

Arthur Penn, Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

Major Credits

Producer: Warren Beatty

Script: David Newman and Robert Benton

Editor: Dede Allen

Cast: Warren Beatty (Clyde Barrow), Faye Dunaway (Bonnie Parker), Michael J. Pollard (C.W. Moss), Gene Hackman (Buck Barrow), Estelle Parsons (Blanche), Gene Wilder (Eugene)

Background

The story is based on the real-life exploits of the legendary bank-robbing couple whose career had already been depicted in several Hollywood movies: Fritz Lang's You Only Live Once (1937), Nicholas Ray's They Live by Night (1948), Joseph H. Lewis' Gun Crazy (1949), and William Witney's The Bonnie Parker Story (1958). Gangster films had profoundly influenced the young directors of the French New Wave, and Beatty originally tried to get Jean-Luc Godard (Breathless) and Francois Truffaut (Shoot the Piano Player) to direct Bonnie and Clyde. Newman and Benton's script and Arthur Penn's direction reflect many of the influential characteristics--rapid cutting, mixture of comedy and tragedy, defiance of conventional morality--that marked the French New Wave.

Most critics responded to the opening of Bonnie and Clyde with anger and loathing. Pauline Kael, in The New Yorker, stood practically alone in defending the film's expressive use of genre conventions and audacious cinematic style. Eventually, public opinion--the film was a huge box office success--triumphed over hasty critical judgments, and mass magazines like Time published unprecedented retractions of their original reviews. Bonnie and Clyde became prototypes of the anti-establishment heroes of so many subsequent American films (including Malick's Badlands and Days of Heaven); Penn's directorial style influenced such later films as Hill's Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Schlesinger's Midnight Cowboy, Altman's McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch, and Spielberg's The Sugarland Express.

Important Sequences

1. credits - The black and white period photographs and Rudy Vallee's voice summon us into a nostalgically recalled past, but the "bleeding" letters and incessant clicking of the camera ominously qualify our comfortable response.

2. the bank robbery in which C. W. wedges the getaway car into a parking place and Clyde shoots the teller in the eye (an allusion to Potemkin) - structurally, the turning point in the film, this sequence is also a paradigm of Bonnie and Clyde's disorienting mixture of comedy and graphic violence.

3. the picnic reunion - Penn employs soft focus, special filters, muffled sound, and slow motion to create a stylized, lyrical atmosphere. The humor in the film really ends with Mother Parker's parting advice: "Don't live three miles from me because you'll be dead if you do."

4. the ending - Penn used four cameras, each running at a different speed, and different lenses to register both the shock and the balletic qualities of Bonnie and Clyde's death. The careful montage might be compared to the equally famous shower sequence in Hitchcock's Psycho.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is there an artistic purpose behind the film's combination of contrasting emotional tones?

2. Does Bonnie and Clyde offer any pertinent criticism of the society it depicts? Do the gangster heroes embody valid moral alternatives to the social order they oppose?