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Introduction

ARTHUR PENN'S ENDURING GANGSTERS

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: COUNTERCULTURAL CINEMA

Boy meets girl in small-town Texas. Their crime spree begins as girl goads boy into robbing a grocery store; they speed out of town in a stolen car, spirits high. Against the backdrop of Depression-era America, this attractive and stylish young couple and their accomplices career through stickups and shootouts, kidnappings and narrow escapes, ultimately meeting their dramatic end in a legendary ambush. Based on a true-life story, few films in the history of the American cinema have inspired more critical discussion and greater scholarly debate than has director Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Along with *The Graduate* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), Penn's provocative evocation of Depression-era life on the run, delivered with visual panache and a hip sensibility, ushered in what came to be categorized as "the New American Cinema." Such an artistic renaissance, as several writers in this anthology detail, resulted from a unique nexus of conditions within the American film industry and the society that surrounded it: the economic breakdown of the Hollywood studio system, the ideological move toward more explicit depic-

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tions of sex and violence, the historical impact of escalating the Vietnam War, the aesthetic influence of European art house films, and the cultural creation of a new film ratings system. Ultimately, according to Glenn Man, these three films "reassessed the American cinema's achievement, deconstructed and restructured its traditional forms, and exploded or questioned its dominant myths."[1]

From our current historical vantage, it seems easy to understand why these three watershed films captured the spirit of a turbulent America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was an era lacerated by cultural divisions that grew wider and deeper in a jagged trajectory from the Woodstock Nation to the Weathermen, from the Chicago riots to the My Lai massacre. Although none of these films directly confronted the social and political issues gnawing at society's most sacred institutions, each encapsulated part of the zeitgeist spawned by the passionate clash of cultural beliefs. So, for example, *The Graduate* exemplified the emerging generation's fear and loathing of their parents' plastic existence, scornfully depicting an older social order devoid of personal and professional values. *Easy Rider* offered sixties moviegoers a countercultural alternative: a liberating life on the road heightened by the mental and physical stimulations of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Both films reflected a youth culture profoundly anxious about its future and self-consciously preoccupied with its present.

Yet it is *Bonnie and Clyde*, the film formally set in the past rather than in the present, that most poignantly evoked the contemporary exuberance, the complexity, and ultimately, the sadness of those times. The film's screenwriters, David Newman and Robert Benton, clearly fashioned their engaging outlaws to resonate with the countercultural sensibility of the 1960s. As Newman notes in his article written for this book:

> It is about people whose style set them apart from their time and place so that they seemed odd and aberrant to the general run of society. Most importantly, they did this by choice. . . .

> . . . What we were talking about was what is now known as
> "the Sixties." . . . If the film is "really about" something, it is
> about that most of all.

For the new heroes of the youthful culture that burst into prom-
inence during this time, acting "odd and aberrant to the general
run of society" was precisely the goal. They expressed their joy
and discontent in a kaleidoscopic, magical mystery tour of long
hair, drugs, war protests, psychedelic music, bell-bottoms, flower
power, free love, and social causes. To them, the anarchic Bonnie
and Clyde became historical counterparts to their own personal
and communal struggles: a young and attractive couple fighting
against the restrictive moral codes and hostile social institutions
of their time.

But beyond the film's importance in cinematic history, the
events surrounding the release of and public response to *Bonnie
and Clyde*, more than for almost any other American film, is a
story in which the offscreen activities are as important as the on-
screen performances. *Bonnie and Clyde* reflected and influenced a
critical time in American life. The film stood at a profoundly
significant cultural crossroads: a point where American values
veered from a comfortable fifties' mentality to a more compli-
cated reconfiguration of the world; where the old Hollywood
system cracked under the impact of new ideas and technologies;
where the center of film criticism shifted from the stodgy Bosley
Crowther to the pugnacious Pauline Kael; where fashion design-
ers emulated Hollywood instead of Paris; where visual styles in-
corporated European aesthetics; where film became as intellec-
tually legitimate as literature and painting; where sex and
violence replaced romance and innuendo; where revolutionary
political fervor overcame moderate activism; where a youthful
film audience took possession of America's sensibilities. All this
is important for understanding the context that generated the
film as well as the central role that the film played in bringing
these conflicts and transformations into clear focus.

The appeal of *Bonnie and Clyde* for its late-sixties audiences
seems clear: it fired a subversive shot across the prow of main-

stream American society. By doing so, the film forced an older generation of moviemakers, critics, and audiences – one shaped by their Great Depression and World War II experiences – to confront the emerging power and rebellious values of a new and different generation – one molded by the assassination of John F. Kennedy and by the Vietnam War. Yet such a moment, although important as the cultural context of the film, is inherently fleeting: its very currency assures its transience. After all, if *Bonnie and Clyde* only reflects those heady days of the 1960s, however effectively it captures their style and spirit, it can be dismissed as merely a nostalgic relic for aging baby boomers or historical artifact for enthusiastic film scholars. It therefore seems reasonable, particularly in an anthology geared to current film students, to explore the sustaining pleasures this film offers for viewers in the late 1990s.

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS: EPIPHANIES AND EPITHETS

We might ask the following question: in a world characterized far more by button-down shirts than bell-bottom jeans, where global-warming seminars engage far fewer passions than did Vietnam sit-ins, does this once-revolutionary film still exert an intellectual and visceral hold on contemporary audiences? Surely its violence, which alternately scandalized and titillated earlier viewers, no longer causes the same degree of moral outrage or agitated shock when juxtaposed against the blood-soaked frames in the latest Oliver Stone, Quentin Tarantino, or Martin Scorsese feature film. Indeed, when *Bonnie and Clyde* airs on commercial television, it now runs unedited and rated as PG, the once-controversial death sequence posing few problems for vigilant censors.

Yet even with the vast changes in tastes and mores, *Bonnie and Clyde* remains as compelling for viewers today as it was for audiences in 1967 for three basic reasons: (1) the emotional

resonance of the central love story; (2) the sympathetic connection to the communal impulse; and (3) the intellectual fascination with inevitable tragedy. Ironically, then, it is not so much the film's glitz and glamour, nor even its visual audacity, that allows *Bonnie and Clyde* to transcend its time period, although such elements certainly contribute to its lasting popularity. Rather, it is the viewer's fundamental response to Bonnie and Clyde, not as generational symbols or historical icons but as fated individuals struggling for personal and communal connection, that remains essential to the film's continuing appeal.

Tales of lovers doomed to disaster rest at the heart of many enduring works of literature and film: Oedipus and Jocasta, Othello and Desdemona, Heathcliff and Catherine, Rhett and Scarlet, Rick and Ilsa. These couples, among many others, form the spiritual lineage of the emotionally crippled Bonnie and Clyde; like their fictional ancestors, the brash yet vulnerable Clyde and the brazen yet fearful Bonnie strike a responsive chord that connects them to a modern generation searching for its own pathways to each other and to the disquieting world that surrounds them. The nuanced characters created by director Arthur Penn and the scriptwriters David Newman and Robert Benton embody an almost universal yearning for intimate communion: flawed people desperately striving, often unconsciously and extemporaneously, to transform their best individual impulses into a bond, no matter how fleeting and temporary, with others.

Take the scene in which a distraught Bonnie abruptly abandons the gang, after the carefree joyride with Eugene and Velma ends with Bonnie's icy premonition of death. When a distraught Clyde finally catches a glimpse of her in the distance, he sprints across the desiccated cornfield, an ominous shadow sweeping darkly with him and blackening the sunny landscape. He clasps her in his arms, touches her hair, and gently caresses her face. ''Please, honey,'' he begs, ''don't ever leave me without saying nothin'.'' Far more than their words, the emotions etched in their haunted faces express the inextricable bond between these restless, fumbling characters. From this time forth, and at what-

ever cost to their individual psyches, Bonnie and Clyde no longer function as separate entities. We instinctively grasp that their need for each other transcends personal eccentricities, individual failures and particular weaknesses. It is a moment of sheer and total connection with the audience, a frozen second of unmitigated acceptance and unspoken understanding – an emotional epiphany for both characters and viewers.

For Clyde, this fundamental drive for human connection leads to the construction of an extended community or, perhaps configured more accurately, an alternative family. His need for a communal sanctuary differs markedly from Bonnie's desire for a more restrictive relationship. The addition of C. W. Moss, along with Buck and Blanche, moves Clyde beyond the role of male companion and into that of surrogate father. One could easily assign archetypal family roles to the entire Barrow gang: C. W. as the slightly slow younger brother; Buck as the backslapping big brother; Blanche as the prim older sister. In this scenario, Bonnie fulfills the most complex role. Within some scenes, she is the harsh stepmother, alternately ridiculing Blanche, rebuking Buck, and chastising C. W. Other times, she seems far more maternal: sensitively comforting a grieving Blanche, humorously playing with Buck, or playfully cajoling C. W. The point, however, is not to assign rigid roles to each character; rather, it is to understand that Clyde's impulse to surround himself with a "family," one connected more by attitude than by blood, reflects his overwhelming desire to establish a secure place for himself surrounded by those who truly care about him.

Finally, let me turn to the inevitability of Bonnie and Clyde's destruction, a narrative structure as ancient as the Greek trage-dies of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides. We quickly sense that however much the characters of Bonnie and Clyde might attract us on a variety of levels, their path will almost certainly lead to their deaths. Within the narrative itself, Bonnie even-tually accepts that death remains the only possible conclusion to their story; fleeting respites filled with mundane communal activities provide only illusionary glimpses of temporary nor-

malcy. The film's outcome, therefore, is never in doubt. As a result, we tend to concentrate on what these characters choose to do with their allotted time, on how they utilize the modicum of free will left for them to exercise.

Such structural considerations force us to examine how the violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* inherently differs from the casual carnage omnipresent in contemporary movies. Put simply, Penn uses violence as a morally justified conclusion to the actions that precede it. His films have none of the ritualistic sadism of Scorsese's *Goodfellas* and *Casino*, the playful amorality of Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, or the gratuitous bloodletting of Stone's *Natural Born Killers*. For Penn, violent action may be an understandable response to events, it may even eliminate a persistent problem or help attain a desired goal, but he never absolves whoever employs it from moral responsibility. More importantly, once violence has been used (or even threatened), it sets in motion an unstoppable series of events that trap the participants in a web of their own creation.

Great works of art stand the test of time because they simultaneously reflect the period of their creation and transcend it. Such fluidity inspires each generation to discover meanings significant to them within the lines of an epic poem, the frames of a silent movie, or the bars of a musical composition. More than thirty years after its initial release, we can affirm *Bonnie and Clyde*'s status as landmark in the history of American cinema. It clearly marked a turning point in American film history, as movies made under the once powerful studio system gave way to more independent, experimental, and youth-oriented films. Yet to approach this film as merely the hoary relic of a bygone age is to ignore its enduring power. One of the few films that force viewers to meditate seriously upon how violence, both on the screen and off, shapes our lives, it also speaks to the profound yearning for human connection that permeates our daily existence. Thus *Bonnie and Clyde* remains a vital and engaging movie that intellectually challenges and emotionally touches contemporary audiences. I have little doubt that it will continue to

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strike a responsive chord in those who watch movies in the new century and beyond.

THE BOOK: CREATORS, COMMENTATORS, AND CRITICS

The essays in this anthology represent a wide spectrum of critical methodologies, ideological perspectives, and personal responses to *Bonnie and Clyde*. As such, they testify to the film's continued ability to inspire a broad range of opinions and to maintain its emotional sway over modern viewers. My introduction establishes the movie's significance for viewers in the late sixties and its relevance to contemporary audiences. In the articles that follow, the director Arthur Penn and the screenwriter David Newman discuss their personal involvement in the film's creation.

Penn's essay outlines how he came to direct *Bonnie and Clyde*, his state of mind prior to the film's production, his feelings about the Hollywood studio system, and the various obstacles he faced during and after the shooting and editing of the film. It is a fascinating look from the inside out, a rare glimpse into the collaborative process from the point of view of the man who stood at the center of this creative enterprise. David Newman's piece, also written expressly for this book, is a witty discussion of the various interpretations of the movie visited upon him by critics and commentators over the last three decades, including several by other contributors to this volume. In his essay, he details what he and co-writer Robert Benton thought their screenplay was about at the time they wrote it and over the subsequent years.

The book's focus on technical and thematic aspects of *Bonnie and Clyde,* on the film's cultural and critical receptions, and on its significance as part of American culture follow these comments by two of its creators. These begin with two articles about history: one about documented events, the other the evolution of ideas. Diane Carson's exhaustive history of the incidents sur-

rounding the actual Bonnie and Clyde provides rare eyewitness accounts of the outlaws' exploits. Moving beyond the strictly factual, Carson speculates on the nature and function of myth and legend in our culture, demonstrating how Hollywood re-packages infamous personas for consumer consumption. Focus-ing on 1967, the year that *Bonnie and Clyde* was released, Steven Alan Carr paints a portrait of an America at war with itself over cultural values and government policies. Such a piece allows the reader to understand why this film resonated with viewers living in those turbulent times.

Matthew Bernstein's essay examines the visual style of *Bonnie and Clyde*. He explores, in concrete detail, the distinctive look and feel of the film, examining the visual and editing techniques that captured the attention of viewers and critics. Here readers learn about the technical aspects that make the film such a unique creation.

The following essay by Stephen Prince zeros in on the most controversial aspect of *Bonnie and Clyde*: its violence. In addition to noting Penn's artistic influences, Prince situates the film's violence within those debates about the social effects of mass media that erupted in the late 1960s and continue today. Read-ers are then invited to compare *Bonnie and Clyde* with several contemporary movies.

In her piece, Liora Moriel offers a "queer" reading of this film. Bringing a fresh theoretical approach to her analysis, she focuses on queer theory as a tool for uncovering hidden meanings. Such a contemporary vision allows readers to see *Bonnie and Clyde* through one current perspective and to understand how the film remains receptive to diverse readings.

Finally, this book includes two widely divergent responses to *Bonnie and Clyde* from 1967. Bosley Crowther's scathing attack in the *New York Times* aptly demonstrates the vitriolic negative response the film engendered from many mainstream reviewers. It also marked Crowther's last conservative volley, as he was perceived to be clearly out of touch with contemporary sensibil-ities and was relieved of his preeminent position at the newspa-

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per. Conversely, Pauline Kael's passionate defense of the film in *The New Yorker* marked her ascendancy as the most powerful movie critic in the United States. Together these reviews allow readers to comprehend the firestorm of controversy ignited by the release of *Bonnie and Clyde*, one pitting old aesthetic values against new ones and establishing a dividing line between a generation of directors, moviegoers, and critics.

NOTES

1. Glenn Man, *Radical Visions: American Film Renaissance, 1967–1976* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 1.