BFI FILM CLASSICS

BONNIE AND CLYDE

Lester D. Friedman

Memory is the Master of Death.
Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*

For Rachel and Marc Friedman,
who carry within them memories
of the past and hopes for the future

INTRODUCTION

They put a hundred and eighty-seven bullet holes in Clyde, Bonnie Parker and the car they were driving. Bonnie was eating a sandwich. ... I remember thinking at the time, it wouldn't be a bad way to go, if you have to.

Jack Foley to Karen Sisco in Elmore Leonard's *Out of Sight* (1996)

Few films in the history of the American cinema inspire more passionate discussion and generate greater scholarly debate than *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Along with *The Graduate* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), director Arthur Penn's seductive evocation of Depression era life on the run, delivered with visual panache and a hip sensibility, ushered in an era quickly dubbed 'The New American Cinema'. This artistic renaissance, which energised both the production and consumption of cinema, resulted from a unique nexus of conditions within the American film industry and the society which surrounded it: the economic breakdown of Hollywood's studio system; the shift toward explicit depictions of sex and violence; the escalation of the war in Vietnam; the aesthetic influence of European art house films; the creation of a new film rating system. These three films challenged the moral, ideological and communal values which had dominated American culture – and consequently its movies – since the end of World War II.

From our comfortable historical vantage point in the 1990s, it seems relatively easy to discern why these three watershed films captured the spirit of a turbulent America in the late 60s and early 70s. It was an era lacerated by cultural divisions that grew wider, deeper and more bitter in the jagged trajectory from the Woodstock Nation to the Weathermen, from the siege of Chicago to the massacre at My Lai. While none of these films paints a broad cultural portrait of the social and political issues gnawing at society's institutions, each encapsulates part of the fierce clash of cultural beliefs. So, for example, Ben Braddock (the archetypal college graduate) personifies his generation's fear and loathing of their parents' plastic existence, judging the existing social order as devoid of personal loyalty and professional values. *Easy Rider* (1969), which today seems like a quaint period piece, offers a countercultural alternative to the stultifying suburbs: a liberating life on the road heightened by the

pleasurable stimulation of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Both films reflect the fears of a profoundly anxious generation that saw its options reduced to early death in Southeast Asia or stagnation back at home.

Yet *Bonnie and Clyde*, the only film in the trio formally set in the past, most poignantly evokes the exuberance, confusion and, ultimately, the deep disillusionment of those times. Screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton clearly intended their engaging outlaws to resonate with the countercultural sensibilities of the 60s: 'It is about people whose style sets 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 know as – The Sixties.'[1] For the new heroes of a youth culture bursting into prominence during this time, acting 'odd and aberrant to the general run of society' was precisely their goal. Their joys and discontents gushed forth in a magical mystery tour of flowing hair, hallucinogenic drugs, war protests, psychedelic music, expansive bell-bottoms, flower power, free love and radical politics. To them, the anarchic Bonnie and Clyde became historical counterparts of their own personal and communal struggles: a young and attractive couple fighting the restrictive moral codes and repressive social institutions of their time.

Bonnie and Clyde fired a shot across the prow of the American ship of state: 'Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* was perhaps the first full statement of the new cinema's values; it was as influential on the American films that followed it as *Breathless* was in France or *Open City* in Italy.'[2] By so doing, the film forced an older generation of moviemakers, critics and audiences – all shaped by the Great Depression and World War II – to confront their rebellious progeny – moulded by the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Vietnam War. It also inaugurated the New American Cinema, a unique period in American film history (1967–80) that, among other stylistic choices, emphasised the visual rather than the narrative aspects of moviemaking.[3] More than its importance to the development of the cinema, however, *Bonnie and Clyde* exemplifies the intimate connections between the creation of great films and the societies which spawn them, even those exceptional films which transcend the eras that surrounded their birth.

Bonnie and Clyde imaginatively mirrored and profoundly influenced American society during a pivotal clash of moral and cultural values. The film itself, along with the public's passionate reaction to it,

reflected the intense challenge to fundamental precepts and institutions that shattered the complacent 50s and begot the fragmented 60s: the Hollywood studio system crumbled under the impact of new media; film criticism shifted from stodgy Bosley Crowther to pugnacious Pauline Kael; fashion designers emulated Hollywood not Paris; American visual styles incorporated European aesthetics; film attained intellectual legitimacy; sex replaced romance; conspicuous violence supplanted subtle innuendo; revolutionary fervour overwhelmed moderate political participation; young film-makers wrested creative power from the World War II generation; youthful audiences demanded innovative Hollywood products. Given its distinctive position in the evolutionary contours of American culture and cinema history, *Bonnie and Clyde* must be viewed within the societal framework which generated it and recognised as a vital force in highlighting these acute conflicts and profound transformations.

THE CREATORS

A photograph is a moral decision taken in an eighth of a second, or a fifteenth, or a hundred-and-twenty-fifth.
Salman Rushdie, 'Ovid Meets hip-hop'

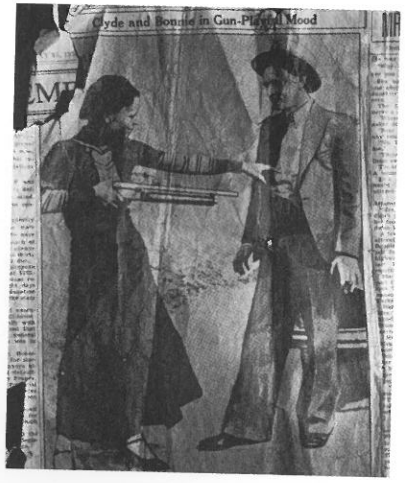
The Screenwriters: David Newman and Robert Benton

David Newman and Robert Benton, the screenwriters of *Bonnie and Clyde*, found themselves working together at *Esquire* magazine in the early 60s, the former as an editor and the latter as an art director. (There, among other things, they created the still-thriving 'Dubious Achievement Awards'.) On the surface, the gregarious, fun-loving Newman, a New York City native, and the taciturn, intense Benton, raised in Waxahachie, Texas, seemed as unlikely a duo as Woodward and Bernstein. Yet they quickly discovered a shared and equally intense love of the movies that dated back to their childhoods. In fact, they spent much of their time thinking about movies, talking about movies and going to movies. Captivated by the zest and spirit of the French New Wave directors, particularly François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, they simultaneously discovered the giants of the American cinema as well: Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford and Orson Welles.

But the film that caused them to talk seriously about writing movies was *Breathless* (1960), Godard's first feature. Though utilising a conventional gangster narrative, the French critic turned director dazzled audiences with a liberated visual style that rejected linear continuity and embraced the freedom of unsteady hand-held shots, disorienting jump cuts, stunning long takes, impulsive location shots and vibrant non-star performers.

With images of the love-obsessed, antihero Michel Poiccard (John-Paul Belmondo) of *Breathless* in their minds, it seems natural that when Newman and Benton started banging script ideas off each other, lawbreakers flouting society's conventions became an obvious and engaging subject. Newman and Benton instinctively understood that in the age of Abbie Hoffman, it was cool to be an outlaw. Brought up in East Texas, Benton recollected hearing about the exploits of a legendary duo from his childhood and even remembered how kids dressed up as Bonnie and Clyde on Halloween. Given this background it is not too surprising that, when they actually sat down to write a script, 'the first idea, the very first one, was a movie about two Texas desperadoes named Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow'.[4]

As Newman and Benton relate in their 1972 essay about the film's genesis, three factors coalesced to inspire them to move from magazine to movie writing: 1. The overwhelming response to their June 1964 *Esquire* article, 'The New Sentimentality', which convinced them a new sensibility was omnipresent in American culture; 2. The publication of John Toland's *The Dillinger Days*, whose small section on the Barrow gang prompted them to learn more about the 'professional love affair' that characterised Bonnie and Clyde's relationship; and 3. An Alfred Hitchcock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (accompanied by a monograph by Peter Bogdanovich) which gave them an education in cinema at its best.



10 Screenwriter Robert Benton, who grew up in East Texas, was well aware of Bonnie and Clyde's exploits

As a result of these influences, the pair felt the overwhelming need to create films: 'We *had* to make movies the way one *has* to breathe.'[5]

Yet when they actually wrote the various drafts that would eventually evolve into the screenplay for *Bonnie and Clyde*, it was not the radically innovative Godard who influenced them most, but rather his fellow *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic-turned-director, the more emotional and romantic François Truffaut. For Newman and Benton two of Truffaut's films provided lasting inspiration during the entire gestation period: *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960), with its stylish combination of humour and darkness within a milieu of noir gangsterism, and *Jules and Jim* (1961), a love triangle drenched in an atmospheric past which spoke to the problems of the present. All these elements appeared in *Bonnie and Clyde*, though with a decidedly American sense of style and energy quite distinct from its French counterparts.

Eventually Truffaut was offered the opportunity to direct *Bonnie and Clyde* (as was Godard) and, though he ultimately declined in order to make *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), he provided Newman and Benton with a series of crucial visual and dramatic ideas that found their way into the final script. As Matthew Bernstein points out in his illuminating analysis of the script's evolution, Truffaut made many specific suggestions such as emphasising high-angle shots of the swerving car on country roads, playing up the humour of Clyde's humiliating initial attempt at bank robbery, stressing the scenes where Bonnie and Clyde take pictures of themselves, making Captain Hamer a connecting thread in the film, cutting from place to place as Bonnie reads her poem to Clyde, and developing Ivan Moss's hatred of his son's tattoo. Bernstein goes on to note that Truffaut's comments, rather surprisingly, 'focused not on opening the film up to more playful, disparate elements à la *Shoot the Piano Player*, but to unify the film, to give it greater aesthetic coherence'.[6]

Newman and Benton parted company in the late 70s, and both went on to have successful careers. Newman continued primarily as a scriptwriter, sometimes working with his wife, Leslie Newman, and more recently with his son, Nathan. His works include *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), three *Superman* pictures (1978, 1980, 1983) and *Moonwalker* (1988). He recently turned to theatre, writing the book for the award-winning Broadway musical, *The Life*. Benton became a celebrated Oscar-winning director/writer, creating critically acclaimed and

popular movies such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Places in the Heart* (1984), *Nobody's Fool* (1994) and *Twilight* (1998). Yet nothing within their long and illustrious careers ever matched the sheer cultural firestorm ignited by *Bonnie and Clyde*. Somehow that first time out of the chute, these two guys 'who knew next to nothing about how such things *should* be done', somehow managed to capture 'lightning in a bottle'.[7]

The Star: Warren Beatty

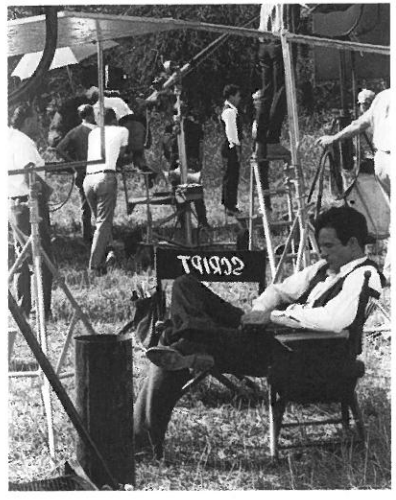
Following the polite rejections of Truffaut and Godard, Newman and Benton's script for *Bonnie and Clyde* languished. It made the rounds of many Hollywood studios, generated little enthusiasm, garnered no financial backing and, in their words, finally 'went into a drawer'.[8] In retrospect, such a fate seems inevitable; they had written a morally complex and highly nuanced French New Wave film, placing two killers in the main roles and featuring a *ménage à trois* between the three principal characters, for a Hollywood system still tied to the pious Ozzie and Harriet morality of the 50s. The dejected pair felt they had given birth to an unwanted child. Then, some eighteen months after they had originally offered it to Truffaut, the French director was at a party with American film star Warren Beatty. Making idle conversation, Truffaut told the actor about the Newman and Benton script, adding that the title role would be a wonderful part for Beatty.

Beatty had already established his charismatic screen persona as a handsome yet rebellious antihero in such films as *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961), but from his earliest Hollywood days, he also demonstrated an independent streak that irritated many industry executives. When, for example, no less a figure than John F. Kennedy wanted Warner Bros. to turn Robert J. Donovan's *PT-109* into a film directed by Fred Zinnemann and starring Beatty, the actor told Press Secretary Pierre Salinger that he hated the script and flatly refused to take the role. Beatty also demonstrated his maverick tendencies by starring in Arthur Penn's quirky, experimental film *Mickey One* (1965), an existential allegory more akin to a European art film than to anything resembling a Hollywood commercial feature. As his career progressed, Beatty continued to move beyond simplistic pretty boy parts, eventually gaining critical respect for producing (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Shampoo* [1975], *Bugsy* [1991]) and directing (*Reds* [1981], *Dick Tracy* [1990] and *Bulworth*

[1998]) films with artistic and thematic aspirations far beyond typical Hollywood productions.

At the time Truffaut told him about the script by Newman and Benton, Beatty was at a crossroads in his career. He saw himself as a tortured iconoclast in the mould of Marlon Brando and James Dean, but the myopic studio chieftains continually cast him in lightweight romantic comedies, proffering roles more suited for Tab Hunter or George Hamilton. After a disastrous pre-production experience with *What's New, Pussycat?* (1965) culminated in his demand to be released from the Woody Allen-written film, Beatty concluded that he needed more control of his own career; he felt compelled to move beyond simply acting in films to producing his own hand-picked projects. Beatty knew no working actors who actually produced their own pictures, but he was adamant about taking his career into his own hands.

So, when he returned to the States, Beatty called Newman and Benton to read the script Truffaut had recommended to him. Within thirty minutes, he told the amazed duo that he wanted to make the film and optioned it. (Beatty initially thought he would just produce the film, envisioning Bob Dylan as the stunted Clyde.) While his role as actor is clearly crucial to the success of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Beatty's function as producer, particularly his interaction with Warner Bros. before and after production, is even more important. In fact, it is no exaggeration to state that without his persistent cajoling to get studio approval for the picture, his willingness to risk his professional reputation and personal finances to get the film made, and his post-production insistence on re-releasing the movie after a disastrous initial run, *Bonnie and Clyde* would probably never have escaped its resting place in Newman's and Benton's desk drawers.



Warren Beatty between takes on the set

Remember that, at this point in their careers, Newman

and Benton were struggling neophytes with no Hollywood experience; Arthur Penn's film output (*The Left-Handed Gun* [1958], *The Miracle Worker* [1962], *Mickey One*, *The Chase* [1966]), though critically respectable, still did not contain a certifiable hit. Beatty's clout within the industry derived from his acting not his producing. One story, denied by Beatty but cited as accurate by self-proclaimed eyewitnesses, provides the flavour of his intense ardour for this project. Cornering Jack Warner in his office, Beatty fell to his knees and offered to lick and kiss the mogul's shoes if he would just give him a reasonable budget ($1.6 million) to make *Bonnie and Clyde*.[9] An embarrassed Warner turned him down, but Beatty did eventually strike a deal with Walter MacEwen, the head of production at Warner Bros. Even here, however, his passionate commitment took precedence over business considerations: Beatty agreed to take a meagre $200,000 salary for starring in the film, trading the rest of his standard fee for forty per cent of the film's gross. (Of course, when the film went on to make some $17 million during its 1968 re-release, Beatty's bargain-basement deal turned into a windfall.)

In addition to getting the film financed, Beatty was also instrumental in forcing the studio to re-release it in wider distribution. Jack Warner, who a few weeks after screening the picture sold his shares in the studio to Seven Arts Productions for $32 million, hated the finished product and ordered it buried. Even with an ecstatic response from industry insiders following a public screening at the Directors Guild theatre, as well as a standing ovation at the Montreal Film Festival, Warner Bros./Seven Arts Productions opened it in Denton, Texas on 13 September (traditionally the worst month of the year to showcase new films) 1967, and booked it into only twenty-five other theatres across the United States. According to Richard Lederer, a marketing executive at Warner Bros. who championed the picture, 'it died. It was finished by the end of October. ... I had done my best; I never felt it could be resurrected. I really didn't.'[10] Everyone at the studio agreed.

Everyone except Warren Beatty. Ignoring the vitriolic early reviews of Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* and Joe Morgenstern in *Newsweek*, Beatty cited Pauline Kael's lengthy and laudatory review in the *New Yorker* (21 October 1967) as evidence of the film's potential to captivate a broad audience of hip, intelligent, college-age viewers. Then, the film became a bonafide hit in London, spawning the first of the clothing fads it ultimately inspired throughout the world. Finally, on 8

December (after the film was no longer showing in the US), a *Time* magazine cover drawn by Robert Rauschenberg brought widespread attention to *Bonnie and Clyde*, heralding it as the start of a New America Cinema; the inside story, authored by Stefan Kanfer, acclaimed it 'The best movie of the year' and cited its importance as equal to American classics such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Citizen Kane* (1941).[11]

With this new glut of publicity tucked firmly under his arm, Beatty coaxed, pleaded and ultimately threatened Eliot Hyman, the new CEO of Warner Bros./Seven Arts, to re-release the picture, a then unprecedented event. It was rebooked to open on the day the Academy Award nominations were announced (*Bonnie and Clyde* received ten). Peter Biskind cites a telling example of the dramatic sales increase this time around: at one theatre in Cleveland, the film grossed $2,600 per week in its initial September play date; in the same theatre during its February re-release, it grossed $26,000 per week.[12] With Beatty's indispensable support *Bonnie and Clyde* eventually underwent a dramatic metamorphosis from box-office fiasco into money-making machine, eventually finding itself among the top twenty grossing films of all time.

The Director: Arthur Penn

Arthur Penn represents an intriguing transition between the old and the new Hollywood, though his path to commercial features came via live teleplays and theatre rather than through a film-making apprenticeship. Penn began his diverse career during the so-called 'Golden Age of Television', initially working as a floor manager and associate director on the 'Colgate Comedy Hour' (1951–3). This led him to directing responsibilities for some of the most prestigious television shows of that era: 'Gulf Playhouse: First Person' (1953), 'Philco-Goodyear Playhouse' (1954), 'Producer's Showcase' (1954), and 'Playhouse 90' (1957–8). Because of Penn's extensive experience in live television production, advisers to then Senator John F. Kennedy asked him to serve as a consultant to the telegenic presidential candidate during the famous Kennedy–Nixon presidential debates of 1960. He ultimately directed the third of these historic television events.

During the 50s, Penn eventually aligned himself with Fred Coe, the most important producer of live television dramas during this fertile period.[13] Coe, who also produced Penn's first two features – *The Left*

Handed Gun and *The Miracle Worker* (1962) – encouraged a host of talented young writers and directors to move beyond the limited dramatic and visual constraints of standard television fare. This freedom led to outstanding programmes, many eventually made into films, such as Paddy Chayefsky's *Marty*, Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful* and Gore Vidal's *The Death of Billy the Kid* (the basis for Penn's first feature), as well as other ground-breaking works like *The Bachelor Party*, *The Rainmaker*, *Days of Wine and Roses* and *Visit to a Small Planet*. Coe also brought established stars to television – including José Ferrer, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Henry Fonda and Frank Sinatra – and discovered new stars such as Grace Kelly and Paul Newman. This productive collaboration with the powerful and resourceful Coe provided many dividends for a relative newcomer such as Arthur Penn.

Among his most deeply held artistic values, Coe's devotion to dynamic writing and vibrant acting actively reinforced Penn's veneration of the script's dramatic elements and the performer's subtle craft. As he told me during a series of interviews in Syracuse (New York) and then Stockbridge (Massachusetts): 'A legacy from the theater is you hold the scriptwriter in a certain reverence. ... At my invitation, scriptwriters come to the set. I want them there, and I like them there.'[14] The same respect is evident in his treatment of actors: 'The lesson I learn over and over again is how good the actors are, and what good actors mean to a work. You just learn again and again what fantastic things an actor can do and bring into a situation.' Penn carried these formal values into all his subsequent theatrical and cinematic work.

In addition to his early days in television and his sustained career in the American cinema, Penn has consistently remained attached to the theatre. In fact, he characterises himself as being far more 'instinctual' about theatre productions than he is about cinema. Before he made his first feature, he had already directed the Broadway hit *Two For the Seesaw* (1958). Even during his most productive film periods, however, he continued to direct successful stage productions, including *The Miracle Worker* (1959), *Toys in the Attic* (1960), *All the Way Home* (1960), *Golden Boy... The Musical* (1964), *Wait Until Dark* (1966), *Sly Fox* (1976) and *Golda* (1977). To this day, Penn remains a man of the theatre as well as film: he has created the Actors Studio Free Theatre in New York City, which is devoted to presenting plays out of the commercial mainstream, and currently serves as president of the revered Actors Studio, training

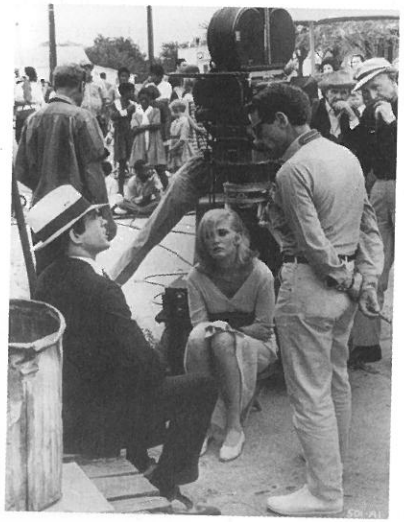
ground for many of the most respected performers in the history of American theatre and cinema.

For Penn, the most important result of his theatrical training is a highly developed sense of dramatic structure: 'While a movie doesn't have to resemble a play by any means,' he says, 'to be ignorant of what a play's structure can bring to a film is to be ignorant at your own peril.' And, as Penn himself readily admits, he only left behind theatricality with his direction of *Bonnie and Clyde*: 'In the earlier films, I had been photographing little theatrical scenes. I just knew by the time I made *Bonnie and Clyde* that I was relying on the combination of kinesis, language, attitudes, dance, costume, look, energy, the speed of cutting and internal rhythm as all being elements in the content of the scenes.'

Before looking at how Warren Beatty persuaded him to direct this risky, offbeat project penned by two novices, it is significant to note again that Penn straddles two vastly different film eras: the studio-bred generation of older directors and the young film 'brats' who eventually seized power during the 60s (George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma and Francis Ford Coppola). Born in 1922, Penn served as an infantryman in Europe during World War II and attended college on the GI Bill, initially at home and then in Italy. He was never particularly enamoured with film as a young man and never studied it formally in school. As he succinctly puts it, 'I don't think I knew a Ford film from a Ford car until I made my first movie.' For Penn, the movie theatre was not a hallowed refuge, not a romantic and isolated hideaway from life and its disappointments, as it was for many young auteurs who rose to prominence during the Vietnam era: 'I didn't go there to indulge my fantasies. It was not sacred for me.'

Thus Penn had far less encyclopaedic knowledge and emotional feeling for the history of the cinema than his younger, more fanatical colleagues. Penn's best films debunk the romanticised individualism of film pioneers such as John Ford and Howard Hawks. It was their style, their economic narrative structures, that resonated in his imagination, and he responded to them formally rather than thematically. So when this East Coast intellectual, this literate man who felt instinctually closer to theatre than to film, found himself directing his first feature (in 1957) on the same backlot as venerable film legends such as William Wellman (*Lafayette Escadrille*), Billy Wilder (*The Spirit of St. Louis*) and Fred Zinnemann (*The Old Man and the Sea*), he was not particularly awestruck.

Everyone associated with the creation of *Bonnie and Clyde* admits that Penn was not initially interested in directing this film, particularly given his recent forays in the byzantine Hollywood studio system. First, Burt Lancaster unceremoniously booted him from production on *The Train* (1964) when his sensibilities clashed with those of the opinionated film star. Next, he endured a totally exhausting and intensely frustrating experience making a big-budget production, *The Chase*, during which his continuous battles with screenwriter Lillian Hellman and producer Sam Spiegel left him physically and emotionally depleted from 'swallowing a daily diet of ignominy'. He was most upset about how Spiegel controlled his post-production work and ultimately recut the film as the producer, rather than the director, saw fit: 'I cannot explain what it is like to have somebody cut the film you shot, the one you had a kind of beat and rhythm to, where they end up emphasizing background and diminishing foreground.' Clearly sick of compromising and with a sizable Broadway hit (*Wait Until Dark*) to his name, Penn withdrew entirely from film production, declining even to consider the various scripts offered to him. So when his friend Warren Beatty approached him to direct a film about two 30s bankrobbers whom he remembered as 'a couple of self-publicizing hoods holding guns, plastered across the front page of the *Daily News*', the distrustful Penn was understandably 'ambivalent', 'gun-shy' and 'skittish'.[15]



18 Arthur Penn, Beatty and Faye Dunaway in conversation

But, as he was later to do with the studio heads and distribution honchos at Warner Bros., Warren Beatty refused to take Penn's polite protestations as a final answer. Beatty flew to New York and enlisted the powerful aid of Abe Lastfogel, who represented both the actor and the director as head of the William Morris Agency. The three met at Dinty Moore's restaurant and, as the bemused director now relates the scene: 'I didn't stand a chance. Warren can be the most relentlessly, persuasive person I know and, when he joined forces with Abe, a true elder statesman of the motion picture business, I had capitulated by the time Warren had finished his complicated order for a salad.'[16] Yet what finally won over the hesitant Penn was not Beatty's renowned charm or his culinary talent for combining greens and dressing; it was Lastfogel's reliable assurances that he would secure Beatty and Penn reasonable autonomy over the project and, even more essential, that Penn would retain final-cut privileges – a concession that would give him the artistic clout he lacked in his distressing experiences making *The Train* and *The Chase*.

But once he started intensive pre-production work on the picture, Penn grew increasingly uncomfortable with one aspect of the Newman/Benton script: the explicit *ménage à trois* between Bonnie, Clyde and C.W. Moss (originally a far more physically attractive character called W.D. Jones). Penn worried that this sexual deviance would throw the film's emotional balance off kilter and needlessly distance the audience from the two outlaws. Beatty was equally adamant about removing this segment of the story, claiming that audiences would never accept him in this role and, secondarily, noting that it was not particularly good for his image. As scriptwriter Newman says in his version of this much remarked upon deletion: 'We risked alienating the audience from what we so badly wanted – that it would love and identify with Clyde and Bonnie from the outset, so that by the time they start doing violent things, it is too late for the audience to back away from its identification with the desperadoes.'[17] Eventually, the director, star and writers agreed that Clyde should have some sort of sexual hang-up, that they needed to juxtapose his macho bravado with a deeper sense of insecurity. Together, they came up with the notion of his impotence, a character component which fit nicely with all the gun imagery, the external violence and, dramatically, the sexual connection between Bonnie and Clyde.

Beatty also brought another notable participant into the mix: Robert Towne, who would later emerge as a pre-eminent scriptwriter (*The Last Detail* [1973], *Chinatown* [1974], *Shampoo*) in Hollywood and director (*Personal Best* [1981], *Tequila Sunrise* [1988]) of his own stories. Towne, all the participants agree, added several relatively small but dramatically crucial elements to the script and, as Penn characterises it, he 'brought a crispness to certain scenes'.[18] For example, he sharpened the poignancy of the family reunion scene, which Penn sensed should come after the Eugene and Velma sequence, instead of preceding it as in the

Clyde's impotence is intimately linked with his violence

original script.[19] Towne wrote the section in which Clyde, swaggering with manly boasts before Bonnie's mother, brags that, once they have enough money, they will live just down the road from her. 'You do that and you won't live long,' Mrs Parker responds with clear logic. 'You best keep runnin' Clyde Barrow.' That flat, unemotional utterance written by Towne possesses great dramatic power and, after it, characters and audience alike know that Bonnie and Clyde are doomed.

One final member of the production team also demands mention, though her significant contributions came during the arduous process of post-production: Dede Allen, one of the most creative film editors in American cinema. On *Bonnie and Clyde*, as with subsequent Penn pictures, Allen served as a superb technical professional and, equally important, as a sympathetic sounding board to help the director navigate the emotional depths that inevitably occur during the editing process. 'You kind of alternate,' says Penn. 'You pass this weighty ball back and forth like shot putters playing with a sixteen pound shot.' Allen, currently a studio executive, went on to be nominated for two Academy Awards (*Dog Day Afternoon* [1975] and *Reds* [1981], for which Beatty won an Oscar as Best Director), worked with Penn on several films following *Bonnie and Clyde* (*Alice's Restaurant* [1969], *Little Big Man* [1970], *Night Moves* [1975], *The Missouri Breaks* [1976]), and edited many fine features, including *The Hustler* (1961), *Slaughterhouse Five* (1972), *Serpico* (1973), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *The Addams Family* (1991).

Everyone connected with *Bonnie and Clyde* has ample reason to rejoice in their decision to participate in its birthing. The film begat

thriving professional careers, most lasting more than thirty years, in a brutal business with a notoriously short memory. All the creative midwives (and many other contributors such as Allen, Towne, Faye Dunaway, Gene Wilder, Gene Hackman, art director Dean Tavoularis and costume designer Theadora Van Runkle) who oversaw its protracted release into the world have sustained lengthy, if at times uneven, careers ignited by the *Bonnie and Clyde* phenomenon. But the revolutionary role that *Bonnie and Clyde* played within the Hollywood system, as well as within American culture at large, reaches far beyond the impact it had upon the individual careers of its creators.

THE CULTURAL PHENOMENON

> Each age builds its monuments to memory and calls them art. The seeming solidity of the image, however, is constantly undermined by our ability to reinterpret, to change, to alter it through our acts of remembering.
>
> Sander Gilman, *Picturing Health and Illness*

Bonnie and Clyde remains one of the few films in cinema history whose impact was as profound outside the movie theatre as it was inside. Makings its appearance at a volatile juncture in American history, the film both reflected and contributed to the competing moral, political, economic and artistic visions dividing Americans during the late 60s and well into the 70s. These differences, deeply rooted in America's communal consciousness, represented a fundamental battle for the heart and soul of American society, a passionate struggle to define the very concept of what being an American ought to mean. Writing about these divisions as manifested later in the century, James Hunter observes: 'They are not merely attitudes that can change on a whim but basic commitments and beliefs that provide a source of identity, purpose and togetherness for the people who live by them.'[20]

Seen in this light, *Bonnie and Clyde* became a cultural dividing line: where you stood in relation to the issues raised by the film represented much more than the mere acceptance or rejection of one particular movie; it defined an ideological position along the current spectrum of societal debates. In particular *Bonnie and Clyde* impacted upon aesthetic