Bonnie and Clyde

Director Arthur Penn sets *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) in motion by flicking through—as if he were using a slide projector—a series of grainy, sepia-toned photographs that are intercut with the picture’s opening credits, which themselves turn from white to blood red as we read them on the screen. The rapidly displayed snapshots purport to be family photos of the legendary outlaws, although it is difficult to tell, especially because Penn offers us two final images in the series, one each of Bonnie and Clyde, with informational captions, that are really pictures of Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty—the actors playing the film roles—dressed up as Bonnie and Clyde. Penn, it seems, is teasing us a bit with this intriguing opening, playing with the myth of the real Bonnie and Clyde in the process of creating his own fictional account.

That Penn would choose to introduce *Bonnie and Clyde* by way of this cinematic sleight-of-hand makes perfect sense if one considers that the picture’s screenwriters, Robert Benton and David Newman, had originally taken their script to France and shopped it to the *avant-garde* filmmakers François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. Although both Truffaut and Godard were intrigued, each finally passed on the project due to complications related to their respective shooting schedules. Instead, Penn, a little known American director with only three films to his credit, was tapped to make the picture. Ironically, however, Penn turned out to be an inspired choice for the project, even though his only cinematic success to that point had come with the very traditional 1962 offering, *The Miracle Worker*, which was nothing at all like the films being made in France by directors such as Truffaut and Godard. Oddly enough, though, his other two films—the box office failures *The Left Handed Gun* (1958) and *Mickey One* (1965)—had resonances with the iconoclastic filmmaking of what was being called French New-Wave cinema. *The Left Handed Gun*, for instance—a biopic about Billy the Kid—although technically traditional and released right at the beginning of the French New-Wave era, was still a revisionist Western that sought to deconstruct the myth of the heroic—or in this case, the anti-heroic—westerner; while *Mickey One*, which most viewers—the few that saw it—admittedly found incomprehensible, was characterized by a unique use of camera, lighting, and *mise-en-scène*, albeit, for Penn, still in embryonic form in 1965. Almost everything that ultimately made *Bonnie and Clyde* an example of brilliant filmmaking, then—what made it so much like the best of French New-Wave filmmaking—was there in inchoate form in *The Left Handed Gun* and *Mickey One*, waiting, as it were, to be drawn together by Penn into a cinematic whole.

One notices from the very beginning of the narrative portion of *Bonnie and Clyde* the influence of the work of Truffaut and Godard—in particular Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) and *Jules and Jim* (1962) and Godard’s *Breathless* (1960). Penn, for instance—working with, it must be noted, his gifted editor on this film, Dede Allen—flaunts convention by providing his viewers with a non-traditional establishing shot. Instead of the usual framing shot filmed from a distance, Penn opens the narrative portion of *Bonnie and Clyde* with an extreme close-up of Bonnie—actually of just her lips. When the camera pulls back, we realize that she is in a small, spare, bedroom. Naked, save for her sheer panties, she moves about the room like a sexually charged, caged animal. Flopping on the bed, she pounds at its metal frame, the bars of which look very much like those of a prison cell. Penn makes the situation clear: Bonnie is dying—literally in the end—to be free from her oppressive surroundings.
Wandering over to her second-floor window, she gazes out at the bucolic scene unfolding below. Spying a strange man lurking around a car parked in front of the building, she inquires, in a scolding tone, what he is doing around her mamma’s car. Startled, the man—it turns out to be Clyde—looks up, and their eyes lock. As film historian Robert Kolker points out, once Penn has connected the characters in these opening scenes by way of their flirtatious gaze—for her part, Bonnie remains provocatively bare during the exchange—they are never again apart throughout the rest of the picture (Kolker, 2002). Clyde is rendered childishly silent as he stares up at Bonnie, unsure of how to explain his actions. Bonnie orders. Hastily throwing a thin dress over herself, she storms down the stairs leading outside the building. Interestingly, Penn shoots Bonnie’s mad dash down the stairs from an extreme low angle, also canting the camera so that the frame is tilted, giving the shot a strangely expressionist feel—almost as if Bonnie is hurrying into some chaotic, oddly surreal world.

And so she is. Still buttoning her dress, she moves out onto the porch. “You want to go into town with me? How’d that be?” says Clyde. “I’m going to work anyway,” Bonnie tells him, coquettishly. And so the scene is set for what is to come: two fragile people, with few prospects, bound together by way of a profound sense of both desire and despair. As they stroll together along an eerily empty small-town street—in West Dallas, it turns out—Bonnie is surprised, and a bit chagrined, when Clyde accurately identifies her as a waitress. She is even more surprised—and increasingly excited—when he tells her that he has been in state prison for armed robbery, and eventually pulls out his revolver to make his point. Bonnie strokes the hard barrel of the gun, uttering only a throaty, “Yeah . . .” as she looks down at the weapon. “But you wouldn’t have the gumption to use it,” she says, with a note of challenge in her voice—and suddenly we are unsure exactly to what Bonnie is referring—the gun or what it represents.

Phallic images abound in this sequence: the gun, of course, but also soda bottles, and even the matchstick that Clyde flicks around in his mouth. As will become very clear, this phallic doubling will function as one of the film’s central themes: repressed desire displaced onto something or someone else, revealing itself in painful and often disturbingly violent ways. Penn provides immediate support for this suggestion, as Clyde takes up Bonnie’s challenge, strolling into a grocery store after instructing Bonnie to keep her eyes open. Backing out of the store moments later, he turns and flashes a wad of money at Bonnie. As he runs across the street, he glances back and, seeing that the shopkeeper has followed him out of the store, fires a shot—above the man’s head. Pushing Bonnie into a car—not theirs obviously—he pops the bonnet, deftly starts the engine and they roar off. A master at allowing farce to unfold into tragedy, Penn brings us into the car with the newly minted outlaws, as Bonnie literally throws herself on Clyde, all her pent-up passions released by the excitement of armed robbery. Penn cross-cuts from inside the car—where Bonnie continues to accost Clyde, who struggles to free himself from her—to outside the car, providing us with exterior shots of the vehicle careening from side to side, off the road and on again, forced to swerve crazily in order to miss a slowly moving horse-drawn wagon. Finally pulling off into a grove of trees, Clyde laughingly implores Bonnie to “slow down,” until, unable to control her desire, he roughly pushes her away, the scene suddenly turning dark and embarrassingly tense. Pushing his way out of the car, Clyde circles away from and then back to the vehicle, as Bonnie, with shaking hands, anxiously lights a cigarette. “Alright now,” says Clyde, thrusting his head back in the car, “I may’s well tell you right off, I
ain’t much of a lover boy.” “You’re advertising is just dandy,” an out-of-breath Bonnie tells Clyde, as she straightens her clothes and aggressively combs out her tousled hair. Trying to calm her, Clyde reaches into the car toward the disappointed Bonnie, who now pushes out the other side of the vehicle. Clyde yells after her: “If all’s you want is a stud service, than you get on back to West Dallas and you stay there the rest of your life.” Lover boys, Clyde makes clear, can be found on every corner in any town; but they won’t care about Bonnie, not the way that Clyde will. They only want to “get into your pants,” warns Clyde, and thus, are not capable of seeing in her what he sees. Moved to follow him to a diner, Bonnie listens as Clyde accurately describes her desperate life. “. . . And you sit in your room,” he says, leaning toward her seductively, “and you wonder when and how am I ever gonna get away from this . . . and now you know.” Leaving the diner, Bonnie dutifully walks to the car in which they arrived; but Clyde heads for a different vehicle. Scurrying across the parking lot, she jumps in beside Clyde and they drive off together; and so their life of crime together begins.

That Penn weaves together so many of the film’s narrative threads in and around cars is no coincidence. Bonnie and Clyde first encounter each other over her mother’s car; and their first explosive moment of shared—and frustrated—desire is played out in and near a car. Cars, after all, represent freedom, a way to move from place to place quickly and easily; and so it is for Bonnie and Clyde. Cars whisk them away from West Dallas, ferry them across the country, and allow them to escape their pursuers. But this is all too simple, Penn seems to be saying, for as soon as Bonnie climbs in beside Clyde in that first stolen car, their fate is sealed—they will die, bloody and alone, although together, in and around yet another stolen car.

The second stolen car, we assume, brings them to a broken down farmhouse, as Penn cuts from the theft at the diner to a room in which Bonnie awakens—on the only furniture available, a set of old car seats—to find Clyde gone. Frightened, she calls out for him; from outside, he walks toward the building. Talking to her through a broken window—a first instance of their being together but just out of reach—he explains that he slept out by the car. Looking around, she points out to him that “these accommodations ain’t particularly deluxe”—no grand hotel, and not even her man to keep her warm. Clyde explains this away by stating simply that “if they’re after us,” he “wants the first shot.” Instructing her to come outside, Clyde demonstrates his prowess with a gun by shooting bottles off a fence while standing on a porch some 20 feet away—impressively, he does not miss. The process of phallic doubling is once again at work in this scene—while one weapon does not work at all, the other, we are reminded, works with deadly precision.

Significantly, Penn cuts from the couple’s point of view on the porch as Clyde begins firing to a reverse shot that allows us to look back over the fence and the exploding bottles at the couple in middle distance. Although the viewer may not notice it at first, Penn’s intentions are more than just esthetic here, as from the second perspective we are provided with a quick glimpse of a sign that informs us that the property is owned by “Midlothian Citizens Bank,” and that “Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.” Penn makes effective use of the sequence, linking together a number of important narrative elements. Excited by watching Clyde shoot, Bonnie willingly takes another gun that Clyde hands her, and with her second shot is able to start a tire swing spinning. Joyous, she listens as Clyde explains that he will get her a Smith and Wesson—a gun that will fit more comfortably in her hand. So enthralled are they by what they are doing, that they do not notice a
figure approaching from behind. When he calls out to them, Clyde spins around, gun at the ready; but it is just a farmer—the man who used to own the place until the bank took it away from him, making him merely a “trespasser.” Penn allows the camera quietly to take in the scene, cutting and panning to reveal the “dustbowl” family of the farmer, packed and waiting in the car, as well as his black hired hand, who comes strolling into the scene from out of the distance. After shooting a number of holes through another bank sign—this one bigger than the first—Clyde hands the gun over to the two men, who not only shoot at the sign, but turn the weapon on the windows of the farmhouse with a certain restrained enthusiasm. As the farmer walks away, Clyde calls out after him, “We rob banks.” The farmer turns back, his face revealing little; apparently he realizes, even if Bonnie and Clyde do not, that the outlaws have nothing to offer—they are not heroes, and their actions are not heroic. They are no more than common criminals whose notorious behavior will not change anything, except for the lives of the family members of the innocent people that Bonnie and Clyde gun down.

The real Bonnie and Clyde—Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow—were active between 1931—Bonnie was 21 when they met, Clyde 22—and 1934, when they were killed by police in a roadside ambush in Louisiana. Initiating their crime spree at the end of Herbert Hoover’s single term in office, they continued it after Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated in the spring of 1933. By the time Roosevelt took office, the Great Depression had devastated the nation; banks were failing at an alarming rate, unemployment stood at 25 percent, and the economy was in crisis, with many Americans losing everything they had. Within days after being sworn in, Roosevelt took steps to save the banks and to put people back to work. The economy continued to struggle, however, and outlaws such as Bonnie and Clyde, who robbed the banks that most Americans believed bore a substantial responsibility for the economic crash, gained a certain reputation as Robin Hood-like, savior figures.

Penn does not let Bonnie and Clyde descend into some sort of populist morality tale, however, decrying the horrors of capitalism and celebrating the criminal activities of a likable pair of outlaws. Preventing this from happening, one imagines, would have been no easy task for Penn, especially given that his Bonnie and Clyde were played by the extraordinarily attractive Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty. Penn succeeds, however, by keeping us painfully close to the couple as they accumulate their partners in crime—C. W. Moss (Michael J. Pollard) and Clyde’s brother and sister-in-law, Buck Barrow (Gene Hackman) and Blanche Barrow (Estelle Parsons)—and live out their stultifying, banal, increasingly desperate lives.

In the film, the crime spree of Bonnie and Clyde begins badly. Clyde sits nervously in the passenger seat of a car, trying to reassure a much calmer Bonnie, who is driving them to their first bank job, that everything will be alright. Penn again plays the scene as farce, with Clyde bursting into an empty bank—it had failed three weeks before—and demanding money that is no longer there. Embarrassed, he forces the sole bank employee outside so that he might explain the situation to Bonnie. As Bonnie laughs uproariously, Clyde fires bullets through the bank window, as if somehow this will resolve his criminal impotence. True to form, Penn allows farce to unfold into tragedy in the next scene. Broke, Clyde is forced to steal food from a small grocery store. Kidding with the store owner about his lack of peach pies, Clyde is suddenly attacked from behind by a beast of a man wielding a meat cleaver. A deadly struggle ensues, as the two crash their way across the store, Clyde desperately trying to free himself from the man’s
grasp. Finally able to flee after brutally smashing his assailant in the head with the butt of his gun, Clyde staggering to the car, entering as Bonnie roars away. Penn again takes us into the car, allowing us to witness Clyde’s childish incomprehension, as he rants against the man who he has left beaten and bloody back at the store: “He tried to kill me!” yells Clyde. “Why’d he tried to kill me? I didn’t want to hurt him. . . . I ain’t against him . . . I ain’t against him.”

Of course, what Clyde doesn’t understand, what he will never understand, is that he is very much against these honest, hard working people—a point that will be expressed with deadly consequences during their next bank job. Having enlisted the aid of C. W. Moss as a get-away driver, Bonnie and Clyde successfully rob a bank, only to exit the building and to find that C. W. has parked the car. Finally able to extricate the car from its parking space, C. W. must drive past the bank to make good their getaway. Caught up in the moment, the bank manager jumps onto the vehicle’s running board, hanging precariously to the side of the car with his face pressed up against the window. Penn gives us the bank manager’s point of view, as we see Clyde raise his gun; quickly cutting to a view from inside the car, we hear the gun go off and see the window shatter as a bullet crashes through it into the instantly bloodied face of the bank manager, who, dead, tumbles into the street.

The scene is important for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it represented one of the most shockingly violent moments in cinematic history to that point in time. Unlike so much of today’s gratuitous, anesthetizing violence, however, Penn does not simply allow the moment to pass casually by, as he follows the bank scene with one which finds Bonnie, Clyde, and C. W. sitting in a darkened theatre distraught over what has happened—at least Clyde and C. W. are distraught; Bonnie seems unfazed by the awful moment, happily watching a Busby Berkeley choreographed song-and-dance number—“We’re in the Money” from *Gold Diggers of 1933*, although it is 1931 at this point in the film’s chronology—at one point shushing the boys so she will not be disturbed. For his part, Clyde sits behind C. W. paternalistically berating him, and informing the overwhelmed young man that they are all now wanted not only for bank robbery, but for murder, as well.

Penn follows the scene in the theater with what is arguably the most important scene in the film. In yet another dark, spare room, Bonnie sings her version of “We’re in the Money” while she prances before the mirror. Clyde nervously fiddles with his revolver. Confronting Bonnie, he tells her that things have now changed, and that if she wants to leave and go back home, now is the time. She refuses to go. They begin to touch each other, hesitantly at first, but then with more passion. Penn does not clutter the scene with dialogue; indeed, the two do not utter a word as they gently stroke each other, softly touching their lips and bodies together. Their eagerness for each other growing, they wrap their bodies together in a raw embrace—until it becomes apparent that Clyde once again cannot perform. Bonnie sits up abruptly, gripping the metal bed frame—reminding us of that opening scene in her own bedroom. Falling back across the bed, her face literally comes to rest on Clyde’s hard unyielding gun. Disgusted with himself, Clyde rolls off the bed; turning his back on Bonnie, he says quietly, “He tried to kill me!” yells Clyde. “Why’d he tried to kill me? I didn’t want to hurt him. . . . I ain’t against him . . . I ain’t against him.”

Bonnie has nothing to say. Turning to him, she smiles sadly, shakes her head and shrugs.
Although their relationship will, finally, be consummated, it is too little too late—indeed, Penn juxtaposes the scene of their single successful act of lovemaking with a scene in which they are betrayed by C. W.’s daddy, who sells out Bonnie and Clyde to the “laws” in order to save his son. From that powerfully disturbing moment in the rundown hotel bedroom, then, where their desires are once again frustrated, their alienation from each other is finally made complete—all hope is lost and they begin spiraling downward toward their inevitable bloody deaths.

The specter of that death appears in the figure of Frank Hamer, a former Texas Ranger who carries on an all-consuming crusade to track down Bonnie and Clyde. Although the police are depicted as some sort of Keystone Kop buffoons throughout the first half of the film, all of this changes dramatically once the character of Frank Hamer is introduced. The chain-smoking, six-foot-four-inch Hammer was actually a real-life Texas Ranger, who left his position after suffering through a series of political disputes with his superiors, and who then began to hire himself out as a bounty hunter. He gained a reputation as being fearless in the face of danger, purportedly gunning down some 80 criminals during his career as a lawman; he was the perfect choice, then, to hunt down America’s most notorious outlaws.

Days after fighting their way out of an ambush at a motor-hotel—during which they kill three police officers—the “Barrow Gang,” as they are now being called, drive along while Buck reads an account of the shootout. When they pull off the road beside a lake for a bathroom break, another car glides silently to a halt just out of sight of the gang. The man who emerges from the car turns out to be Hamer, and he advances on their car. Before he can capture the gang, however, Clyde shoots the gun from his hand and he is suddenly their captive, his hands secured with his own handcuffs. Unsure what to do with the man—should they kill him?—Bonnie suggests they take his picture—surrounded by the members of the Barrow Gang—and send it to the newspapers, embarrassing the big, strong Texas Ranger. As they set up the shot, Clyde chides Hamer, pointing out that the common people, in an expression of populist rage that Clyde does not really seem to understand, are actually on their side. As it turns out, they would have been better off killing Hamer, as, after this humiliating incident, he pursues them with unrelenting determination.

The frivolity with Hamer ends abruptly after the gang kidnaps a staid couple in their own car, taking them for a joyride. Velma (Evans Evans) and Eugene (Gene Wilder) become increasingly comfortable with the gang members, even sharing a fast-food meal with them. They laugh at the suggestion that they might join the gang—what would the folks back home think of that? “Hey, what do you do anyhow?” asks Bonnie. “I’m an undertaker,” says Eugene innocently. Once again Penn turns a farcical scene tragically dark. He gives us a close-up of Bonnie’s face: “Get them out of here,” she says, now with fear in her voice. Of course, it is much too late to alter their fate by turning this undertaker out of the car—another is waiting, just down the road.

Shaken by her experience of unwittingly sharing an intimate moment with an undertaker, Bonnie begs Clyde to take her to see her mamma. Clyde agrees, but at their family picnic, when he attempts to reassure Mrs. Parker that he will protect her daughter, and that they might even settle down near her, Bonnie’s mamma pointedly tells him that he “best keep on running.” Taking Mrs. Parker’s advice, they find their way to yet another motor-hotel. The walls seem to Bonnie to be closing in around her, the other members of the gang, save Clyde, a cloying omnipresent
force. “You know,” she says to Clyde, “when we first started out, I thought we was really going somewhere . . . and this is it.” Ambushed twice more, Buck is killed and Blanche taken prisoner. Both Bonnie and Clyde are wounded, but along with C. W. they escape. Stealing another car, they make their way to a makeshift campground filled with “Okies,” farming families displaced by the Depression. Although Clyde has maintained his populist mythology about the status of the gang in the eyes of the common people, their short visit at the camp proves otherwise. Too weak and hurt to get out of the car—C. W. asks if they might get some drinking water—the outlaws are surrounded by their campground hosts. Staring into the car—one man actually reaches in and paws at Clyde, as if to see if he is real, it appears—the people treat them not as heroes, but as zoo-like curiosities.

Finally tracked by Hamer to the home of C. W.’s daddy, Malcolm Moss (Dub Taylor-Ivan Moss in the credits), Bonnie and Clyde are ambushed on the very back roads they travelled with such carefree abandon. Penn ends things where they began, with Bonnie and Clyde bound together by way of their gaze—just before the guns erupt and their bodies are riddled with bullets, their bodies jumping and jerking uncontrollably, Penn gives us a rapid series of reverse-cuts, close-ups of the eyes of each, locked on those of the other. As the slow-motion death-scene sequence comes to a graceful, dream-like end, men, led by Hamer, walk from their hiding places behind a clump of trees. Penn gives us one last shot—from inside the car, Hamer and the others framed by the windows and the open door of the vehicle. The men say nothing as they stand over the lifeless bodies of Bonnie and Clyde—grim, spent, they are silent witnesses to the very worst that humans have to offer.

—Philip C. DiMare

See also:
Allen, Dede
Beatty, Warren
Editing
Gangster Film, The
Penn, Arthur

References and further reading:

