
Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde

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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 careen 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-

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 prominence 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 complicated 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 designers emulated Hollywood instead of Paris; where visual styles incorporated European aesthetics; where film became as intellectually 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 tragedies 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 eventually 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

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. Focusing 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. Readers 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 sensibilities and was relieved of his preeminent position at the newspa-

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.

Making Waves

THE DIRECTING OF BONNIE AND CLYDE

The script for *Bonnie and Clyde* entered and exited my life a few years before it eventually became a film. I recall that it was some time in the early sixties. At that moment it appeared to me to be a good gangster film, but I decided that a gangster film was not where my interest really lay. Frankly, I wasn't at all certain I wanted to make another Hollywood film. I will explain my ambivalence shortly, when I write about *The Chase*. And, if I were to do another film, I felt it should be a story with a broader social theme than a flick about two thirties bank robbers whose pictures I remembered as a couple of self-publicizing hoods holding guns, plastered across the front page of the *Daily News*.

François Truffaut had read the script, and then Jean-Luc Godard. Robert Benton and David Newman know why those matches never resulted in a film. They did say something to the effect that Godard wanted to shoot it in three weeks in the middle of a Texas winter, which somehow didn't please them. They wrote splendidly of the travails of getting a fine script made into a film in an introductory essay to *The Bonnie and Clyde Book*, aptly titled "Lightning in a Bottle."

A couple of years went by, and Warren Beatty approached me

with the script. He now owned an option on it. We had made a film together called *Mickey One*, and our friendship had endured that. Now, Warren wanted us to make *Bonnie and Clyde* and thought Clyde a fine role for him. Despite Warren's passion for the film, I again declined it because I could not see making a gangster film, despite the very good script. But I did want to make another film with Beatty.

Warren grew tired of my indecision and took advantage of the presence in New York of the head of the William Morris Agency, Abe Lastfogel. We were both clients of that agency then. Warren flew in, and the three of us lunched at Dinty Moore's. I didn't stand a chance. Warren can be the most relentlessly persuasive person I know, and when he joined forces with Abe Lastfogel, a true elder statesman of the motion picture business, I had capitulated by the time Warren had finished his complicated order for a salad. Abe explained that Warren and I could have a sizable amount of autonomy and the privilege of "final cut." That meant a great deal to me since I had had two dreadful experiences where my films were edited by someone else, without even consulting with me. That proved persuasive.

So, I was going to make a film called *Bonnie and Clyde*!

Where was I in my life, and why had I allowed a couple of years to elapse since I had made a film?

My recent experience with a big film had left me depleted of enthusiasm for films made in the bosom of Hollywood. It was titled *The Chase* and had a script authored in large part by Lillian Hellman from a play by Horton Foote. It was produced by Sam Spiegel, who was returning to Hollywood with the triumphs of *Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia* wreathing his head like olive crowns. They were excellent films, and Spiegel deserved credit for inducing David Lean to direct them.

Spiegel had left Hollywood years before as something of a figure of mirth under the name S. P. Eagle, which he employed to disguise his Middle European origins. He was notorious, as I was later told, for giving huge New Year's Eve parties that were clearly beyond his means. Now he was returning to Filmland a

heroic figure. In Europe, Sam had made his fortune. The fact is that Sam was an educated and very intelligent man who was enormously wealthy from those two great films; now, he was a successful producer and large stockholder in Columbia Pictures and wanted to make a film in Hollywood with the biggest names he could gather. And he did. Brando, Redford, Jane Fonda, Robert Duvall, Angie Dickinson, and many other highly esteemed actors were in the cast. I had directed a play of Lillian Hellman's on Broadway, *Toys in the Attic*, which won the New York Drama Critics Circle prize. Lillian urged Sam to hire me. After a meeting between us, he agreed and I was delighted with the opportunity.

I had made three films by that time, but my reputation rested on the more secure grounds of five Broadway hits. Among the three films, only *The Miracle Worker* was what might be called a success. The third film, *Mickey One* starring Warren Beatty, was still being edited. Spiegel did not get to see it until we were well under way and deep in preparation for *The Chase*. It was a film I had made for Columbia under an arrangement that followed *The Miracle Worker* in which I could make any film I wanted provided it cost no more than a million dollars and was not "dirty." In exchange for the paltry budget, Columbia (whoever that was) was not permitted to read the script. When Columbia and Sam had finally seen the film, I was about to start photography on *The Chase*. A conference call from the executives and Sam came through to my office on the set that I would characterize as "clenched teeth, pseudoenthusiastic." It was clear they had hated *Mickey One* but feared upsetting me on the eve of the start of their great and certain megahit film.

Lillian and I worked on the screenplay for *The Chase* in New York while Sam was negotiating the deals for the major roles in Hollywood. He would consult with us about the actors and often suggest that we come to Los Angeles where we would all be able to confer face-to-face on casting, script, and staff. Lillian was reluctant to return to Hollywood, which had thrust her aside for her political persuasions. I was perfectly happy to delay de-

parture from my family, my wife and two young children, for as long as I could. But Sam eventually prevailed, and we moved our work to California.

What neither Lillian nor I knew then was that Sam, in addition to having Hellman write the screenplay, had simultaneously employed another screenwriter to adapt the Horton Foote play. Hollywood has its evil ways, and contempt for "the writer" probably heads its dubious list. So you hire another "writer" to cover the first.

While we were having great success in attracting splendid actors to the piece, Lillian was experiencing an increasing dysfunction in finishing the script. Her health was not good, and her cigarette consumption reached Olympic gold medal numbers. I was frankly delighted when she went off to Palm Springs but dismayed when the flow of pages trickled to an occasional one or two and then none. She was distressed with me because of the pressure she felt I was exerting; and I was. Sam was displeased with the progress of the script and brought in Horton Foote to "just touch up the dialect."

In fact, Horton wrote a sizable portion of the end of the film. Of course, Lillian resented Horton's work on the script and my complicity with Horton and Sam. Horton and I had worked together a number of times in live TV. Lillian was furious and scornful of Horton's southernisms. He had written a line of dialogue that contained the phrase "chopping cotton."

"Who ever heard people talk of 'chopping cotton,' " Lillian exclaimed. "They pick it, not chop it." Horton was a southerner and knew whereof he spoke. Lillian, although born in New Orleans, had spent little time in the South, where they do speak of "chopping cotton." In fact, they chop and pick, two different functions.

I was in a place that causes me distress to write of, even now. We were in that terrible Hollywood game of preference and rejection. I was forming new alliances and allowing older ones to be compromised, all in the expedience of rushing to commence the film on the chosen date. Hellman was in physical

distress. Her cough grew worse and resounded from her desert balcony. Her symptoms accumulated, and she became less able even to converse about the film script. She left California with the script unfinished and with considerable anger toward Sam, Hollywood, me, and all concerned.

Foote finished the script, and we began shooting the film. Actually, and quite amazingly, it proved to be a good script. However, during the shooting, occasional, odd pages would come down to the set from Sam's office. Bizarre, small changes in language, which quite distressed me, were introduced. Perhaps they were chosen by Sam from the other script, which I never saw, by the other screenwriter. Perhaps Sam "wrote" them himself. In any event, the movie bears all the signs of a true Hollywood industrial production. No real authorship, only an accumulation of minor inspirations. It was bewildering.

Somehow a pretty good film emerged. The best part of the experience was working with the extraordinary actors who brought invention, enthusiasm, and high spirits to the project. Brando was a delight. He would improvise after having rendered a take that was word perfect. And the improvisations were often brilliant. Sadly, very few remain in the finished film.

Yet, I never felt it was my film. My discomfort grew daily. My stomach sent messages that it was having serious difficulty digesting the daily diet of ignominy I was feeding it. I failed to take the film under my control. Sam was the *éminence grise* whose figure as a Hollywood titan hovered over everything. I should have confronted him and claimed control of the film or relinquished it totally. I did neither. I continued to deceive myself that this was Hollywood and many fine films had been made that way. That was true, but they were made by directors who were much more adroit at managing the system than I was.

Sam slept late in the morning and then would call me on the set to find out if everything was going as scheduled. They were tedious and patronizing phone conversations. One day, as I hung up, I realized Brando had been watching me. With his unerring eye for psychological gestures, he approached me. By

now we had become good friends and enjoyed a lot of laughter. As he came closer, I saw that his shoulders were raised and his hands out in helpless surrender. He fixed me with his devilish grin. "It's me," I said.

It was. I was getting beat up on that film and allowing it to happen. The director of photography, an old Hollywood hand named Joseph LaShelle, was determined that he was going to light the picture so as to bring wonder and amazement to the eye. Night after night we sat, this magnificent cast and I, while he lit and lit and filled the dark with brilliance and then stopped the lens down to where he felt he had sculptured the night. The cast and I were by that time weary and our inspiration sorely diminished. "It's all yours," he would say. By then it was often one o'clock in the morning.

The shooting ended, amazingly enough, on schedule. Now, we were going to edit it into a motion picture. With the exception of my first movie, also made in Hollywood, I had controlled the editing of my next two, *The Miracle Worker* and *Mickey One*. Editing is a phase of filmmaking I deeply enjoy. So many rhythmic choices can be invented that energize a film and give surprise, alternation of expectation, and the pleasure of the deep richness of actors' performances. The nuances and often "inappropriate behavior" that fine actors bring to their art are discovered, uncovered, and made vivid by their placement in the film's emerging life. It's a thrilling alchemy; hard work, but often editing discovers gold. I looked forward to making *The Chase* into a film.

Sam and I had discussed where I would edit. We had agreed upon New York, because I was contracted to direct a play on Broadway after the completion of shooting. Shortly after I returned to New York I had a call from Sam. "Where do you want to edit the film, Hollywood or London?" he asked, as if we had never decided on New York. Of course, he wanted control of the editing, and it was done in London against my protests. It is moderately well edited, although its pace is stolid and far too

“significant.” The greatest loss the film suffered in editing was that some of Brando’s extraordinary improvisatory work never survived Sam’s orthodoxy and his implied authorship. All the actors in that remarkable cast had done fine work. The pity is that not enough of it is left there to be seen in the edited film.

The film opened to a response that was certainly less favorable than we might have wished for. I was sick of movie shenanigans and mostly sick of myself for abdicating responsibility and not having the sense to reach a contract on each point with Spiegel.

Brando’s imitation of me was true to the end.

The play I directed, *Wait Until Dark* by Frederick Knott, was a sizable hit on Broadway, and for the second time in my life I said to myself, “To hell with Hollywood; I can live happily doing plays.” I withdrew from films and for the next couple of years declined to consider some wonderful scripts that were offered me. When they were made into movies, they proved to have been fine indeed. I envied the directors who had made them.

Teaching is not a particular passion of mine, but it was something I did occasionally enjoy. The dean of the School of Art and Architecture at Yale, whom I had met at a discussion I took part in at Yale, persuaded me to teach a postgraduate course to six people, each of whom had already made a film. I met the students, and they were bright and seemed pleased at the prospect of working with me. We started, and one day a week I would drive to New Haven, teach, and drive back to New York. It was arduous but damned nourishing, and it did wonders for my psyche and stomach, which clearly were closely in touch with each other. Slowly I was developing an appetite for the fray of wrenching a movie out of the chaos of my gut. Just after I finished the year’s teaching, Warren Beatty called with Bonnie and Clyde.

I recount all of this to explain my ambivalence toward committing to the film. I was still gun-shy, and it took a friend like Warren to persist and refuse to accept my skittishness. Warren is

one of very few people on whom, in hard times, one can really count. Ten years later, when help was needed by my daughter who was ill and stranded on an island off the coast of North Africa, Warren went immediately to work to get a Columbia Pictures corporate plane to pick her up. Fortunately, she was able to get on a commercial flight out and return to the States to be treated for her bout with hepatitis. But Warren would have succeeded in a few hours, and he would have helped us inestimably. Lillian Hellman, who shared my warm opinion of Warren, dubbed him “the best foul-weather friend” one could have. True.

Now I was about to start a new film with that friend. But what film? At our house in the country, where I usually retreat to work, I knew after several readings there was something about it bothering me. Robert Benton and David Newman, fine writers, had taken from the little biographical material available, the presumption that there was a sexual triangulation with Bonnie, Clyde, and the character C. W. Moss (eventually played by Michael J. Pollard). Incidentally, C. W. Moss is an amalgamation of several characters who joined and left the Barrow gang. That sexual *ménage à trois* struck me as both too sophisticated and, even if true, divergent from the direction I felt the film should go. My recall from early memories was that the crop of bank robbers and eventual “Public Enemies,” so designated by J. Edgar Hoover’s expanding FBI, were in fact country folk; they were farmers or children of farmers, bumpkins most of them, frequently all but illiterate. They were willing to settle for the small sums they snatched from country banks, but they certainly did not seem to me figures that belonged in complicated sexual arrangements.

Recently published books about the FBI confirm that Hoover, superb Washingtonian that he was, spent large sums and made multiple appearances before congressional committees, elevating these country bank robbers into a national menace. “Public Enemy” numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. were all out in the middle of the country. By Mr. Hoover’s lights, nothing was going on in the large cities that merited placing urban dwellers on his “Public

Enemy” list. Luciano, Lansky, Madden just didn’t rate “Public Enemy” status by Mr. Hoover’s estimate. And “G-men” against “Public Enemies” provided the perfect scenario for the enlargement of his fledgling criminal agency into the FBI, a federal police force, where none had existed previously. With great information-gathering forces at his capricious disposal, J. Edgar maintained, for the rest of his days, that there was no mob, no Cosa Nostra, no crime families, only “Communists” and his chosen “Public Enemies.”

Laws were changed, and the FBI was empowered to extend its might beyond state limits in their relentless pursuit of these “merciless criminals.” J. Edgar Hoover utilized his powers to assemble a vast body of information about everyone whose acquiescence he would need to increase his puissance. The list covered congressmen, future presidents, and justices, as well as numerous celebrities. He blackmailed the nation for at least three decades. The Cold War gave him an even greater opportunity to practice his brand of “Americanism.” He skipped around the maypole of “Americanism” with Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, and Richard Nixon, chanting ditties of patriotism for the nation they held in thrall.

The Great Depression formed itself as the banks and financial institutions pursued a positively Dickensian value system. They persisted in the punitive posture of moneylenders, Scroogian to the core. “If you can’t pay back the money and interest, then we will foreclose and take possession of the equity against which we lent you the money” – very simple economic behavior. Punishment must be meted out to the delinquent. Breadlines formed, bonus marches took place, the capitalist premises of the nation were in disarray. The problem was that after the farms had been taken by the banks and left fallow, the banks found themselves equally fallow. They failed. A huge number of unworked farms can hardly be considered assets. The displaced farm families were cast off to seek a livelihood anyway they might. Resentment against the Establishment and its economic bastions burst out. It was only a small step for the dislodged farmers and their

children to pick up some of the plentiful weapons and turn them against the repositories where they believed the money was.

It was from this admittedly simplistic perspective that I began to see the film. Naive and living on poor emotional rations was the way I described the characters. Benton and Newman agreed that the sexual sophistication in the original script did not contribute to the film we now wanted to make. We talked and moved in the direction of a simpler tale, one of narcissism, of bravura, and, at least from Clyde's point of view, of sexual timidity. Our talks were wonderfully funny and pointed. They gave me even greater confidence and enthusiasm for the film. As a kid in the Great Depression, I had developed a certain sympathy for the people I saw resisting the circumstances that prevailed in the country. Our divorced family was poor, quite poor. There was to my youthful perception a sense that what we observed of our American life was unfair. "Ah, America," my mother, who had come here as a teenage girl, would lament in disappointment at the hard times we were living through. Yet there was plentiful evidence that not everybody suffered in the Depression. The rich practiced their mores and lived by values that bewildered us. Debutantes, speakeasies, mobsters, and high society filled the pages of the tabloids.

We had the tone of the film. It was to start as a jaunty little spree in crime, then suddenly turn serious, and finally arrive at a point that was irreversible. How would the characters perceive their lives? Bonnie had her "poem." It was epitaphic and romantic, and more than slightly self-aggrandizing. I had Bonnie's version of their death, but not a true closure to the film. How to end it?

There was an accurate historical representation in the script of the death of Bonnie and Clyde. Yet the ending troubled me. Written in the script, as it apparently happened, the police officers fired relentlessly into Bonnie and Clyde. There were eighty-seven bullet hits on their bodies. I wanted something different to close this film. The words I employed to myself and later to