

## **“Something’s happening here”: *Bonnie and Clyde and the Sixties***

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Bruce Campbell

Something’s happening here  
What it is ain’t exactly clear  
(Buffalo Springfield)

It was a tumultuous time; 1967, the Age of Aquarius, the time of Flower Power, free love, and hippies.<sup>1</sup> There were “Be-Ins” on both coasts. In the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco, there was a celebration called the “Summer of Love,” and a top-ten song advised “if you’re going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair” (McKenzie). Young people were encouraged to “turn on, tune in, drop out,” and the nation suddenly learned about LSD.<sup>2</sup> A generation just coming of age called for “peace and love.” Others wanted quicker, more violent change. Young men were being sent to Vietnam to fight what many considered an unjust war. Figures from the US National Archives show that more than eleven thousand young Americans died in Vietnam in 1967. The next year, the number would rise to more than eighteen thousand. The war was costing taxpayers billions of dollars a year, and each month, thousands of young men were being drafted into military service.<sup>3</sup> When there were demonstrations against the draft and the war, protestors were met by police and National Guard troops. Groups like the Weathermen began using bombs to strike at “the system.”<sup>4</sup> Blacks seeking equality grew frustrated with the slow progress of Martin Luther King’s nonviolent approach to achieving racial equality. In the summer of 1967, race riots plagued Newark, Detroit, and other cities. There would be more. King and Robert Kennedy would be assassinated the following year; police and protestors would clash violently at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago; and, just three years later, Ohio National Guard troops

would shoot and kill four students at Kent State University. What was happening?

The world was being turned upside down. There was confusion about values, especially among the young. Baby boomers who had been taught to respect and obey the institutions of society now saw those institutions as corrupt and immoral. Good and bad, right and wrong, what to do? Should a young man register for the draft, do nothing, or actively resist and burn his draft card? Morality was ambiguous. Young people began to rebel, to push back against those whom they felt had betrayed them. Sometimes, that was their own parents. A gap was widening between the generations. “Don’t trust anyone over thirty” was the popular phrase. The young rejected prevailing middle-class values as shallow, hypocritical, and morally corrupt. This was a true “counter-culture,” counter to the status quo, to the mainstream, to authority.

In 1967, America was engaged in two wars: one in the rice paddies of Southeast Asia, the other within, on Main Street, USA. It was a cultural war between the status quo and the emerging counterculture, with its new ideas and fresh approaches. The art world was not neutral in this war. It took a definite point of view, coming down squarely on the side of the revolutionists, the young generation, the anti-establishment forces. In 1967, the rock musical *Hair* opened Off Broadway, spreading the message of Flower Power. Also in 1967, the Beatles christened the “sex, drugs and rock-n-roll” era with the revolutionary album *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. *Armies of the Night* described the October 1967 anti-war march on the Pentagon and won a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for Norman Mailer.<sup>5</sup> Just two years later, the counterculture reached its zenith on a farm in upstate New York. Billed as “An Aquarian Exposition: 3 days of Peace & Music,” it became known simply as Woodstock.

One place where the cultural changes in the society could be seen most clearly was at the movies. As film historian Peter Biskind sees it, two films released in 1967 “sent tremors through the industry” (15). One was *The Graduate*, a biting satire about the generation gap. The other was *Bonnie and Clyde*. The counterculture of the

'60s, whose leaders opposed and defied "the system," provided the perfect context for a film whose anti-heroes clash with the establishment. Real people, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, were small-time gangsters who tore through the Midwest on a wild crime spree during the Dust Bowl, Depression-ridden 1930s, but in the film, they become the embodiment of 1960s anti-establishment sentiment. As critic Roger Ebert said of *Bonnie and Clyde* when it was released: "this is a film aimed squarely and unforgivingly at the time we are living in. . . . The fact that the story is set thirty-five years ago doesn't mean a thing. It had to be set sometime. But it was made now and it's about us" (Ebert). The film's director, Arthur Penn, said in an interview for the American Film Institute that the way the film resonated at the time, especially with the young, was not planned, but understandable. "I think people associated and brought analogous situations in their own lives, resist the draft, resist the war in Vietnam, break out of these kind of constricted mores, have a sexual revolution. It just happened to be appropriate to that time" (Penn, "Arthur Penn on Directing..."). *The Guardian* agreed, weighing in on the film's fortieth anniversary: "It was immediately apparent to most people that *Bonnie and Clyde* was a zeitgeist picture, reflecting a troubled America tormented by an impossible war in Vietnam—riots in the black ghettos; campus demonstrations; draft card burning; military recruits fleeing to Canada" (French).

We decided to write a kind of French New Wave movie.  
(Robert Benton in TCM)

While a revolution was going on in the streets and on college campuses across America, there was another one underway in movie theaters. In the mid-1960s, the Hollywood film industry was floundering. It was stuck in a rut. Studio executives failed to recognize that the audience for motion pictures was changing. "Between the mid-fifties and mid-sixties that audience shifted from a predominantly middle-aged, modestly educated, middle-to-lower class group to a younger, better educated, more affluent and predominantly middle-class group" (Cook 874). But Hollywood

was not providing movies for this new population of film-goers. It continued to make conventional films in conventional ways. “What paid studio bills in the mid-1960s were James Bond extravaganzas, John Wayne westerns, Elvis Presley quickies,” says Harris (3). Studios churned out expensive epics that were enormous failures, possibly the most infamous being 1963’s *Cleopatra* with Elizabeth Taylor. In 1962, box office receipts dropped to their lowest level ever (Cook 919).

That all changed in 1967. The most praised films that year embraced counterculture, anti-establishment thinking, and social themes. It is as though Hollywood suddenly realized the power of film to carry social messages or to mirror the moral ambiguities and larger cultural questions being played out all around them every day. At the Academy Awards, four of the films nominated for best picture in 1967 commented in some way on the contemporary social scene. In addition to *Bonnie and Clyde*, there was *The Graduate* and two films that dealt with race relations: *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, about interracial marriage, and the starkly realistic *In the Heat of the Night*, the film about racist culture in the South that eventually won the Oscar. There could only be five films nominated at that time, and the fifth film was the critical and commercial failure *Doctor Doolittle*, a last gasp by the studios to try to manufacture a hit (Harris 2).

*Bonnie and Clyde* was especially representative of the time period because in addition to dealing with contemporary issues, it broke existing conventions of filmmaking. European directors, especially the French, were discovering new ways to use the medium. They rejected the look and structure of staid Hollywood films shot on studio sound stages. They used jump cuts, non-linear storytelling, natural lighting, and settings. They put the director above all—an “auteur” whose artistic vision guided the whole film.<sup>6</sup> These so-called “Nouvelle Vague” or “New Wave” directors were joined by other auteurs, such as Antonioni, Bergman, and Fellini, and their films were mostly shown in American “art houses.” These small, intimate movie theaters specialized in showing lesser-known, mostly non-American films, considered by many to be sophisticated

high art that was geared to urban and college audiences. When American directors began experimenting with these techniques and theories and inventing their own, they became their own new wave, one that would spawn a “Hollywood Renaissance,” a new generation of filmmakers who were to change American films forever. As *Bonnie and Clyde* screenwriter Robert Benton has said, “we decided to write a kind of French New Wave movie, set in America” (Benton).

And so they did. As Benton recalls, he and fellow screenwriter David Newman spent an intense period revising the film’s treatment with French director François Truffaut. Truffaut was interested in directing the film, but got funding for another project, *Fahrenheit 451*. He sent the treatment to his fellow French director Jean-Luc Godard who loved American gangster films. A deal could not be made with Godard either, and the directing assignment fell to an innovative young American director, Arthur Penn (Harris 34–38, 64–69, 148–154). However, the involvement of Truffaut places *Bonnie and Clyde* squarely in center of the film movement that continues to impact film to this day. Penn, along with Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Robert Altman, and others ushered in a New Wave of American directors. They brought modern sensibilities and innovative styles to American film. Penn considered his work not as a copy of French films, but as an integral part of this new film movement. When asked in 2010 at a special presentation of *Bonnie and Clyde* how much he was influenced by French New Wave filmmakers, Penn said not at all, that they influenced each other, their work was all part of the same film movement.<sup>7</sup>

*Bonnie and Clyde* boldly announces itself as a new kind of film in its opening shot. In extreme close up, we see a pair of lips, Bonnie’s (Faye Dunaway) lips. The huge, red lips filling the frame look like a Pop Art painting.<sup>8</sup> It could have been done by Andy Warhol, and in fact somewhat resembles his portrait of Marilyn Monroe. From this first shot, the ‘60s framework of Pop Art is established. There is a Pop Art quality throughout the film, one of the things that makes the realism of the violence all the more shocking and effective. This first scene goes on to show Bonnie writhing bored—and mostly naked—

on a bed in the summer heat. There is no Production Code censorship at work here.<sup>9</sup> From the start, the movie is suggestive. This is the “sexual revolution” on film. In its first few shots, we see clearly that this will be a film set in the 1930s but with a contemporary moral sensibility, contemporary to the 1960s. Screenwriter Benton said, “The French New Wave allowed us to write with a more complex morality, more ambiguous characters, more sophisticated relationships” (Biskind 27).

New Wave filmmaking can also be seen in the film’s constantly changing styles. There is not one unifying style to *Bonnie and Clyde*. Instead, it has varied styles, each appropriate to a particular scene or sequence. For example, the reunion scene in which Bonnie gets to see her mother and family again is not realistic at all. It is shot through a filter that makes things look hazy and dream-like. Some shots are in slow motion. There is only faint natural sound. This all gives the scene a nostalgic quality, a feeling of reminiscence. The style here is appropriate for what we sense is the last time the family will meet. It is touching and sentimental. Of course, when Clyde (Warren Beatty, who also produced the film) says he and Bonnie want to live near Bonnie’s mother, she replies that if they do, they won’t live long. The way this jars and shocks us out of the scene’s reverie—the clash of emotions—is also a sign of New Wave filmmaking. However, the style of the scene as a whole is in sharp contrast with the harsh realism of other scenes, such as when Buck Barrow dies. In this scene, overhead shots show the Barrow gang desperately trying to escape a clearing in the woods where they are surrounded. Bonnie and Clyde and C.W. get away, but from on high, the camera shows Buck face down on the ground, mortally wounded. It slowly zooms in to his fingers, spastically twitching out the final seconds of his life. It is this juxtaposition of styles, along with ironic elements, like getaways accompanied by banjo music, which sets the film apart as “New Wave” and gives it its force. “Much of its impact lies in its sudden mood swings between explicit violence, lyricism, comedy and drama” (King 32).

There's a man with a gun over there  
Telling me I got to beware  
(Buffalo Springfield)

Possibly because it was such a different kind of film, the release of *Bonnie and Clyde* was greeted with a number of negative notices, some of them strongly worded. Among the most infamous is *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther's August 14, 1967 review, which takes aim at the film's violence: "This blending of farce with brutal killings is as pointless as it is lacking in taste." There is little question that the violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* was the most controversial and criticized thing about it. As the *Guardian* said: "*Bonnie and Clyde* upped the ante on screen violence overnight" (French). It can be argued that by breaking barriers in screen violence, the film set the stage for and legitimized violence in films to come, such as in the work of directors like Sam Peckinpah and films like Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. It helped to hasten Hollywood's abandonment of the Production Code. Yet the violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* was a natural extension of the times in which it was made and the experience of the audience to which it was aimed. In its obituary for screenwriter David Newman, the *New York Times* said of *Bonnie and Clyde* "its extreme violence accurately reflected American culture during both the Depression and the Vietnam-shadowed, racially conflicted 1960's" (Lehmann-Haupt).

The violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* feels intrinsic to the story. The pair almost never initiates violence. It overtakes them despite their attempts to avoid it. Violent scenes usually begin with the cops in pursuit and shooting first. But it's the final scene, the ambush, where the pair of lover-gangsters meet their end, which has drawn the most attention. Critics at the time said the violence in the final sequence was gratuitous and excessive, that there was no need to show the bodies of the fallen couple bouncing spasmodically and in slow motion as they are hit again and again with a barrage of bullets. The impact is heightened by what came just before, Bonnie and Clyde riding in their car free and seemingly without a care, at the peak of happiness. They have just shared a piece of ripe, succulent

fruit, the juice dripping suggestively. They do not suspect what is to come. Director Arthur Penn defends the graphic nature of the sequence on artistic grounds, describing the violent shooting as akin to a dance: “Remember, this was the time of Marshall McLuhan. The idea was to use the medium as a narrative device. I wanted to take the film away from the relatively squalid quality of the story into something a little more balletic. I wanted closure” (Biskind 35).

However, the scene also exemplifies more. It shows an overreaction by law enforcement, the use of overwhelming force in an all-out assault on two people. As Richard Gilman put it in *New Republic*, the final ambush amounts to “an image of absolute blind violence on the part of organized society, a violence far surpassing that which it is supposed to be putting down.” Yet this overreaction is just what younger movie-goers had come to expect from law enforcement. Violence is how anti-war protests and civil rights marches were broken up. For those living in the ‘60s, violence was not new; it came into their homes every night on TV. It came from the jungles of Southeast Asia, from college campuses, from the streets of American cities. The ‘60s was a violent time. If art imitates life, is it any wonder violence would come to the most popular of American entertainments, the silver screen? As Geoff King says, “with the violence of the Vietnam War and race riots plastered across the television screen and weekly magazine covers, the younger generation made the implicit connection between the social upheaval of the 1960s and the surrogate violence of the 1930s criminal couple” (15). Peter Biskind says, “*Bonnie and Clyde* legitimized violence against the establishment, the same violence that seethed in the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of frustrated opponents of the Vietnam War. *Bonnie and Clyde* was a movement movie” (49).

The coming of violence, and sex, to the movies in the 1960s was also a reflection of the changing values of the counter culture. David A. Cook says, “the values of the new audience, like its lifestyles, were radically different from those of the old. For better or worse, it had a generally permissive attitude toward such former cultural taboos as the explicit representation of sex, violence and

death” (922). Along with a rejection of all things fake and artificial, ‘60s audiences would not accept the ‘30s style of gangster movie, in which Edward G. Robinson or James Cagney could shoot up a room without spilling a drop of blood. Says director Arthur Penn, “it used to be that you couldn’t shoot somebody and see them hit in the same frame; there had to be a cut. We said ‘let’s not repeat what the studios have done for so long. It has to be in-your-face’” (Biskind 35). In *Bonnie and Clyde*, a man chasing them jumps onto the running board of their getaway car. Clyde shoots him in the face at point blank range, and we see the gruesome result. However, here the moment is softened. Today we would graphically see the man’s head explode. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, Penn places the camera inside the car with Clyde, and we see the bullet shatter the side window, both symbolically shattering the man’s head and shielding us from the horrifying image. Still, this was a movie that pulled few punches. According to Penn, “it seemed to me that if we were going to depict violence, then we would be obliged to really depict it accurately; the kind of terrible, frightening volume that one sees when one genuinely is confronted by violence” (Penn interviewed by Gross). Penn also thought the film violence reflected the violence of time: “we’re in the Vietnam War, this film cannot be immaculate and sanitized and bang-bang. It’s f\*\*\*\*\*g bloody” (Biskind 23). In some ways, the final sequence was a brave choice. Other films of the period shied away from such graphic endings for their heroes. At the climax of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Paul Newman and Robert Redford are surrounded and decide to go down with guns blazing. Rather than show the grim fusillade, as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, director George Roy Hill stops the action. He freezes a somewhat heroic image of Butch and Sundance and lets the audio of their final gun battle play out over it.

Much of the violence in Penn’s film occurs in shootouts with the police. Our heroes, the glamorous, young, romantic couple are being attacked by “the laws.” The cops are the bad guys. In this film, they are mostly pictured as buffoons, chasing after the fleeing gang like the bumbling Keystone Cops of Mack Sennett’s 1920s silent comedies and accompanied by the upbeat sound of Lester Flatt and

Earl Scruggs picking “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” on their banjos. The lightheartedness is evident in the music throughout the film. No wonder, since it was scored by Charles Strouse, the composer of the 1960 Broadway musical-comedy hit *Bye Bye Birdie*. The police are abstract personalities made to look ridiculous. The only significant character representing the police is the sneering, mustachioed Texas Ranger, Frank Hamer (Denver Pyle). Here again is something that would have resonated with young people in 1967. They were likely to see police as the enforcers of the corrupt, morally bankrupt system they opposed. The police were the enemy. The friendly neighborhood beat patrolman they knew growing up with in the ‘50s was now a helmeted warrior on horseback swinging a club. At protests, police were called “pigs,” and there were aggressive chants of “off the pigs,” meaning “kill the police.” The image was cemented in the summer of 1968 at the Democratic Presidential convention in Chicago, when police clubbed and beat protestors on live TV while the crowds chanted “the whole world is watching” (NBC News Archives). So, at the movies, young audiences cheered when the cops looked foolish or were portrayed as clowns, and they applauded when the gang once again foiled the law and escaped.

Young people speaking their minds  
Picking up so much resistance from behind  
(Buffalo Springfield)

There was a gap between the older and younger generations in the 1960s, a big, wide, yawning gap. The older generation valued materialistic things, things that the younger generation saw as superficial and lacking in moral or spiritual value. The generation gap was seen most clearly on film in *The Graduate*. It established Mike Nichols as one of the American New Wave directors who were reshaping Hollywood. The main character, a recent college graduate, is repulsed and disgusted by the behavior of his parents and their friends. Like the cops in *Bonnie and Clyde*, adults in *The Graduate* are buffoonish caricatures. They care about material possessions and “making it.” They are superficial. The secret path to success that one of them whispers is “plastics.” This is all hollow and meaningless to