Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*

Friedman, Lester D. (ed.)

Few films in the history of American cinema caused more intense critical discussion and greater emotional debate than Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*. This volume includes freshly-commissioned essays by leading scholars of Arthur Penn's work, as well as contributions from Penn himself and scriptwriter David Newman. They analyze the cultural history, technical brilliance, visual strategies, and violent imagery that marked *Bonnie and Clyde* as a significant turning point in American film.

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Arthur Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde

Edited by Lester D. Friedman

Few films in the history of American cinema caused more intense critical discussion and greater emotional debate than Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*. This provocative portrayal 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.” Focusing on a story set in the 1930s, yet clearly fashioned to resonate with the countercultural tenor of the 1960s, the film remains compelling for today’s viewers by virtue of its central love story and inevitable tragedy, its subversive statement as well as its sympathetic connection to the communal impulse. This volume includes freshly commissioned essays by leading scholars of Arthur Penn’s work, as well as contributions from Penn himself and scriptwriter David Newman. They analyze the cultural history, technical brilliance, visual strategies, and violent imagery that marked *Bonnie and Clyde* as a significant turning point in American film.
Arthur Penn's
_Bonnie and Clyde_

Edited by
LESTER D. FRIEDMAN
Syracuse University
For Rae-Ellen
Who Brought Back the Light
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From “ Fucking Cops!” to “Fucking Media!”

BONNIE AND CLYDE FOR A SIXTIES AMERICA

"MAINSTREAMING DEVIANCY"

In the waning days of Senator Bob Dole’s 1996 presidential campaign, the Republican candidate accused the media of defacing “family values.” The concept was not exactly new to political discourse. In 1992, less than a week after the Los Angeles violence promoted by the acquittal of police officers videotaped beating Rodney King, Vice President Dan Quayle fretted over Murphy Brown, a fictional character on prime-time television who was having a fictional baby out of wedlock. Never mentioning Candace Bergen, the star of the show, Quayle referred instead to her fictional persona as he spoke before the San Francisco Commonwealth Club. The riots, Quayle bemoaned, resulted from a crisis in family values brought about by the media. Now, three years later and the Los Angeles rebellion a distant memory, Senator Dole took up the standard of family values with renewed vigor. The dangers of sex and violence in the media, particularly for children, loomed larger than ever. “One of the greatest threats to American family values,” Dole argued, “is the way our popular culture ridicules them. Our music, movies, television and advertising regularly push the limits of decency, bombarding our children with destructive messages of casual violence and even more casual sex.”

Considering the impact Bonnie and Clyde (1967) had upon its audience in the late sixties, Dole’s stump epistle for the relatively compliant nineties appears a bit overwrought. The Republican candidate accused rap groups like 2 Live Crew and films like Oliver Stone’s Natural Born Killers (1994) of what he called “the mainstreaming of deviancy.” Although not every rap song or movie neatly conforms to the domestic correctness of the conservative agenda, there was certainly more of the mainstream in the alleged deviancy cited by Dole than there was deviancy in the mainstream. The lyrics of 2 Live Crew often hail the group’s male listeners with hyper-heterosexual fantasies of objectified women. And had Dole actually watched Stone’s movie – a nineties update of the Bonnie and Clyde myth – he might have readily concurred with its rendering of the media as greedy, unethical purveyors of sensationalism.

One should still find cause for concern, both with Dole’s speech and with a broader, nonpartisan tendency to promote so-called family values within the media. This concern, arguably, should rest less with any so-called deviancy and more with the lack of deviancy in – or even of opposition to – what mainstream contemporary discourse labels as “deviant.” Natural Born Killers uses some oppositional strategies, but it is no Bonnie and Clyde for its time. Given their respective contexts, the two films emerge as very different, in spite of their shared narrative lineage. Oliver Stone’s film received a somewhat cool critical and popular reception – although it certainly has its adherents. Arthur Penn’s film, on the other hand, stood established film criticism on its head and passionately divided its audience. Todd Gitlin recalls how, at the end of Bonnie and Clyde’s Hollywood premiere, an audience member arose from his seat and yelled “Fucking cops!” This should have been the film that Dole lambasted, but the Republican candidate had come to power twenty years too late. To shore up his political support, he simply joined a chorus of voices across a diverse political spectrum, all in es-
ence yelling “Fucking media!” Dole’s unique contribution was to dub one of the voices in this chorale— the media breast-beating Natural Born Killers— as deviant.

While struggle and resistance have not disappeared from mainstream popular culture, their place and purpose have changed since the sixties. Few movies since Bonnie and Clyde have had such a profound impact on the culture or have generated as intense and passionate a debate. With its violent references to sixties culture, its relative sexual frankness for the time, and its calculated links between repressive forces of the Depression and repressive forces of the sixties, Bonnie and Clyde evidenced a “mainstreaming of deviancy” better than Bob Dole could ever have imagined. The violence in Natural Born Killers, far more graphic than that in Penn’s film, also repelled many viewers. By 1996, however, explicit and graphic depictions of violence were hardly unique to Stone’s film. This violence served a very different purpose from that in Bonnie and Clyde. The brutality and anti-Arab racism of another summer blockbuster—the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle True Lies (1996)— somehow escaped Bob Dole’s notice. And Dole praised Independence Day (1996) as a promoter of family values, even though (or perhaps because) the violence in that movie claims a flamboyantly gay character, a maternally deficient First Lady, and a mentally unbalanced Vietnam veteran who may or may not have been the victim of male rape. In the nineties, the narrow interests of family values could still promote violence, especially when directed against the “deviant.”

If the style of both Natural Born Killers and Bonnie and Clyde engendered controversy in their respective eras, only Bonnie and Clyde could generate controversy by what it said as well as by
how it said it. In contemporary reviews, critics contended that both films used excessive violence. Controversy over the graphic nature of these films turned them into what John Fiske has called "media events." As Fiske notes, media events serve as crisis points within culture — connecting, conducting, charging, and redirecting various statements and ideas that constitute discourse. Thus, a discourse on violence and the media runs through Natural Born Killers and Bonnie and Clyde, charging them with ideological significance. This body of statements and deeply held beliefs connected the two films to ongoing debates over the nature and purpose of violence in the media and made them important.

"THE NEW SENTIMENTALITY" FOR A SIXTIES AMERICA

Bonnie and Clyde appeared in a year, 1967, marked by unprecedented civil ferment, involving both race relations and opposition to the Vietnam War. In 127 U.S. cities during that year, seventy-seven protesters died and four thousand were wounded in clashes between police and citizens. By July, the crisis had peaked in Newark and Detroit. After police arrested and beat a black man following a traffic violation on July 12, 1967, widespread protests shook Newark. Police and National Guardsmen began shooting at anyone who looked black. After five days, all except two of the twenty-six persons killed were black. Thousands were either injured or arrested. Six days later, a police raid on a predominate black club in Detroit resulted in a week of rioting so severe that the city had to summon federal troops. This time, all but seven of the forty-three dead were black. Thousands were either arrested, injured, or left homeless.

The year 1967 also marked a turning point in civic support for the Vietnam War. By February, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had publicly denounced the war. A month later, he referred to the United States as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world," encouraged draft evasion, and called for stronger ties between the civil rights movement and antiwar protests. Many individuals participated in a series of massive antiwar protests throughout the year. As hundreds of thousands took to the streets across the country — cities such as Washington, D.C., New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and San Francisco — police responded with mass arrests. Well-known celebrities like the folk singer Joan Baez, poet Allen Ginsberg, and pediatrician Benjamin Spock were also arrested during these protests. On October 21 alone, police arrested 647 protesters outside the Pentagon. By November, Lewis B. Hershey, the director of the Selective Service, announced a new retaliatory measure: any male college student arrested in an antiwar demonstration would automatically lose his draft deferment. Meanwhile, a more insidious response to widespread public dissent took shape. The Central Intelligence Agency launched Operation Chaos, in which the agency began to spy upon everyday U.S. citizens. Its efforts culminated in thirteen thousand files containing three hundred thousand names. Anyone remotely associated with protesting the Vietnam War might have his or her letter or telegram opened by the federal government.

Despite, or arguably as a result of, such heavy-handed actions, a wave of counterculture was about to crest in the mass media ocean. One of the first blockbuster rock concerts was held, the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, featuring the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin. By November, the debut issue of the San Francisco-based magazine Rolling Stone had given a slick new face to the cultural margins. Even broadcasting afforded new possibilities to voices outside the mainstream. Prompted by complaints about the limits of commercial media, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act in November. By creating the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the act offered an alternative to the sponsor-supported dogma of supply-side mass media.

However, it was the rise of American commercial television in the sixties that ultimately marked significant shifts in public
opinion toward what had once been the counterculture. Footage of carnage in Vietnam began to appear on the nightly news, eroding public support for what had once been a popular war. The three major networks also dabbed with programming irrelevant shows like Laugh-In and The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, hoping to attract younger audiences. Coverage of the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago revealed Mayor Richard Daley’s police force beating demonstrators outside the convention hall; police inside also roughed up CBS reporter Dan Rather while he was on the air, further undermining public confidence in government authority.

The motion picture industry was undergoing its own profound transformation, coinciding with the broader countercultural shifts taking place in society. In his Radical Visions, Glenn Man outlines three important changes: the breakup of the studio system, the scrapping of the industry’s self-regulating Production Code, and the growing presence and influence of postwar European art cinema in this country. Through the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, five major studios – Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century-Fox, and RKO – built a powerful oligopoly which controlled virtually every aspect of motion picture production. Motion pictures had evolved into a vertically integrated industry in which a handful of powerful corporate players controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of films.

Since the turn of the century, religious denominations had railed against the perceived moral effects and influence of this oligopoly. The film industry, responding to the threat posed by its critics, created a self-regulatory and censorship arm, the Production Code Administration (PCA). Every film that the studios produced needed approval from this agency. The Production Code reflected the ideological bent of both Depression-era America and the Catholic hierarchy. For example, the code prohibited films “presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice.” The code also stipulated that “brutal killings are not to be presented in detail.” Other strictures included a wide assortment of representations depicting sex, vulgarity, obscenity, and profanity. “The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home,” for example, was to be upheld. Any sexually “suggestive postures or gestures” were “not to be shown.” Totally “forbidden” was “sex perversion or any inference to it.” The New York Times critic, Bosley Crowther, repeatedly railed against the code, as well as against censorship at state and local levels. Yet Crowther just as vehemently opposed Bonnie and Clyde, the film that helped bring about the demise of the Production Code by breaking these and other rules that had governed American filmmaking for more than thirty years.

By exercising self-regulation, the studios were able to stave off outside policing and interference – for a time. In 1948, however, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its Paramount decision, which cleared the way for the Justice Department to pursue vigorous antitrust litigation against the major studios. Rather than continue an already protracted legal struggle with the Justice Department, the studios signed a series of consent decrees. Ultimately, these decrees forced the major studios to relinquish the exhibition arm of their industry.

Once studios no longer owned vast theater chains, the industry practice of self-regulation began to erode. Post-World War II audiences had relatively unprecedented access to an influx of European art films. No code had governed the making of these movies, now showing in newly independent theaters. One Italian film, The Miracle (1950), told the story of a pregnant peasant woman who believes her illegitimate child is the new Christ. Crowther championed this film, and when the New York State Board of Censors refused to issue it an exhibition permit, the New York Times critic figured prominently in a Supreme Court case challenging the board’s decision. The Court’s landmark 1952 decision gave motion pictures First Amendment protection, something film had not had since the Court’s 1915 decision upholding state censorship boards. In so doing, it cleared the way for foreign and independent films to appear in the
theaters that had once been controlled by the major studios and their self-regulatory agencies.

Meanwhile, postwar Hollywood began to serve a different function. Each major studio experimented with a variety of widescreen and 3-D processes to differentiate its product from that of television. For example, just three years prior to releasing *Bonnie and Clyde*, Warner Brothers released *My Fair Lady* (1964), which became one of the last of the big-budget musical extravaganzas. Such major studio releases, however, now appeared with growing infrequency. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, movie stars and directors formed their own independent production companies. The studios began to lease their soundstages to these companies and to distribute their films. Postwar Hollywood cinema like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), Mike Nichols’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), and Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1962) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) increasingly dealt with mature themes and appealed to specialized audiences, even if these particular films could still attract a mass audience. These changes often proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the studios lost control of their lucrative exhibition arms. Also, television displaced the hold movies and radio had upon the mass audience. Yet leasing studio space, providing distribution resources, and locating increasingly specialized audiences could also be highly lucrative for the studios. To be sure, studios already had adjusted to these changes by the time Warner Brothers released *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967. But just as definitely, *Bonnie and Clyde* embodied what these changes had begun to bear.

Television proved to be a unique financial boon for the film industry. Anthology dramas, which were performed and broadcast live, inspired television critics to dub the early 1950s “the Golden Age” of American television. Many of the original directors of early television – Robert Altman, John Frankenheimer, Sidney Lumet, and, of course, Arthur Penn – eventually made their way to Hollywood. By the mid-1950s, however, television had shifted away from live programming – which could generate revenue only once – to filmed programming, which could generate revenue over and over again. Thus, film studios could earn profits by leasing soundstage space to television production companies.

Influences upon Arthur Penn’s career paralleled many of those shaping the New Hollywood. After returning from overseas service during World War II, Penn attended Black Mountain College, a progressive school for the arts outside Asheville, North Carolina, in 1947. The faculty included some of the most experimental and controversial artists of the day, among them the composer John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham, artists Willem and Elaine de Kooning, and philosopher Buckminster Fuller. The school also served as a haven for alumni of the German Bauhaus School who had become refugees from Nazism during World War II. Penn, who was initially a student at this remarkable school, taught an informal acting class by the end of his first year. As an instructor, he pioneered the use of a number of cutting-edge techniques for the time, including improvisation and the Stanislavsky method. The latter technique encouraged intimate collaboration between director and actor to help the performer draw upon his or her personal experience to create a character.

Penn began his career in live television, working on such esteemed anthology drama series as *Philco Playhouse* and *Playhouse 90*. Often, these remarkable programs featured an original teleplay each week. Relatively unknown creative personnel like Penn could hone their craft on these live broadcasts as well as garner much critical attention. In 1956, the first season of *Playhouse 90*, Arthur Penn directed *The Miracle Worker*, an original teleplay by William Gibson. The broadcast received so much acclaim that its story was later adapted for Broadway, with Penn as the director. In 1962 Penn directed a film version of the play.

Presumably because of his work in live television during the 1950s, Penn was hired as a media advisor to John F. Kennedy and even directed the third in a series of presidential debates between Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Penn thus contrib-
uted to the "look" of Kennedy during these 1960 debates. The debates marked a watershed moment in the history of political communication. As the historian Erik Barnouw notes, Kennedy's performance ushered in a new breed of media-savvy campaigners:

What television audiences noted chiefly was the air of confidence, the nimbleness of mind that exuded from the young Kennedy. It emerged not only from crisp statements emphasized by sparse gestures, but also from glimpses of Kennedy not talking. . . A glimpse of the listening Kennedy in reaction shots showed him attentive, alert, with a suggestion of a smile on his lips.16

In their influential 1964 Esquire article, two aspiring screenwriters, David Newman and Robert Benton, cite John F. Kennedy as harbinger of what the authors called "the New Sentimentality." The "wise, intellectual and the taste-making people" loved Kennedy, according to Newman and Benton, "because he was tough, because he was all pro, because he was a man who knew what he wanted and grabbed it." With Kennedy, the authors claim, "the New Sentimentality came out in the open." Newman and Benton also referred to the work of the French and Italian New Wave, including the films of Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Michelangelo Antonioni. In Godard's Breathless (1959), Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg were one of the "Key Couples of the New Sentimentality."17 The New Sentimentality, according to Newman and Benton, is marked by self-indulgence, vicarious thrills, and personal gain.20

At the same time, another influential critical movement was also taking root in the United States. Emerging from postwar France, "auteurism" argued that films were the result of a director's personal expression and view. Particularly in the pages of the journal Cahiers du Cinéma, soon-to-be erstwhile critics like Truffaut and Godard outlined their politique des auteurs. Taking up the banner in the United States, the Village Voice's critic Andrew Sarris became auteurism's most vociferous proponent. In its argument that a bad film by a good director would always be more valuable and interesting than a good film by a bad director, auteurism conflicted with more traditional sensibilities. Crowther championed great films; auteurism championed great directors. Against this backdrop of violent political upheavals, institutional shifts, and conflicting tastes, Bonnie and Clyde marked a moment of crisis in American culture. The film occasioned a remarkable contest of power, with a variety of voices struggling to be heard, to achieve dominance, and to explain the relevance (or lack thereof) of Bonnie, Clyde, and Bonnie and Clyde.

"IT'S REBELLION, NOT RIOT"

While the political, social, and aesthetic context of the sixties provided a backdrop against which to "read" the film, Bonnie and Clyde was more than just the right film at the right time. Unlike other contemporary Hollywood releases, Bonnie and Clyde's narrative and stylistic elements allowed for a relatively open set of reading positions that resonated with the social and political shifts of the time. That Bonnie and Clyde could be about something other than the historical Bonnie and Clyde, and that audiences could understand this distinction, marks the film as one of the most important of the decade. If nothing else, the film and the controversy that followed its release altered American film criticism for years to come.

Bonnie and Clyde actively encouraged its viewers to interpret the film as more than just a gangster story. One could "read" the film as a commentary upon the turbulent sixties. One could read it as the personal vision of an iconoclastic director. Or, one could read Bonnie and Clyde as a shift away from the traditional classical narrative of a Hollywood film and toward the European art film. In addition, these various readings not only could coexist but even could complement one another. All of these readings resulted from the film's unique appeal to the knowing spectator.
In reading *Bonnie and Clyde*, the knowing spectator occupies a relatively privileged position. The knowing spectator connects with the film's irreverent style, its tragicomic tone, its graphic depictions of sex and violence, and its deliberate ambiguities—in short, with its New Sentimentality. Interpreting these narrative and visual strategies, this spectator understands *Bonnie and Clyde*’s analogues: the Depression stands for the sixties, gangsters for the counterculture, the police and banks for the Establishment. In blurring traditional distinctions between high and low culture, the film also relies upon a certain degree of pop-cultural literacy among its viewers. The film's irony, its blatant Freudianism, its references to Keystone Cops slapstick, and its debt to the European art cinema all appeal to the knowledgeable viewer. In short, the knowing spectator apprehends *Bonnie and Clyde* as more than just a literal narrative.

When *Bonnie and Clyde* premiered in August at the 1967 Montreal International Film Festival, however, many reviewers did not know what to make of the film's appeal to the knowing spectator. Writing for the *Saturday Review*, Hollis Alpert notes that while *Bonnie and Clyde* is “exceedingly well made,” it does not “make clear [its] attitudes toward the two criminals,” something Alpert finds “bothersome.” Variety complains that the film is “inconsistent,” “confusing,” and “incongruously couples comedy with crime.” In his first of three reviews attacking the film, Bosley Crowther complains that it “is assembled in a helter-skelter fashion and played at an erratic, breakneck speed.”

While the social commentary of the film is not completely lost upon Crowther, he focuses on its aesthetic elements. According to Crowther, *Bonnie and Clyde* is a “slap-happy color film charade” that misses “the very misery and drabness” marking the Depression of the 1930s. Even more disturbing to Crowther was the movie's reception at the film festival, where audiences “wildly received” the film with “gales of laughter and applause.” For Crowther, *Bonnie and Clyde* incited a mob mentality that showed “just how delirious these festival audiences can be.” Crowther does recognize *Bonnie and Clyde*’s political and social context as the sixties, but views this “callous and callow” film as “but another indulgence of a restless and reckless taste, and an embarrassing addition to an excess of violence.” Because of the turmoil of the late sixties, Crowther questions whether “a film should represent . . . [our] country in these critical times.”

A week after its premiere in Montreal, *Bonnie and Clyde* opened in New York, to mixed reviews. Kathleen Carroll of the *Daily News* praises the film as “bold and brassy, brutal and brilliant,” yet admits that it would “jolt and disturb” anyone who believes it “romanticizes crime.” Archer Winsten of the *New York Post* is more circumspect in his praise. *Bonnie and Clyde*, he observes, “is a movie rich in controversy”; it is both praiseworthy and flawed. Reviews in *Newsweek* and *Time* pan the film, calling it a “squalid shoot-'em for the moron trade” and “a strange and purposeless mingling of fact and claptrap,” respectively. Meanwhile, Crowther launched his second missive, calling the film “a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick comedy that treats the hideous depredations of that sleazy, moronic pair as though they were as full of fun and frolic as the jazz-age cut-ups in ‘Thoroughly Modern Millie.’”

Shortly after these initial reviews, the film's distributor, Warner Brothers—Seven Arts, pulled *Bonnie and Clyde* from circulation. In the meantime, however, a groundswell of support for the film emerged. Penelope Gilliat, writing for *The New Yorker*, suggests that the film “could look like a celebration of gangsters only to a man with a head full of wood shavings.” Andrew Sarris of the *Village Voice* responded to Bosley Crowther’s reviews more directly. “To use the pages of the *New York Times* for a personal vendetta against a director and actor one doesn’t like is questionable enough,” Sarris writes. “To incite the lurking forces of censorship and repression with inflammatory diatribes against violence on the screen is downright mischievous.” Sarris even places Crowther within the camp of “bigots,” those racists who use “the fake rhetoric of law and order.” In his criticism of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Sarris argues, Crowther employs a similar discourse and thus legitimates attempts “to lash back at the Ne-
Meanwhile, readers of the *New York Times* began to protest Crowther's missives. Harold Imber enters "a strong demurrer" to the *Times* critic, comparing *Bonnie and Clyde* to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Kenneth Feldman turns Crowther's *Thoroughly Modern Millie* comparison against the critic, suggesting that he "runs away" when confronted with "the dark side - the real side" of this era. Charles E. Evans argues that rather than the film's encouraging or glamorizing a life of crime, "the moral of inevitable destruction for anyone launching a career of illegality and violence was made abundantly clear."  

In her letter to the *New York Times*’s "Movie Mailbag," Teresa Hayden locates the relevance of *Bonnie and Clyde* in media coverage of the race riots that summer: "During the sad, tragic, ugly riots recently in Newark, Detroit, etc., nice commentators and reporters were shocked at what they described as the 'carnival' atmosphere." Hayden stresses how removed the media were from these events. "It seemed so clear what they were describing and why: 'Have-nots' in 1967 or the 1930's who go 'hog-wild,' incapable of imagining our fine bourgeois world as something they can enter legitimately."  

Meanwhile, director Arthur Penn began to defend the film in the press. In an interview with *Variety*, Penn claims that if he were "a French director," his critics "might not have liked the picture but they'd have understood what I was trying to do." Penn also began to address the film's violence, aligning it with the political struggle of blacks in America. In an interview for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Penn recalls how "five negroes" who attended a screening of the film:  

completely identified with *Bonnie and Clyde*. They were delighted. They said: "This is the way; that's the way to go, baby. Those cats were all right." They really understood, because in a certain sense the American negro has the same kind of attitude of "I have nothing more to lose," that was true during the Depression for Bonnie and Clyde. It is true now of the American negro. He is really at the point of revolution - it's rebellion, not riot.  

Once *Time* and *Newsweek* reversed their critical assessments of the film, its producer and star, Warren Beatty, convinced Warner Brothers-Seven Arts to re-release the film. A new advertising campaign for the film made much of *Newsweek*'s reversal. And according to *Variety*, studio executives strongly hinted that Bosley Crowther's reviews, reader backlash, and impassioned defenses of the film in other publications all "helped the picture rather than hurt it." *As Variety* notes, even the *Catholic Film Newsletter* of the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures praised *Bonnie and Clyde*, recommending the film, along with a reissue of *Gone with the Wind*, as the "Best of the Month."  

Meanwhile, the film was doing phenomenally well in London. According to the London *Observer*, the film "has broken every record" at the movie theater there. In three weeks, the paper estimated that one hundred forty thousand people saw the film.  

In the United States, Pauline Kael's career-making defense of the film also marked a turning point for *Bonnie and Clyde*. "How do you make a good movie in this country without being jumped on?" she asks in the opening of her lengthy defense of the film. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Kael calls *Bonnie and Clyde* an "excitingly American American movie" and notes that "the audience is alive to it." With almost eerie prescience, Kael enumerates the film's connections to the New Sentimentality: its deliberate blurring of the boundaries between high and low culture, its ambiguity, its appeals to the knowing spectator, and its ties to the French New Wave. The power of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Kael argues, is that it "brings into the almost frighteningly public world of movies things that people have been feeling and saying and writing about." Kael suggests that some of the backlash against the film may be the result of an "educated, or 'knowing' group" never again having "private possession" over elite sensibilities. "But even for that group," Kael notes, "there is an excitement in hearing its own private thoughts expressed out loud and in seeing something of its own sensibility become part of our common culture."
A few years after the 1967 uproar over *Bonnie and Clyde*, the film critic Richard Schickel tried to make some sense out of the discursive devastation that had visited him and his colleagues. There had been press conferences, retractions, letters to the editor, even public fretting over manliness—all in print, and all precipitated by a single film. Kael emerged relatively unscathed. Others, including Schickel himself, had reversed their critical opinion after the tremendous popularity of the film had become painfully clear. As Schickel admitted in 1972, the film's "makers sensed far better than I the basic shift in the basic mood of its basically youthful audience." Making "two-bit mobsters into romantic outlaws—misunderstood, inarticulate, but sympathetic to other underdogs and irritants to authority (for which read 'the establishment')," *Bonnie and Clyde* had turned the critical establishment on its head. "By so doing," he noted with grudging admiration, "they created the first of the new cult films for the kids and helped establish the now infamous 'youth market.'" It was, in Schickel's words, "the major commercial discovery of the past five years, the largest single determinant of American film content in the late sixties and early seventies." The discovery was not without a price, however. Schickel speculated that the *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther had "hastened the end of his long career" by attacking *Bonnie and Clyde* three times in print. Crowther's opinion had once meant something. After a barrage of letters from readers protesting Crowther's relentless criticism of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the *Times* summarily replaced him with Renata Adler, a twenty-six-year-old auteurist.

One could either love or hate *Bonnie and Clyde*, but Schickel's snideness notwithstanding, the film represented much more than simply the beginning of a new wave of "cult films for the kids." Its seeming allegiance to counterculture, its fragmented and stylized narrative, its not-so-subtle Freudian treatment of sexuality, and of course its graphic treatment of violence particularly threatened the dominant interpretive frames espoused by popular journalistic criticism. By asserting constructed notions of taste, relevance, audience, and authorship, the debate over
the film revealed powerful political and ideological subtexts. *Bonnie and Clyde* became the field upon which important struggles of subtext were waged – struggles between competing discourses of taste and relevance, struggles over the discursive legitimacy of established journalistic criticism, and struggles over a whole way of thinking and talking about the American audience.

This last-mentioned construct, the American audience, ultimately served as an incredibly important signifier in debates over the film. Yet it also remains something of a paradox. As Janet Staiger points out, the so-called reader of films often gets talked about in ways that are more fictive than actual. This "fictive audience" is often that "other person" – that someone else who is, for example, incapable of resisting allegedly antisocial media influence. But fictive audiences do not materialize out of thin air. Like most fictions, the fictive audience for *Bonnie and Clyde* emerged out of a specific historical context. As subsequent debates attempted to construct this fictive audience for the film, discussion about this audience was helping the actual viewers and critics to help make sense of *Bonnie and Clyde*. This fiction, constructed within journalistic discourse, became its own text to be read, interpreted, fought over, and negotiated.

Invoking the fictive audience could establish discursive power and, by extension, ideological power. Just as some critics were threatened by the film’s creation and recasting of gangster mythology – especially with regard to its effect on audiences – so too did critics fret over the perceived indifference of audiences who could no longer distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, truth and falsity. Auteurism challenged this assumption. As Staiger notes, auteurism developed in popular criticism during the 1950s in response to an influx of post–World War II foreign films. The result of this reading strategy – looking at foreign films as the products of authors – helped differentiate these films from those made in Hollywood. This approach also helped differentiate the audiences attending these films. In assuming that audiences wanted to see films as art, produced by a singular artistic vision, auteurs departed from more traditional discussions of motion pictures as an industrial art form. Thus auteur approaches to *Bonnie and Clyde* could articulate the film’s strategies in terms of both high art and a sophisticated audience.

As Staiger notes, positing authorship had long been a strategy used by the cultural elite and by well-educated audiences for reading foreign films, which were perceived as being more "realistic" and more "serious" and as having a "message." The message had to come from somewhere; the "author" was the logical choice. Staiger traces such interpretive strategies to discussions of Italian neorealist films like *Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and the film that Bosley Crowther himself had defended – *The Miracle*. Auteurism, by itself, was neither particularly novel nor particularly threatening. Attributing this interpretive practice to entertainment films, and by extension, to a mass audience capable of engaging in this activity, was what proved so menacing to popular journalistic criticism. For *Bonnie and Clyde*, authorship became part of the struggle to assert legitimacy for the film and its audience.

Popular criticism sought to strip *Bonnie and Clyde* of an auteurist reading, in part by asserting established notions of taste. John Simon objects to the film’s self-conscious pretensions toward being a work of art, professing his belief that "true art is not aware of itself as art." Yet such assertions are hardly made consistently. Crowther, who had condemned *Bonnie and Clyde* for its violence, could justify his praise for *Thunderball* (1965) because its excess violence was obviously lacking in seriousness. Fredric Wertham, a critic of *Bonnie and Clyde* and a psychiatrist best known for his treatise on comic books, *Seduction of the Innocent*, argues that "under no circumstances was violent death... something to laugh about."

Popular criticism also relied upon realist frames of reference to deny *Bonnie and Clyde* an auteurist reading. "In general," Wertham states, "it is a great fallacy to believe that in order to combat violence you have to show it as gory as possible."
Charles Champlin notes that *Bonnie and Clyde* had the capacity to "create the illusion of reality . . . so great that even the sophisticated viewer must surrender to the illusion." The critic could use his constructed notion of realism to validate his perspective, "Real violence on the screen," Champlin wrote, "is very real indeed. If it weren't, [fellow critics] Mr. Morgenstern, Mr. Crowther and the rest of us would have no cause to be concerned."  

Another strategy posited by popular criticism was that the auteurist-driven relevance of *Bonnie and Clyde* constituted nothing more than pandering to the audience. Crowther dismisses the depiction of Clyde's impotence as "a whiff of pornography." He also objects to "excesses of visible violence," which he finds to be "deliberate pandering to an increasingly voracious public taste for blood and killing." Writing for the *New American Review*, Stanley Kauffmann objects to the popularization of previously elite culture. He blames the auteurist sensibilities of films like *Bonnie and Clyde* in part upon "the ravenous appetite of the new middle class for culture-status." But "college-bred" industry personnel are also partly to blame, having "nicely adjusted their ambitions for intellectual prestige" to "intense commercial pressure." Kauffman's assault upon this "ravenous appetite" was in keeping with the cultural traditionalism of the *New American Review*. The editors of this annual claimed not to "whore after the young and the wild or to publish material merely because its like has never before been seen on land or sea," professing a belief that "the cultural tradition needs to be restated, not abandoned.

Such restatements, of course, have powerful ideological implications. A common objection to *Bonnie and Clyde* faulted its lack of what critics called historical reality. Both Kauffman and Crowther object to the way in which the story's "facts" have been altered. Crowther protests making "mean, ugly, sexually maladjusted roughnecks" into "free-wheeling, fun-loving kids, as handsome and artificially charming as Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway" because this was "a dangerous distortion" of both "facts" and "plausibility." Interestingly, Kauffman decries auteurism while blaming Penn's authorship for the story's divergence from reality. In Crowther's eyes, *Bonnie and Clyde* assumed no responsibility as "authentic biography or social history, instead serving as a clever and effective distortion." Kauffman could have forgiven as "dramatic license" the fact that "in reality" Bonnie was "ugly" and an adulterer and that she "continued to have a busy sex life of an eccentric kind" even after she met Clyde. The objection to relevance barely conceals the hostility of heterosexist propriety toward changes that Kauffman finds aggrandizing and "hollow." Especially galling to him are the film's Freudian symbolism and its "economic determinism." Kauffman is at once shocked by the film's overt displays of sexuality ("the clearest suggestion of fellatio that I have seen in an American film") and dismissive of its "new intellectual veneer.

Kauffman prefers a politically conservative veneer. Throughout his review, he uses thinly cloaked anti-Communist rhetoric to dismiss the film. He notes how "the dispossessed treat the wounded bandits like People's Heroes." He compares the film to "thirties propaganda plays" of striking workers leading "happy, if harried" home lives. Kauffman's biases become even more pronounced when he attacks what he calls the proletarian theme of the film, using "proletarian" interchangeably with "economic determinism." The police shown in the movie, Kauffman notes:

are usually poor men, too, and that – in those Depression days – they felt very lucky to have jobs and would do almost anything to keep them. (So would any of those dispossessed farmers, if they had been able to get police jobs). Clyde never kills anyone until a grocer whom he is robbing tries to kill him. This shocks Clyde – the discovery that people will kill to protect their property.

By the violent climax of the film, Kauffman argues, the audience has no sympathy for the heroes, because this sympathy "has been dissipated by the dozens of other victims of society – who
happened to be tellers or policemen — already killed by the Barrow gang.” Kaufman is, of course, naturalizing the workings of the dominant here. There is no power differential between state and citizen; the police are just folks doing their jobs. Class conflict is obliteratored; even the dispossessed farmer would willingly become a representative of the state when hardened deviants come to town.\(^{92}\)

Despite these and other protests against auteurist readings of *Bonnie and Clyde*, auteurism was in fact highly compatible with dominant discursive practice. As mentioned earlier, many popular critics were already using this approach with foreign films. Andrew Sarris had articulated auteurism with particularly nationalist and militaristic inflections. Danae Clark has shown that auteurism effectively conceals capitalist demands upon the rank-and-file labor force (the technicians) to be efficient, thus naturalizing the entire process, and gives studios greater power to differentiate their product and to control labor with pay incentives and large budgets. “Auteur criticism can thus be read,” she writes, “as an attempt to restore the virtues of art to a system of productivity designed to minimize creative difference and individual accomplishment.”\(^{63}\)

Since popular criticism had already employed authorship as a strategy in reading foreign films, and since auteurism could actually serve the ideological needs of the dominant, auteurism in and of itself was not the threat. Instead, popular criticism objected to the way in which auteurism could at once fragment the general audience for entertainment films and popularize the marginal. Jay Emanuel, the publisher of *The Motion Picture Exhibitor*, laments the days when “excessive screen violence and sadism were confined to fast-buck films designed for strictly limited appeal.” As Emanuel suggests, part of what made films like *Bonnie and Clyde* so shocking was that they were no longer relegated to fringe producers, distributors, and exhibitors. In his view, “Films no longer cater to mainstream tastes; theaters have ceased to help audiences choose the kinds of films they wish to see.” Instead, the product differentiates itself for consumers.

“Top stars and top directors used to bring in big audiences automatically,” Emanuel writes. “Today, however, audiences shop for their entertainment as carefully as they shop for their clothes.”\(^{62}\)

This fragmented, consumer audience for *Bonnie and Clyde* could still fulfill a variety of economic and ideological functions. When Warner Brothers–Seven Arts re-released the film, it was shown in “prestige” engagements. The film influenced European designers, who in turn influenced American designers into bringing back hats and caps, wide lapels, wide ties, stripes, and colored suits.\(^{64}\) David Newman and Robert Benton celebrated the film’s phenomenal influence and popularity — what they called catching “lightning in a bottle.”\(^{64}\) But although a fragmented audience of consumers could still fulfill certain aspects of capital, popular criticism remained in crisis over how to explain *Bonnie and Clyde*’s immense popularity.

As a result of the controversy over *Bonnie and Clyde*, critics and audiences began to talk about a youth audience in new ways. This construction could help explain the film’s enormous popularity. Potentially threatening, the youth audience could also function as consumers, thus helping repair the discursive ruptures that controversy over the film had suggested. As Aniko Bodroghkozy suggests, the visible traces left by the rebellious youth movement of the 1960s were produced by young white middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-class males who could align themselves with some aspects of the counterculture while actively working against the interests of marginalized groups, such as women.\(^{65}\) That a Hollywood movie like *Bonnie and Clyde* could appeal to rebellious youth served at least two important functions: first, it meant that the potency of films in reaching marginalized audiences was solidified; and second, it meant that the youth audience could be contextualized within mainstream culture, tethering this audience to the film’s success — and therefore resolving the threat of otherwise alienated readers.

Instead of addressing the possibility of multiple or serious readings of so-called entertainment films, popular discourse on
Bonnie and Clyde promoted this new fictive youth audience. Bosley Crowther explains that the film was calculated to “gratify the preconceptions and illusions of young people who had come of age with the Beatles and Bob Dylan, the philosophy of doing-your-thing and the notion that defying the Establishment was beautiful and brave.” He ultimately finds the film to be “clever” in capturing “the amoral restlessness of youth in those years.”

Richard Schickel expresses amazement that he and his fellow critics did not initially see how Bonnie and Clyde had “plugged into youth’s new, or at least newly intense, image of itself as a band of outsiders entitled to embrace (or at least applaud) even illegal methods in attacking the corrupt, corrupting social order ruled by old men and institutions.” Even the film’s defenders acceded to this new discursive audience text. “Youth identified with Bonnie and Clyde,” one book explains, “because of their [the protagonists'] plight — two small people caught up in ‘the system.’ One law student, responding to Crowther’s missives, argues for the ‘special relevance’ of Bonnie and Clyde to “a generation seeking to bring new and real meaning to life in a decade characterized by brutal, senseless violence.”

John Baxter interprets spectators for Bonnie and Clyde as “young audiences [who] saw Penn’s couple as saints for a disenchanted age” because everything else in a “society devoid of social purpose” was unworthy of “emulation.”

The most powerful feature of this discussion was the way in which it ultimately eviscerated the possibility of resistance. Instead, it rendered the youth audience an elusive component of consumer culture. As Bodroghkozy notes, common wisdom dictated that when the industry went looking for a hit with youth audiences, it failed. But the films that the industry expected to flop, like Bonnie and Clyde and The Graduate (1967), turned out to be wildly popular with young audiences. Popular discourse could have repaired the rupture these films presented by depicting the youth audience as powerful, untapped, and unpredictable, but an entity that could nonetheless function as consumers. By articulating concepts of relevance, taste, and auteurism.
popular discourse was able to make sense of the unfamiliar fictive audience it had created. As a critic for *See Magazine* noted, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* represented a turning point for films. But it was a turning point that could be explained only in terms of a youth audience able to generate “colossal remuneration” for “films of high artistic achievement.”

By the time Warner Brothers released Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* in 1994, both the youth audience and their emergent position as “knowing” spectators had become thoroughly commodified. The distribution company for *Bonnie and Clyde* of the 1960s, which had struggled to retool itself after the breakup of the studio system in the 1940s, now belonged to one of a handful of media conglomerates — Time Warner — whose holdings include Turner Broadcasting, HBO, cable systems, magazines, records, comic books, book publishing, and theme parks. In the summer of 1967, amid the riots and rebellions, Warner Brothers could release a movie that basically said “fucking cops!” In the summer of 1994, Warner Brothers could release a movie that basically said “fucking media!” By that time, Rodney King had become a dim cultural memory, and L.A. was arguably just a “riot, not rebellion.”

NOTES

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2. Ibid., 103.
5. Insightful discussions with Nancy Virtue helped a great deal in clarifying these thoughts on the movie.

FROM “FUCKING COPS!” TO “FUCKING MEDIA!”

8. “Political Events, 1967,” *People’s Chronology, Microsoft Bookshelf* ’95, CD-ROM.
10. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 25.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Carroll, “Bonnie and Clyde Brutal and Brilliant,” 44.
41. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 178.
44. Ibid., 181–82.
45. Ibid., 188.
49. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 200.
54. Ibid., 161–2.
57. Ibid., 203–4.
59. Ibid., 160.
60. Ibid., 160–1.

**WORKS CITED**


**FROM “FUCKING COPS!” TO “FUCKING MEDIA!”**


Inglis, Ruth A. “Self-Regulation in Operation.” *The American Film Indus-
The first five shots of Bonnie and Clyde comprise one of the most daring and jarring opening sequences in American film history. Dissolving from a photo of Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty), we see an extreme close-up of Bonnie (Faye Dunaway), specifically her mouth, as she finishes applying lipstick. As the camera quickly pans with her appraising look in her mirror and draws back, bright light conveys the stifling heat in Bonnie’s room. An industrial machine in the neighborhood throbs in a steady, dull beat. Bonnie gets up, crosses the room to flop on her bed, and pounds on the headrail. The low-angle shot of Bonnie reveals the drab walls and ceiling of her room. The camera rises and dollies in on her eyes for another extreme close-up after she punches the bedpost. Bonnie then looks over the rail, gets up again, and crosses the room to get dressed reluctantly. She appears to us a restless, potentially ferocious, caged being (a metaphor encouraged by the birdcage just visible in the back corner).

One of the many pleasures of viewing Bonnie and Clyde resides in appreciating how much of the film’s density and complexity can be related back to this opening scene. The immediacy of this sequence is part of its boldness; through extremely close shots, it binds the viewer to Bonnie’s predicament, inaugurating