner, coldly shooting down the man Angel Eyes sends after him, thereby unequivocally terminating their partnership. Since he knows that Tuco is close, he now feels confident enough to take on Angel Eyes and his men. Blondy finds Tuco by following his inner antennae, and together they wipe out Angel Eyes' band. Angel Eyes

escapes, leaving a note for them, a note which Tuco vainly attempts to read. “See you later, id-, idi—” Blondy takes the note. “Idiots,” he reads, handing it back to Tuco. “It’s for you.” Blondy is now putting his ape (and his id!) in its place.

Back on the trail, Tuco is boasting of his prowess and assuring Blondy he will get them to their destination when, as if on cue, they are intercepted and taken as prisoners, once again by the Blues. At the camp—and once again with rash impetuosity—Tuco improvises by stating that they are there to volunteer. The following scenes, in which Leone shows us the folly and futility of mass-destruction, also give us Blondy’s first indisputably heroic deed, when he blows up the bridge the soldiers are fighting over. As a result, he not only gives the dying captain a last moment of happiness (destroying the bridge was the Captain’s fondest wish), but possibly saves many of the men’s lives, too (since they now have nothing to be fighting over). Blondy blows up the bridge primarily for his own convenience (so “these idiots will go somewhere else to fight,” as Tuco puts it); but even so, we begin to see Blondy in a new light after this. It’s clear that he is equally motivated by a desire to bring an end to the senseless slaughter (Blondy laments that he’s “never seen so many men wasted so badly”).\* He also earns a new, begrudging respect from Tuco (who certainly only goes along with Blondy’s plan because it facilitates his own desires), to the point that Tuco (while they are rigging the bridge with dynamite) suggests they trade secrets and so bring a level of trust into their alliance. Blondy complies but, all-too-familiar with Tuco’s deviant nature, insists that Tuco give up his end of the secret first. This moment signifies a truce, an agreement, between the two sides of the psyche: an end to duplicity and mistrust, and a new level of co-operation. This done, the bridge is blown, the captain dies with a smile on his face, and the battle (if not the war) is ended. Tuco and Blondy are now officially partners in crime. Having crossed the Abyss together, they have blown up the bridge and brought an end to a senseless conflict, in the process opening their own path to the buried gold. The exploding bridge is the only orgasm—in the absence of any women in the film (besides

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\* It’s indicative of the anarchic spirit of Leone’s vision that the one overtly heroic act in his movie is an act of outright destruction. Leone plainly sympathizes even less than his characters do with the insane bids for power and progress of government that leads to such senseless slaughter. The bridge facilitates crossing over between territories, hence is a power point that both sides struggle for and will make almost any sacrifice to attain. By destroying the basis of the struggle—the man-made artifact—the location returns to its original, natural state as a simple river, and so becomes irrelevant to the political machinations. Of course, Tuco and Blondy can still cross the river, but *under their own power* (they have to wade). Leone is advocating a return to individual action, or responsibility, over governmental. Hence his vision is basically anarchist.

Carson's floozy and the fainting, windowed mother at the movie's opening)—that the two men can enjoy. Blowing up the bridge “consummates” their own coupling. Soon after—Tucó having gotten Blondy to “put out” his half of the secret—Tucó runs out on Blondy.

Before this, on the other side of the river, Blondy comes across another dying man, a wounded soldier to whom he offers a last toke on his cheroot. This is, following immediately after his official graduation to heroic status, Blondy's first show of goodness; by the standards Leone has set up for Blondy until now, it borders on saintliness. The dying man's taking his last breath from Blondy's cheroot signifies a kind of transference—an empathy—passing between the two men. Blondy establishes himself finally in our eyes as capable of compassion; in a word, the solar hero. By showing tenderness towards a dying man in his last moments, he proves that he has learnt to value life, and to understand the need for “goodness.” By bringing a measure of peace to a dying man's soul, he attains a certain grace himself. The direct result of this is Blondy's “transformation” into the Man with No Name. In exchange for his own coat (with which he covers the dying man), he takes the dead man's poncho; and since it is the same poncho already familiar to us from the first two movies, the effect is something like that of Clark Kent putting on his red-and-blues at last. By the act of donning his magical cloak, by going from “Blondy” to “No Name,” the protagonist attains—or regains—his mythical, otherworldly status and becomes once again an angel, albeit (inevitably) an Angel of Death.\*

At this point, Tucó steals the dead soldier's horse and gallops off in search of the goal, abandoning Blondy. Blondy, unruffled by the inevitable betrayal, coolly lights the fuse on a handy canon (using the same cheroot he shared with a dead man) and (his “aim” now preterhumanly precise) blows Tucó off his horse. Tucó staggers about in the clouds of dust while Blondy lights another canon. The next blast sends Tucó crashing into a gravestone, whereupon he realizes that he has arrived, finally, at the promised land: Xibalba, the Land of the Dead. The following scene is the movie's highpoint, as Tucó rushes headlong through the cemetery, surrounded by seemingly endless rows of

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\* Curiously, it is only at this point that Clint Eastwood's performance comes to life. For most of the film, his presence is all-but obliterated by Eli Wallach's scene-stealing Tucó (probably Wallach's finest hour as a performer). In the last few scenes, however, Eastwood has a chance to shine. Maybe he feels lost without his poncho?

tombstones, to Morricone's soaring orchestral strains, in search of a single grave. Death is of course the central motif of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, as befits not only all good Westerns but all self-respecting schizophrenic texts. The quest for self amounts to no less than the knowledge of good and evil, which is, after all (mythically speaking), knowledge of death. Blondy allows Tuco to run free through the maze in order to save himself the trouble of having to look for the grave. Now that his "ape" has been properly trained, it can be unleashed in order to perform its duties. The fact that Leone has already established Tuco's illiteracy does not seem to bother him here; apparently Tuco can read exactly as well as circumstances demand. He finds the designated grave, that of "Arch Stanton," and begins digging. Once he is almost done, Blondy arrives and tosses him a shovel, telling him to finish the job.

Why he does this when he knows that it is the wrong grave is anyone's guess. Apparently it is another case of his supernatural intuition at work, since Angel Eyes arrives at this point and, getting the draw on both of them, finds to his chagrin that there is nothing in the grave but Arch Stanton's mortal remains. For No Name, now on the very brink of full integration, divine intervention has merged with supernatural foresight and impeccable strategy. Having regained his advantage (he never really lost it), he proposes a contest. He will write down the *true name* of the grave (where the treasure is) on a stone, place the stone in the middle of the flagstone *corrida*, and the three men will shoot it out. The survivor will then turn the stone and claim the treasure. "It's a lot of money," says No Name. "We're gonna have to earn it."

Since No Name has already taken the bullets out of Tuco's gun (unbeknownst to Tuco), the contest is finally between him and Angel Eyes alone: the good and the bad, with the ugly as a passive (anything but mute) witness. No Name kills Angel Eyes, who falls neatly into an open grave, whereupon No Name shoots his hat and gun in after him. Evil has been gracefully erased, leaving no traces. Now only the ugly remains. Blondy points out the correct grave. Tuco, stammering over the word "Unknown," finally twigs: "There's no name on it!" "There's no name on the stone, either," replies No Name, wryly, showing Tuco the blank stone. His game was rigged, evidently; and although the other two might easily have deduced, given the time, that the treasure was buried in the *unmarked* grave next to that of Arch Stanton, No Name was never in any doubt about

who would live to claim it. The unknown soldier is the keeper of the hidden gold. Of course death has no name—and who would know better the true nature of the unknown than (avenging angel of death) the man *with* no name? (Leone's foresight here is pretty supernatural itself; since *A Fistful of Dollars* wasn't released in the US until 1967, a year after he made *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, the epithet "Man with No Name" hadn't even been invented yet. Yet his games with names, and the lack thereof, already uncannily anticipated this mythos.)

The unarmed Tuco digs up the treasure and wallows obscenely in it, like a hog in slime. At which point, he looks up and sees No Name, holding a noose with his name on it. This is Blondy's last act of "betrayal," only now he is assuming Tuco's role as trickster. Since he never actually intends to let Tuco hang, but only wants him to *believe* that he is leaving him to die, No Name is simply playing a particularly cruel game at this point. He puts the noose around Tuco's neck and has him stand on a flimsy wooden cross for support, leaving Tuco's share of the gold at his feet, tantalizingly out of reach. Then, with a wry smile, he rides off. Poor Tuco, taken in all the way—the trickster tricked, the ape "aped"—is left whimpering helplessly on the brink of non-existence. He is now hanging over his own abyss, an abyss he'll never cross, plainly (the ugly doesn't have it in him to be that "good"), but one that he now gets to gaze into.

No Name is playing out his role as merciless avenger for the last time, but ironically, all for show. He is no longer driven by the old revenger urges, or by genre conventions, but is only enjoying a last laugh at Tuco's expense, giving him a taste of his own medicine. When No Name/Blondy reappears on the horizon, Tuco's relief is rapidly curtailed by his realization that Blondy intends to make the shot (and so sever the rope around Tuco's neck) from an impossible distance. Tuco realizes that his salvation might just as likely be his end. No Name makes the shot, of course: his aim is once again impeccable, more so than ever in fact, since all traces of "doubt" (split perception, or schizophrenia) have been removed along with Angel Eyes and he can now see clearly. He leaves Tuco (his hands still tied) howling obscenities, rich at last but still unsatisfied, forever ugly, while "the bad" rests eternal in an unmarked grave, unrecognized, assimilated, forgotten. And the good—now triumphantly, gloriously, *ironically* so—rides

into the sun, having snatched wisdom (gold) from the jaws of death (the grave), and regained his natural, solitary state as a wandering star.

The occult text reveals itself. Picture this: a stone circle (*corrida*) at the heart of Hades; at the center of this circle is a stone *with no name on it*. (And it is by placing the stone in the center of the circular *corrida* that No Name, the solar hero, completes the astrological glyph for the Sun: ☉) Three characters, or “virtues,” situate themselves on the circumference of the circle (making a grand trine), each one vying for the philosopher’s stone. By this method—or strategy—the three-fold ego approaches enlightenment (rather like three spermatozoa competing for the ovum). The good eradicates the bad, and tames and suppresses the ugly, putting it to its own uses (whereupon it leaves it hanging), riding out of Hell with the alchemist’s gold under his saddle. Jung’s process of individuation is complete. The controlling intelligence (ego) confronts its dual nature (the bad and the ugly) in the labyrinth of the unconscious (Sad Hill). It disposes of evil altogether, thereby canceling the previous duality. “Ugly” is thus reigned into the ego’s service (disarmed but still useful), facilitating the ego’s business in the unconscious realm (having got him to locate the grave, Blondy has Tuco dig up the gold). Once the ugly has served its purpose, it is left behind. “Ugly” is the final mask which the ego wears in order to navigate the underworld. As a functioning personality (and all personalities are by definition at best ugly, at worst plain bad), it has outlived its usefulness and must be “hung up” long enough for the good to get free of its influence, once and for all. Blondy of course shoots Tuco down from a safe distance, and even gives him his share of the gold (though he may never have the stone), leaving him in hell (consigned to the unconscious). Thus unburdened of its shadow, the ego, now free of all attachments, identity, or name, rides off into Infinity. Enlightenment: that’s what it is. Duality has been overcome; the third point—which takes off from (but has no part of) the other two—has been attained. The schizo is a shaman. Hallelujah.

*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* is a crude but poetic mythological text. It is a mischievous, ironic, largely unwitting but nonetheless elaborate blueprint for the passage from conflict, fragmentation, and suffering (schizophrenia) to harmony, integration, self-determination and individuation—shamanic or solar consciousness. It’s also a rousing,

stylized, free-form epic Western with all the necessary ingredients of first-class “mindless” (visceral, blissful) entertainment, and it’s this very dual nature that makes it a work of art. How many people who see the movie will receive even the faintest whiff of such an “occult text”? One in a thousand, at best; it took me twenty years and countless viewings before I did. But once you spot it, it changes everything, and that’s the beauty of it. That’s what makes the text “occult,” after all, and that’s why the treasure is buried: so only those with sufficient ingenuity and determination will ever get to ride off with the gold.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes Gabler, *Life: the Movie*, pg. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Leone was making a reference to the “the Nazi camps, with their Jewish orchestras” here. See *Spaghetti Westerns*, by Christopher Frayling, pg. 172.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically from the first book in the series, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*.