

Bonnie and Clyde

By Richard Schickel

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Memory deconstructs movies. We remember them mainly in fragments—an image or two, a bit of dialogue, a star's attitude. "Bonnie and Clyde," to take a convenient example, is most immediately recalled by most of us—certainly by me—as a funny old car bucketing through a lonesome Dust Bowl landscape, its bank robber passengers shaking with gleeful laughter as they outrun the fruitlessly pursuing cops. The policemen intend, if they can, to kill the fleeing miscreants; at the very least they want to put them in jail and throw away the key. But those cars—and there are several of them, since there are several chase sequences in the movie—are inescapably comic. You can't quite believe that anything so silly looking could contain such deadly potential.

You also can't quite believe that a movie so jaunty and genial can achieve the deadly weight it attains in its signature sequence—the one that we tend to remember much more specifically than we do its comic car chases. That sequence is, of course, the death, by inordinate gunfire, of its principals at the end of the film. Their little outlaw band has been decimated, and they have taken refuge on a farm owned by the father of C.W. Moss, their dim-witted wheelman. They have been to town for supplies. As they return, their host, apparently fixing a flat tire on his truck, hails them. They stop to help. It's a pretty spot, which Bonnie's expression registers. Then there's a rustle in the bushes. Some startled birds take flight. Their betrayer dives for cover under his truck. Clyde and Bonnie exchange looks of incredible poignancy: Puzzlement, fear, love, a sad acceptance that they have arrived at the end from which there is no escape, chase across their faces. And then the incredible firepower of the ambush rips into their bodies. We see the bullets tearing into them. We see their bodies bounce and twitch in slow-motion response to the impact.

The sequence, no matter how often you reencounter it, tears your heart out. It is also based on historical truth. In their research, the filmmakers discovered that 1,000 rounds were fired when the real Bonnie and Clyde were ambushed. It also had, according to the film's director, Arthur Penn, a very self-conscious contemporary reference—to the excesses of munitions then being expended on the effort to pacify Vietnam. When one of the bullets rips a piece of Clyde's head off, we were supposed to recognize, too, the reference to Bobby Kennedy's assassination.

It is a curious fact that none of this was noted by reviewers at the time. That's probably because the argument over the film was largely framed by Bosely Crowther, the veteran lead critic of the *New York Times*. He was a tiresome old fud, and people had long since wearied of his cluelessness, especially when it came to all the new ways of cinematic seeing that had been arriving in the United States from abroad for something like a

decade. Now he proved himself equally blind to American innovation. He didn't care a rap about Penn's truthful visualization of Bonnie and Clyde's end. He was, in fact, outraged by the claims to "a faithful representation" of historical fact that the film's publicists apparently put forward—as if such faithfulness was something the movies routinely offered when they took up historical subjects. He was even more angry over the way the film blended farce and tragedy, which he deemed "as pointless as it is lacking in taste"—as if that were not its very point, the main reason for making it.

But besides missing the obvious references to Vietnam at the end of the film, he also failed to see that the whole movie was pitched toward youthful America's general feelings of victimization at that time. Oddly enough, Pauline Kael—Crowther's opposite in every way—also missed those points in her lengthy consideration of "Bonnie and Clyde," published in the *New Yorker* a couple of months later. She saw its originality and its power, but, somewhat irrelevantly, she spent much of her space comparing it to older movies about outlaw couples on the run, making some dubious connections between it and "The Manchurian Candidate" and somewhat peevishly picking away at flaws that were more visible to her than to others.

No matter, perhaps. Within a year Crowther was out at the *Times*, Kael was permanently in at the *New Yorker* and "Bonnie and Clyde" gained ten Academy Award nominations. Partly as a result of them it became a huge hit in a re-release campaign that Beatty indefatigably masterminded. More important, it became a touchstone film, one of those rare movies that seems to signal a seismic shift in the sensibilities both of moviemakers and moviegoers.

Looking back at the movie now, I think perhaps the reviewers, whatever their overall judgment of the film, were right to ignore its political and social meanings. The whole Vietnam con-



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troversty seems like ancient history now, but “Bonnie and Clyde” remains remarkably fresh and gripping, a movie you don’t have to damn with faint praise of that deadly (and medicinal) phrase, “historically important.” The reason for this may lie in the way it examines two things no one had quite thought to take up in the movies before: the links between sexuality and the American way of death, the links between celebrity and martyrdom.

Think for a minute about the scene, early in the picture, where shy, sly Clyde completes his seduction of bored, golden Bonnie. They are standing outside a gas station, sucking on soda pops. He has confessed his criminal past, but she doesn’t quite believe his boast that he did time for armed robbery. Now, though, he slides an enormous gun out from beneath his coat. She touches it reverently, sexually. But still she asks: Does he have the nerve to use it? Or is it just a boastful boy’s toy, more useful for impressing girls than it is for impressing victims?

Clyde’s answer is to stroll across the street, stick up a grocery store, and steal a car. Off the two of them go, buckety-buckety, laughing all the way. Soon thereafter he confesses his impotence. Soon after that, having taken refuge in an abandoned farmhouse—it has been foreclosed by the bank—they are lending their guns to displaced farmers to take potshots and the bank’s “Keep off” signs. It is not much of a revenge; it is, indeed, a childish one, but it is what Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker have to offer.

It is all they ever have to offer in the way of social concern and comment. But it is enough for them to gain Robin Hoodish status among the Dust Bowl’s downtrodden and dispossessed. They are pretty—prettier in the movie than they were in life—but they are not too bright. Especially Clyde. He’s always pretending to have thought things out, but basically his career in armed robbery is ad hoc, improvised, childlike.

Take for example, the moment their frolicsome ways are tainted by murder. By now they have recruited the rest of their gang—besides Michael J. Pollard’s C.W. Moss, they include Clyde’s good-ole-boy brother (Gene Hackman) and his perpetually hysterical bride, Blanche (Estelle Parsons, the only performer to win an Oscar for this film)—and they have hit a relatively rich bank. But C.W. doesn’t park outside it, motor running. Instead he finds a tight, *legal* parking space down the street, from which he has trouble extricating his vehicle when his confederates exit the bank. This delay gives the bank manager time to leap on their running board. Unthinking, Clyde kills him with a shot to the head—the blow blossoming like a flower unfolding.

The movie is now darkened by death and so is Clyde. Later, he chastises C.W. for his stupidity in a movie theater while the chorines warble “We’re in the Money.” But yet the murder doesn’t seem to score Clyde. More killings will, indeed, follow, but Clyde remains optimistic and infinitely distractible. He is his own best cheerleader. Had things broken differently for him

one can easily imagine him as another sort of All-American figure, the good-natured social chairman of a second-tier frat house at some third-tier college. Be that as it may, Beatty’s weightless playing of this figure—his utter heedlessness of consequence—is one of the movie’s permanent ornaments.

Faye Dunaway is no less good as Bonnie. She begins the movie hot and naked and looking for any action that will relieve the boredom of her waitress’s life. But yet she is self-conscious as no one else in the movie is. She desperately wants Clyde to claim his manhood with her (the movie very sensibly avoids two historical speculations, both of which Kael rather wished it had explored—a homosexual attachment between Clyde and C.W., a straight relationship between C.W. and Bonnie), and she’s alternately encouraging and petulant on that point.

What’s more interesting is her growing sense of doom. As the takings at the banks dwindle (even Clyde complains that they’re doing a lot of work for not much gain), as their escapes from the police become narrower and more perilous, a sense of gloomy portent settles on her. It is the function of the sequence where the gang takes Gene Wilder and Evans Evans for a joyride to bring these feelings to the surface. Everyone—outlaws and squares alike—gets along famously until Wilder’s character casually admits that he’s an undertaker by trade. Immediately Bonnie orders the car stopped and the puzzled pair dumped on a lonesome road. His profession reminds her too vividly of the end she alone among the Barrow Gang can see.

Then there’s the doomy Parker family picnic she insists they attend. I think Penn’s use of diffusion filters on the scene is his only directorial mistake in this film—its softness jerks us out of the reality that is elsewhere so brilliantly sustained. But there’s an encounter with Bonnie’s mother that is chilling. The old woman knows she will never see her daughter again and as much as says so, Clyde tries to reassure her—he can run circles around the cops. Mrs. Parker doesn’t buy that for a minute. “You’d best keep on running, Clyde Barrow,” she says. And the look on her daughter’s face acknowledges the grim truth she has spoken.

Maybe it is her foreboding that inspired Bonnie’s muse. But it is not long before she is scribbling “The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde” in a notebook. It is a taunt and a boast and finally an elegy:

Someday they’ll go down together;
They’ll bury them side by side;
To few it’ll be grief—
To the law a relief—
But it’s death for Bonnie and Clyde.

Proud Clyde sends this effusion off to a newspaper. It is printed and reprinted, and his delight in his lady’s gift knows no bounds. Also, he senses in it the beginnings of a new kind of celebrity—a kind that no other backwoods bank robber has

ever known—and, magically, Clyde is restored to potency. Or maybe he's not restored; maybe this is a first-time thing.

It's a terrific narrative stroke—so much more interesting than merely drawing a comparison between success with your gun and success with your member. But the newspaper in which Bonnie and Clyde have been reading her work blows away across a fallow field—one of the many things Penn was good about was contrasting the bouncy violence of his action with the empty serenity of his bucolic landscapes. The shot portends their ending, which follows soon enough.

The movie itself portends something else—a new attitude toward crime and death in the American cinema. Prior to “Bonnie and Clyde,” as Kael observed, it was possible for movies to elicit a certain sympathy for doomed criminals, especially when they were lovers. But as society's victims—people who had not been given the education or the economic means to avoid the criminal life, we, in the audience, were encouraged to bear a certain amount of guilt for the bad, but morally satisfying ends, they came to.

In the previous history of the movies only James Cagney, often as careless and attractive in himself as “Bonnie and Clyde” was as a movie, sometimes hinted that crime might pay in ways that conventional moral accountancy could not calculate. You often had a feeling that, gripped by his demonic energy, some of his gangsters would have been crooks had they been born in mansions and gone to Yale, so strong was the force of his motiveless but good-natured malignity.

At some point in preproduction it was proposed to Beatty, Penn, and the writers, Robert Benton and David Newman, that “Bonnie and Clyde” be made in black and white, as a period piece. They rejected the idea. They didn't want to put that distance between their work and their audience. They wanted to make a color movie, in which the past was shown to be—cars and costumes aside—indistinguishable from modern America. More important, I think they must have wanted to propose, in addition to everything else, the very modernist notion that we live in an indeterminate universe, to suggest that criminal life was just an unlucky accident. Clyde meets Bonnie when he happens upon her mother's car and thinks to steal it. Suppose

he had gone after a different auto. Suppose Bonnie had not been home to spot him. She might have remained a waitress. And he might have been just another small-time crook. Or even have gone straight—as, perhaps, the night manager in a convenience store. Instead, a tinkly legend grew up around them. Can you imagine how thrilled Bonnie and Clyde would have been by “Bonnie and Clyde?” Except, of course, their legend required their martyrdom.

Think, too, about the people they murdered. Had they been standing a couple of inches to the left or right they might have been spared. Had they decided to cash their check a little later or a little sooner, they might have been spared the rigors of a bank robbery. In other words, this movie pioneers the concept of a chance universe. And that's a concept that has animated most of our best crime movies since—“Pulp Fiction,” for one, or “Fargo.” “I don't deserve this,” a much older Gene Hackman croaks to Clint Eastwood at the conclusion of “Unforgiven.” “I was building a house,” he adds, conveniently omitting the more sadistic criminal activities he hides beneath his pious mask. “Deserve's got nothin' to do with it,” says Eastwood's Will Munny as he prepares to drop the trigger on his helpless antagonist.

That phrase is an emblem of our time. It was the most profound business of “Bonnie and Clyde” to bring it to popular consciousness, no matter what its creators thought about the war in Vietnam (although now we have begun to see that as the most terrible accident in our political history). In this it succeeded most wonderfully—immortally so, in my still bedazzled opinion.

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