

“A Test for the Individual Viewer”: *Bonnie and Clyde*’s Violent Reception

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The Case of *Bonnie and Clyde*

To posit sexual display and violent action as the two most universal “attractions” of Hollywood movies is merely to state the obvious. In a practical sense, success for American movies may be gauged by the degree to which they are able to mass-produce audience excitement. There have, however, been instances in which that mass excitement has itself been deemed dangerously overstimulating.

Initially characterized as “tasteless” and “grisly” (*Time*, Aug. 25, 1967); as “stomach-turning” (*Newsweek*, Aug. 21, 1967); as “reprehensible,” “gross and demeaning,” featuring “some of the most gruesome carnage since Verdun” (*Newsweek*, Aug. 28, 1967); as “dementia praecox of the most pointless sort” (*Films in Review*, Oct. 1967), Arthur Penn’s 1967 release *Bonnie and Clyde* served, more than any commercial movie made in America before or since, to redefine the nature of acceptable on-screen violence. “A test for the individual viewer for his own threshold,” per one early reviewer, *Bonnie and Clyde* encouraged laughing “at sadism and murder [but] eventually repels you, and makes you angry or ashamed at having had your emotions manipulated” (*Newsday*, Aug. 14, 1967).

American mass culture may be considered a form of spectacular political theater that also functions as a feedback system. It is within this public space—which overlaps the arena of electoral politics—that rival scenarios and contending abstractions struggle for existence, definition, and acceptance. Thus, at once highly popular and extremely po-

larizing (itself an unusual accomplishment for a Hollywood movie), *Bonnie and Clyde* is significant as much for what it symbolized as for what it actually depicted.

Written by Robert Benton and David Newman, *Bonnie and Clyde* takes as its subject the quasi-historical, increasingly violent criminal exploits of a young couple and their accomplices throughout the central Southwest during the early 1930s. The story was sufficiently compelling to have inspired a number of previous movies. Nevertheless, *Bonnie and Clyde* was unprecedented both in foregrounding mayhem as a choreographed spectacle—most notoriously in the two-minute *danse macabre* that, ending the movie with a metaphor for the cinema itself, offered the startling image of the protagonists’ corpses reanimated by a barrage of gunfire—and in offering a scenario that, despite its period setting, was widely cited for its contemporary relevance.

Bonnie and Clyde remains important today as much for the shift in attitude that it embodies as for its intrinsic value as film—or even for the particular magnitude of its violence. Within two years of its release, the movie had already been supplanted as the ultimate in cinematic carnage by Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, which featured even further distended slow motion, additional spurting blood, and more kinetic editing. “A pace-setter in the display of violence,” *The Wild Bunch*’s climactic Götterdämmerung served as the “aggressive” film footage in a 1973 National Institute of Mental Health study, “Motivated Aggressiveness Perpetuated by Exposure to Aggressive Films and Reduced by Exposure to Nonaggressive Films.”¹

Nevertheless, over a quarter century after *Bonnie and Clyde*’s controversial premiere, political pundit David R. Boldt used the editorial page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Aug. 1, 1993) to attack the movie as the source for Hollywood “pornoviolence.” If *Bonnie and Clyde* has been “largely forgotten,” Boldt wrote, it is only “because its wretched excesses have been exceeded so often.” For Boldt, *Bonnie and Clyde* represents something akin to a national fall from grace: “I think we went wrong with the release of *Bonnie and Clyde* . . . the first in a wave of movies that came to the screen immediately after Hollywood’s self-policing apparatus was dismantled in 1966. . . .”

Boldt remembers his own negative response to *Bonnie and Clyde* as having been sharpened by a sense of social foreboding and alienation from the rest of the audience—which, he imagined, was enjoying the movie for the very reasons he loathed it: “All I knew the first time I saw it was that *Bonnie and Clyde* was a malignantly manipulative movie—and that all the other people in the theater around me seemed to be eating it up. I can actually recall thinking to myself at the time, ‘This is it. We’ve had it.’” As Boldt further notes, *Bonnie and Clyde* is not simply a violent display. It is a violent display given a particular perspective: “The entire film is told from the point of view of the criminals.”

The implications are clear. Liberated from the constraints of the movie industry's traditional "self-policing apparatus," the movie audience may be manipulated into passive complicity with the portrayal of criminal violence. Indeed, this complicity is perhaps an integral aspect of the mass audience's enjoyment. A movie like *Bonnie and Clyde* is thus itself a sort of symbolic crime—it makes us something like accomplices to murder. Of course, it is also possible that a discussion of the violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* is a way to talk about something else.

Historical Precedents

The question of violence in American movies has typically been linked to the representation of some criminal activity—most frequently episodes of gangsterism or juvenile delinquency. In fact, it is sometimes only in the context of criminal behavior that screen violence may even be perceived as problematic. Senator Bob Dole's widely publicized June 1995 attack on the American entertainment industry singled out *Natural Born Killers*, a movie concerning a murderous outlaw couple clearly modeled on Bonnie and Clyde, as a "nightmare of depravity" while citing *True Lies*, a scarcely less bloody film in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays an American espionage agent, as being "friendly to families."

In any case, the question of violence in American movies has largely been secondary to issues of sexual behavior. The earliest reported case of American movie censorship—in which Chicago police denied an exhibition permit to Essanay's 1908 *The James Boys in Missouri* for "criminalizing" American history—involved the representation of violent lawbreaking (de Grazia & Newman, 1982, pp. 177–78). Nevertheless, the 1927 Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) Production Code, administered by Will B. Hays, was almost exclusively concerned with issues of sex and nudity. The treatment of illegal behavior was not even raised as a question until the revised 1930 MPAA Code, which had been formulated in response to silent gangster films, like Josef von Sternberg's 1927 *Underworld* and 1928 *The Docks of New York* (Bergman, 1971, p. 5).

Little Caesar, released by Warner Brothers in early 1931, helped stimulate a subsequent cycle of gangster talkies. Popular and controversial, these movies made so great an impact that, as film historian Carlos Clarens would later note, "a mere 10 percent of [Hollywood's] yearly output suddenly came to represent the dominant trend" (1980, p. 81). Gangster movies were blamed for inciting violence—perhaps even that of the historical Bonnie and Clyde—as well as for providing practical information as to its application. In the summer of 1931, for example, it was reported that a New Jersey twelve-year-old returned from seeing

The Secret Six and consequently shot another child through the head (Bergman, 1971, p. 4).

The presumed threat was thus the possibility that impressionable members of the audience might wish to participate in that which the movie seemed to celebrate. “Does not the exhibition of gangster pictures in the so-called high delinquency neighborhoods amount to the diffusion of poison?” the 1933 best-seller *Our Movie Made Children* asked in devoting a major portion of its penultimate chapter to the sometimes fatal impact that *Little Caesar* had had upon impressionable young slum dwellers (Forman, 1935, pp. 195, 265ff.).

Attempting to maintain respectable perimeters for screen violence, the Hays Office proscribed on-screen bleeding and stipulated that a firearm and its victim not be framed together in the same shot. Hays was, however, challenged by the most violent gangster film of the cycle, Howard Hughes’s *Scarface*. The MPAA office returned *Scarface*’s script with the following directive from Hays: “Under no circumstances is this film to be made. The American public and all conscientious State Boards of Censorship find mobsters and hoodlums repugnant. Gangsterism must not be mentioned in the cinema. If you should be foolhardy enough to make *Scarface*, this office will make certain it is never released” (Clarens, 1980, p. 82). Hughes, unimpressed, is supposed to have told his director, Howard Hawks, to “screw the Hays Office [and] start the picture.” Despite some cuts and a few local bans, Hughes—who would, a decade later, tangle with the Hays Office over the issue of Jane Russell’s cleavage in *The Outlaw*—prevailed (Clarens, 1980, De Grazia & Newman, 1982, p. 36).

The first “General Principle” of the 1930 MPAA Production Code was that “no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.” (It was further mandated, under the section “Crimes against the Law: Murder,” that “brutal killings [were] not to be presented in detail” and any “use of firearms [would be] restricted to essentials.”) Nevertheless, the MPAA Code was not truly enforced until 1934, when the Hays Office was given additional muscle by the Catholic Legion of Decency. Again, the association of violence with criminal behavior was crucial. In the mid-1930s, Warner Brothers revamped and elevated the gangster genre with movies like *G-Men* (1935), *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), and *Public Enemy’s Wife* (1936), which glorified the role of the FBI and were, in some cases, endorsed by its director, J. Edgar Hoover (Bergman, 1971, pp. 84–88).

Thereafter, despite an occasional incident—the 1941 *Blood and Sand* remake was, for example, required to tone down a “gruesome” bullfight sequence (Leff & Simmons, 1990, p. 119)—the issue of on-screen violence lay largely dormant until several years after World War

II, when cuts were demanded in the 1949 juvenile-delinquency drama *City across the River* (Doherty, 1988, p. 119). The juvenile-delinquency cycle also included *Knock on Any Door* and *Bad Boy*, both 1949, as well as two other 1949 movies that can be seen as thematic precursors of *Bonnie and Clyde: Gun Crazy* and *They Live by Night*. A subsequent juvenile-delinquency movie, *The Blackboard Jungle*, and the Mike Hammer thriller *Kiss Me Deadly* (both 1955), initially rejected by censors, were prominently cited in the 1955 hearings held by presidential hopeful Estes Kefauver's Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency—as was the as yet unreleased *Rebel without a Cause* (Schumach, 1964, pp. 174–78).²

In 1957, Don Siegel's *Baby Face Nelson*, made for the low-budget studio Allied Artists, broke the MPAA interdiction against the representation of historical criminals. The following year, another small studio, American-International Pictures (which specialized in topical, drive-in fare) resurrected two early-1930s bandits for a teen-oriented double bill, *Machine Gun Kelly* and *The Bonnie Parker Story*. Roused to action, J. Edgar Hoover nostalgically warned that “In the face of the nation's terrifying juvenile crime wave we are threatened with a flood of movies and television productions which flaunt indecency and applaud lawlessness. Not since the days when thousands passed the bier of the infamous John Dillinger and made his home a virtual shrine have we witnessed such a brazen affront to our national conscience” (*Motion Picture Herald*, May 10, 1958). Despite this concern, however, violence in the movies would not reemerge as a significant issue for another decade—and only then in the context of a presidential assassination, an escalating, if undeclared, war, and a succession of civil disorders that would shock and convulse American society.

The Problem of Pornoviolence

David Boldt doesn't define (or credit) his apparent neologism “pornoviolence,” but the term, like the movie to which he applied it, first appeared during the summer of 1967. Attempting to answer the question, “Why Are We Suddenly Obsessed with Violence?” posed by the July 1967 issue of *Esquire*, Tom Wolfe's essay, “Pornoviolence,” analyzed such variegated phenomena as the sensational weekly tabloid the *National Enquirer*, an episode of the TV western *Gunsmoke*, Truman Capote's best-selling nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, and the sustained popularity of James Bond as exemplars of a “new pornography, the pornography of violence.”

What was it that made this “pornography” new? Albeit restricting his discussion to the realm of cultural production, Wolfe was struck by the widespread, obsessive interest in the minutiae of John F. Kennedy's death: “There has been an incessant replay, with every recoverable clin-

ical detail, of those less than five seconds in which a man got his head blown off.” Imagining that the preferred “vantage point” was “almost never that of the victim [but rather] the view from Oswald’s rifle,” Wolfe described a pornoviolence that was essentially spectacular and purely sensational: “The camera angle, therefore the viewer, is with the gun, the fist, the rock. . . . You do not live the action through the hero’s eyes. You live with the aggressor, whoever he may be” (Wolfe, 1977, pp. 161–62).

Wolfe linked this desire to align oneself with the instrument of aggression to the experience (and, in its compulsive repetition, Freud would suggest, to the attempted mastery) of a national trauma. As profoundly abrupt and disorderly as it was, the Kennedy assassination undermined the logic of the American democratic process. A history-altering crime by its very nature, the murder of the American president could not help but support the notion argued by the French revolutionary theorist Georges Sorel (1847–1922) that all great social change is inevitably marked by violence (Roth, 1980, pp. 50–51). For a sizable part of the American public, then, violence was not simply a source of excitement but an integral part of the historical process.

Among other articles, the July *Esquire* included one far less judgmental than Wolfe’s. In “Now Let the Festivities Begin,” regular contributors Robert Benton and David Newman surveyed those cultural artifacts that embodied “‘the fun’ of violence.” Casting a wider net than Wolfe’s to better snare the zeitgeist, the writers cited evidence ranging from true-crime best-sellers (*The Boston Strangler* and *In Cold Blood*) and current theatrical offerings (*Marat/Sade*, *Dutchman*, *MacBird*) through musicians as varied as the Rolling Stones and Archie Shepp to images as disparate as Andy Warhol’s electric chairs, Francis Bacon’s flayed bodies, and Marvel comic books. What these all had in common, per Benton and Newman, was their attitude: “The rules of reaction have changed: it’s not that old catharsis any longer, but that new kick.”

Catharsis connotes tragedy. But unlike Aristotle (or Tom Wolfe), Benton and Newman did not take any particular moral attitude toward the artistic representation of mayhem. Rather than a new pornography of violence, they would seem to propose a wide-ranging and fashionable aesthetic of violence for violence’s sake—a violence of style as well as content. Benton and Newman were not only the screenwriters for *Bonnie and Clyde*; they had originated the entire project. Although the writers scrupulously avoided plugging their long-germinating but soon-to-be-released film, the entire issue of *Esquire* may be seen as a rehearsal for its reception.

Bonnie and Clyde had its world premiere on August 4, 1967, as the gala opening attraction of the Montreal International Film Festival (itself part of the world’s fair, Expo 67). Bosley Crowther, the *New York Times* critic and then dean of American daily movie reviewers, was in

attendance and subsequently declared himself amazed that “so callous and callow a film should represent [the] country in these critical times.” *Bonnie and Clyde* was the “indulgence of a restless and reckless taste, and an embarrassing addition to an excess of violence on the screen” (*New York Times*, Aug. 7, 1967).³

Crowther was already in the midst of a campaign against movie violence, up until then exemplified by *The Dirty Dozen*, a new and highly popular war film. *The Dirty Dozen* had its world premiere in New York on June 16. The movie set house records at the Loew’s Capitol, a large Broadway theater, and, after opening nationally over the July 4 weekend, enjoyed the highest grossing week of any single picture in distributor MGM’s history. Indeed, *The Dirty Dozen* sold an unprecedented \$15 million worth of tickets during its first two months in release—a period that also brought a marked increase in American civil violence, much of it racial in nature and virtually all of it directed against the police.

On a symbolic level, the hot summer of 1967 opened on the afternoon of May 2, when eighteen representatives of the Oakland-based Black Panther Party for Defense provoked a media sensation by appearing, armed with M1 rifles and twelve-gauge shotguns, at the California state capitol building in Sacramento. Two weeks later, a Houston policeman was killed by sniper fire during disturbances at the predominantly black Texas Southern University. That same night in Washington, D.C., the controversial Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman Stokely Carmichael declared that “we’re going to shoot the cops who are shooting our black brothers in the back in this country” (*U.S. News and World Report* May 29, 1967). A number of American cities, including Boston, Tampa, Dayton, Atlanta, Buffalo, and Cincinnati, experienced a series of race riots over the next month. (Meanwhile, on June 23 in Los Angeles, police—for the first time—used force to break up a demonstration against President Lyndon Johnson and the American war in Vietnam.)

The Dirty Dozen’s extraordinary popularity thus coincided with a season of nationally televised violence. June’s relatively minor disturbances set the stage for the far more extensive Newark disorders that raged from July 12 through July 17, leaving twenty-three dead and causing \$10 million in damages. The following weekend’s Detroit riots (which ultimately required a force of eight thousand National Guardsmen and forty-seven hundred paratroopers to put down) produced nearly twice as many casualties and doubled the estimated cost of destruction. On July 30, the same day that order was finally restored in Detroit, the *New York Times* had published the latest missive in Crowther’s crusade under the perhaps dismissive headline “Another Smash at Violence.”

Here, the critic took issue with those who had written to the *Times*

to attack his attack on *The Dirty Dozen* (or, in one case, question his objections to the Italian western *For a Few Dollars More*, released in late June). To those who argued that violent movies manifested an accurate reflection of current American social reality and, in particular, the war in Vietnam, Crowther replied that, “By habituating the public to violence and brutality—by making these hideous exercises into morbid and sadistic jokes, as is done in *The Dirty Dozen*—these films of excessive violence only deaden their sensitivities and make slaughter seem a meaningless cliché.”

Hardly clichéd, however, *The Dirty Dozen* evoked World War II in a drastically revisionist way. The film’s eponymous antiheroes are a unit composed of murderers, rapists, and other violent misfits, released from the brig and commanded by a tough colonel (Lee Marvin) who has been ordered by the cynical American brass to lead them on a suicide mission behind enemy lines. On one hand, *The Dirty Dozen* is a glorification of dirty fighting that openly mocks society’s ambivalent dependence on the killer instinct. An army psychologist calls the Dozen “the most twisted bunch of antisocial psychopaths,” adding that he “can’t think of a better way to fight a war” and thus endorsing what could be termed the movie’s tough-minded realpolitik, its “dirty” secret. On the other hand, the movie is an attack on authority—of any kind. American commanding officers, no less than their German adversaries, are shown as essentially corrupt and unfeeling.⁴

Although *The Dirty Dozen* opens with a graphic representation of a hanging (the first of the “repellent subjects” that the 1930 MPAA Code stipulated be “treated within the careful limits of good taste”), extraordinary mayhem is withheld until the final mission. Then, with an undeniable slapstick quality, the Dozen trap the German generals—together with a number of innocent civilians, most of them women—in an underground bunker. They then pour gasoline through ventilator shafts and drop in live grenades. Unfolding in an atmosphere of frenzied cruelty, this astonishing sequence manages to invoke mass death by a combination of gas-chamber asphyxiation, saturation bombing, and napalm.

When *The Dirty Dozen* opened in New York, many reviewers appeared to be shocked and revolted. Despite the movie’s ambiguous relation to violence, few experienced the excessively graphic *Dirty Dozen* as antiwar so much as a crude and overly enthusiastic celebration of war—and this at a time when their own country was engaged in a major military operation. Crowther was the most outspoken in labeling the film “a raw and preposterous glorification of a group of criminal soldiers who are trained to kill and who then go about this brutal business with hot sadistic zeal . . . an astonishingly wanton war movie. . . . morbid and disgusting beyond words” (*New York Times*, June 16, 1967).

By Crowther’s lights, *The Dirty Dozen* was not only violent but

irresponsible. The movie's mayhem constituted a form of dangerous hyperbole akin to demagoguery. In objecting to the portrayal of the Dozen themselves, Crowther might almost have been attacking those leaders, SNCC chairman Carmichael and his successor H. Rap Brown, whose inflammatory rhetoric was widely reported and condemned before and, particularly, throughout the summer's riots. "To bathe these rascals in a specious heroic light—to make their hoodlum bravado and defiance of discipline, and their nasty kind of gutter solidarity, seem exhilarating and admirable—is encouraging a spirit of hooliganism that is brazenly antisocial, to say the least."

A number of *The Dirty Dozen's* reviews are similarly characterized by an unusual concern for the movie's effect upon its spectators. *Newsweek* (July 2, 1967) complained that the "orgy of unrestrained violence" with which *The Dirty Dozen* climaxed was designed "to stir only the atavistic passions of this audience." The *New York Post* (June 16, 1967) termed it "roughage for an audience needing entertainment increasingly hyped for the hardened" in which "kill-crazy brutality is exploited to the utmost" and concluded that it "could be a crowd pleaser." The *Daily News* (June 16, 1967) remarked that *The Dirty Dozen* opened to "the loudest blast of applause ever heard on old Broadway," while the *New Yorker* (July 22, 1967) observed that "the moronic muggings of the title characters were hailed by colleague thugs in the audience with gales of comradely laughter."

Mass excitement may be deemed overstimulating when violence is linked to the representation of criminal activity. *The Dirty Dozen* was understood less as a comment on warfare than, at once violent and antiauthoritarian, something that might be incitement to riot—although there is no evidence of any disturbances in any theater during the course of its release.

Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice* (June 29, 1967) was somewhat more specific and politically attuned in terming *The Dirty Dozen* "a glorification of the dropout [that was] well suited to slum fantasizing." Without specifically mentioning America's season of violence, Sarris theorized the source of the movie's appeal:

Jean Renoir has observed that people are moved more by magic than by logic. To sit in the balcony of the Capitol while Clint Walker and Jim Brown [both relatively sympathetic members of the Dirty Dozen] are demolishing two finicky noncoms is to confirm this observation. All the well-intentioned Operation Bootstrap cinema in the world cannot provide underdog audiences with the emotional release achieved almost effortlessly with one shot to the solar plexus. It's sad, but true. Blood is thicker than progressive porridge.

So it would be with the even more "political" and antiauthoritarian *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Bonnie and Clyde's Critical Reception

Considering *Bonnie and Clyde's* violence quotient, *Variety* (Aug. 9, 1967) had recommended a "hard-sell exploitation campaign." Warner Brothers complied, using one of the most outrageous slogans of the period for the first advertisement to run in the *New York Times* (Aug. 13, 1967): "They're young . . . they're in love . . . and they kill people."⁵

Such flippancy was provocative, and the critical response when *Bonnie and Clyde* opened in New York, on August 13, 1967, was no less strong. The "blending of farce with brutal killings is as pointless as it is lacking in taste," Crowther wrote in the *New York Times*. Then, something unusual happened. "We got advertising we never could have afforded," director Arthur Penn would recall twenty-seven years later in the course of a public interview at the American Museum of the Moving Image (Nov. 12, 1994). The *Times* was flooded with letters attacking Crowther, who felt compelled to publish yet a third denunciation of *Bonnie and Clyde*, this time accusing the movie of distorting history and, like *The Dirty Dozen*, pandering to a fashionable anti-Establishment anger.⁶

Such anger may have been even more fashionable than Crowther feared. That same week, in an unprecedented second review (Aug. 28, 1967), *Newsweek* critic Joseph Morgenstern recanted his original, *Dirty Dozen*-like characterization of *Bonnie and Clyde* as "a squalid shoot-'em up for the moron trade."

Now, Warner Brothers was running print ads in which the Barrow Gang thanked New York for its support while *Variety* (Aug. 30, 1967) gleefully reported the fracas as "Crowther's 'Bonnie'-Brook." The *Times* published another half-dozen letters praising *Bonnie and Clyde* as well as an interview with Arthur Penn in which he responded to Crowther's charges, arguing that his film was, if anything, a cautionary treatment: "The trouble with the violence in most films is that it is not violent enough" (Sept. 17, 1967). Let *Films in Review* (Oct. 1967) call *Bonnie and Clyde* "evil"; the *New Yorker* ran two positive reviews. Critic Penelope Gilliat's original notice was followed two months later, in the October 21 issue, by freelancer Pauline Kael's nine-thousand-word manifesto: "The innocuousness of most of our movies is accepted with such complacency that when an American movie reaches people, when it makes them react, some of them think there must be something the matter with it—perhaps a law should be passed against it."

Kael raised the rhetorical stakes considerably by linking her defense of *Bonnie and Clyde* to issues of free speech, illegality, and even insurrection, while implicitly defending the overthrow of the MPAA Code. At the same time, she suggested that *Bonnie and Clyde* was perceived as dangerous precisely because it succeeded in popularizing a hitherto rarefied attitude toward criminal violence: "*Bonnie and Clyde* brings

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Written by DAVID NEWMAN and ROBERT BENTON · Music by Charles Strouse · Distributed by WARREN BEATTY · Directed by ARTHUR PENN

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FIGURE 6.1 *Variety* had recommended a “hard-sell exploitation campaign” and Warner Brothers complied, using one of the most outrageous slogans of the period for *Bonnie and Clyde*: “They’re young . . . they’re in love . . . and they kill people.” Courtesy of Warner Bros. © 1967 Warner Bros.—Seven Arts and Tatira-Hiller Productions.

into the almost frighteningly public world of movies things that people have been feeling and saying and writing about.” Presumably, these might include the cultural artifacts that Benton and Newman surveyed in “Now Let the Festivities Begin” as well as the philosophical justification for political violence found, for example, in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Movies, as the anxious response to *The Dirty Dozen* suggests, considerably democratized the audience. “Once something is said or done on the screens of the world, once it has entered mass art, it can never again belong to a minority, never again be the private possession of an educated, or ‘knowing’ group.” The movie *Bonnie and Clyde*, like the historical Bonnie and Clyde, appeared to Kael to be acting out “forbidden roles” and popularizing illicit thrills. Indeed, establishing itself as a post-MPAA (and post-liberal) release, *Bonnie and Clyde* wastes little time establishing a social or psychological basis for its protagonists’ criminal behavior—the better to dwell on that behavior itself. Moreover, from the onset, the capacity for criminal violence is shown alternately as a substitute for or a stimulant to sexual relations.

Bored waitress Bonnie Parker (Faye Dunaway) and brash ex-con Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty) meet on a dusty, depressed West Dallas afternoon when she foils his attempt to steal her mother’s Model T. The scene is fraught with erotic suggestion. Bonnie, who observes Clyde from her bedroom window, is herself nude when first seen by him (and us). After thwarted Clyde proudly shows her his revolver, she fondles the barrel suggestively and taunts him into robbing a grocery store. Clyde does so and Bonnie is so aroused she literally throws herself at the gunman as they careen off in their newly stolen getaway car. To her disappointment, he is sexually impotent. In a scene thus fraught with embarrassment and anxiety, Clyde reasserts control by appealing to Bonnie’s desire for glamour and successfully enlisting her as his accomplice in crime. Clyde, as he says, may not be a “lover boy,” but he is evidently a crack shot and much is made of his teaching eager Bonnie how to handle a gun.

The movie’s initial tone is saucy and lighthearted, with frequent use of the rollicking banjo piece “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” as a theme for the outlaw pair’s comic mishaps. Holding up another grocery, Clyde narrowly avoids having his head split by a clerk who attacks him from behind with a meat cleaver. (“He tried to kill me,” he tells Bonnie in amazement.) After attempting to rob a bank that has already failed, Bonnie and Clyde pick up a loveably stupid accomplice, C. W. Moss (Michael J. Pollard), as a driver, only to be confounded in their next job when he parks the getaway car. Here, for the first time, the comedy becomes too real. Clyde is compelled to shoot the bank teller who pursues them point-blank in the face—a shock image that deliberately re-



FIGURE 6.2 From the outset of *Bonnie and Clyde*, capacity for criminal violence is shown alternately as a substitute for or a stimulant to sexual relations. Courtesy of Warner Bros. © 1969 Warner Bros.—Seven Arts Inc.

calls the violent death of an elderly, bespectacled woman in the Odessa Steps sequence of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*.

This first killing is followed by an even more obvious film citation with a cut to Bonnie, Clyde, and C. W. at the movies watching the now-campy opening number, "We're in the Money," from a thirty-four-year-old Warner Brothers musical, *Gold Diggers of 1933*. Bonnie, who is least affected by the death of the bank officer, will later reprise the song before her mirror. In general, she and Clyde act as though they are living a movie. Their initial relationship—defined by Clyde's discovery, training, and casting of Bonnie—is suggestive of a producer grooming a prospective star. For virtually the entire period that they are fugitives from the law, the couple can be seen explicitly constructing their public images—posing for photographs, introducing themselves as celebrities, enjoying their press clips, and, in the case of Bonnie, writing doggerel verse to celebrate their exploits.

It is the newspaper publication of "The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde," and thus public recognition of his existence, that inspires Clyde to a successful sexual performance. "Once incarnated as myths," as Richard Maltby notes in *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the*

Ideology of Consensus, Bonnie and Clyde are shown to behave "just like 'normal' people: their subsequent assassination may then be presented as a tragic irony, in which they are victimized for their non-conformity by a vindictive society" (1983, p. 309). Significantly, once Bonnie and Clyde achieve what might be termed ordinary sexual satisfaction, the capacity for outrageous—and outrageously punitive—violence resides entirely with the state.

Even before the movie's climax, the audience has been conditioned to fear mayhem. Pursued by the Texas Rangers, the increasingly celebrated Barrow Gang joins forces with Clyde's older brother, Buck (Gene Hackman), and Buck's wife, Blanche (Estelle Parsons). After an initial flurry of enthusiasm, the mood darkens. The Barrows are twice trapped in rustic motor courts by small armies of lawmen and twice compelled to shoot their way out to freedom, killing several police officers in the process. *Bonnie and Clyde's* obvious aestheticism, its pleasure in broken glass and overturned automobiles, appeared to trivialize violence. When the members of the Barrow Gang were themselves the victims of gunshots, however, the movie raised the firepower to wartime dimensions. (*Esquire's* November 1967 issue described the penultimate gun battle as "the Siege of Dienbenphu.") This allowed for some painful verisimilitude, as when Buck is naturalistically shot in the head and Blanche, herself wounded, launches into what would be an Oscar-winning rant of denial.

Similarly, the protagonists' climactic, bloody perforation has a tremendous finality. The shooting stops, the lawmen emerge from their ambush and advance toward the car. At this point, the movie literally stops dead; Bonnie and Clyde no longer exist, the screen goes black.

Bonnie and Clyde as Arbiters of Fashion

Bonnie and Clyde divided American critics but the civil war was a brief one. Bosley Crowther retired at the end of 1967 (ultimately replaced by Vincent Canby, whose sympathetic Penn interview had signaled the senior critic's waning power); Kael went on staff at the *New Yorker* to become the most influential American movie critic of the next two decades. By that time, *Bonnie and Clyde* was certified pop art, featured on the cover of the December 8, 1967, issue of *Time* as interpreted by Robert Rauschenberg for an essay entitled "The New Cinema: Violence . . . Sex . . . Art."

Time, which had earlier panned *Bonnie and Clyde* under the headline "Low-Down Hoedown" as "a strange and purposeless mingling of fact and claptrap," blandly reversed itself to proclaim the movie "the sleeper of the decade." Whereas *Time's* original review parroted Crowther's outrage that *Bonnie and Clyde* had represented the nation in Montreal, the newsweekly now echoed Kael's assertion that audiences

left the movie in a state of stunned reverie: "There is usually a hushed, shaken silence to the crowds that trail out of the theaters."

By some accounts, the anonymous *Time* staffer who initially reviewed *Bonnie and Clyde* was subsequently relieved of such responsibilities (Clarens, 1980, p. 259). *Newsweek* (Dec. 18, 1967), meanwhile, would amusedly cite *Pravda's* fuddy-duddy blast against the "decadent" *Bonnie and Clyde*. If the Russians missed the fun of violence, *Time's* cover essay was ostentatiously au courant in invoking *Cahiers du Cinema* and paraphrasing Jean-Luc Godard to explain how narrative, in the movies, may only serve as a pretext, that filmmakers need not adhere to conventions, and that comedy and tragedy might be blurred: A "segment of the public wants the intellectually demanding, emotionally fulfilling kind of film exemplified by *Bonnie and Clyde*." Tastes had grown more sophisticated. Violence was no longer restricted to the moron trade. Television had taken over Hollywood's function and the "cinema" was now "the favorite art form of the young."

The generational relationship was clinched when the December 26, 1967, issue of *Time* ran a letter written by an eighteen-year-old college freshman from Peoria, maintaining that *Bonnie and Clyde* was "not a film for adults," which was precisely why it had incurred such Establishment wrath. Nor was it the violence, she wrote, that had shocked her peers: "The reason it was so silent, so horribly silent in the theater at the end of the film was because we *liked* Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, we identified with them and wanted to be like them." But what exactly did *that* mean?

One can hardly imagine such a letter being written to *Time* in defense of *The Dirty Dozen*. As the authors of the discarded MPAA Code feared, the attractive protagonists of *Bonnie and Clyde* had seduced impressionable viewers into complicity with criminal violence. Appropriating the romantic saga of the Outlaw Couple, *Bonnie and Clyde* drew legitimacy from one of Hollywood's oldest stories even as it invited a new and sophisticated complicity with the perhaps illicit pleasures purveyed by the movies. *Bonnie and Clyde* signaled a willingness to suspend moral judgment and go with the flow. Its success, as Richard Maltby notes, demonstrated "the extent to which the obligatory moral certainties of the Production Code's linear narratives had been discarded in favor of a self-regarding opportunism which allowed performers to act as they pleased, as free from social conventions as they were from narrative responsibilities" (1983, p. 312).

Bonnie and Clyde promoted an appreciation of crime as a game ruined by a grown-up society's tedious insistence that acts have consequences. Some took this literally. The *New York Times* (Mar. 23, 1968) reported that five teenage boys in dress "apparently inspired by the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*" were arrested in the affluent suburb of Westport, Connecticut, and charged with breach of the peace after "creating

a disturbance at a local bank” by brandishing a toy gun as an armored car pulled up across the street.

Not simply as photogenic as pop stars (in one sequence, the Barrow Gang playfully cluster around the car of a hapless undertaker and his date, mashing their faces against the windows as if imitating the Beatles in *A Hard Day's Night*), Bonnie and Clyde are simultaneously victims and aggressors. Meanwhile, as Maltby points out,

the interplay of comedy (in which the gang is always seen to laugh) and violence (in which the gang is always seen to suffer) enforces the audience's emotional attachment to them. . . . The ingratiating nature of the central performances allows the spectator no viewpoint other than that of the characters themselves, and the narcissistic display of style as its own justification obliges the audience to make its judgments on the appearances with which Beatty and Dunaway are so obsessed. (1983, p. 313)

It should not be surprising then that, for some, *Bonnie and Clyde* was not so much overly violent as excessively glamorous: “Pretty people who kill, and the killing they do is pretty too,” wrote Jimmy Breslin in *New York* (July 8, 1968), adding that if “you want to see a real killer, then you should have been around to see Lee Harvey Oswald.”

Good looks, swell clothes, and impossible cool set Bonnie and Clyde apart from their dowdy environment. That Beatty and Dunaway themselves appear too old to be a couple of crazy mixed-up kids is part of the movie's pronounced figure-ground problem. These were no ordinary delinquents. Crowther had complained that *Bonnie and Clyde*'s “sleazy, moronic” protagonists were shown “as full of fun and frolic as the jazz-age cut-ups in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*” (*New York Times*, Aug. 14, 1967), and couturiers, certainly, understood that they were scarcely a pair of dust-bowl losers. If anything, Bonnie and Clyde's style suggested that of the wealthy young couple in *The Great Gatsby*, motoring heedlessly through the hinterlands, smashing up the lives of lesser “little people,” and then retreating into their money.

Bonnie and Clyde were too beautiful to grow up, become domestic, join the middle class. Their vehicle was about going over the edge, hence the joke of the January 13, 1968, *New Yorker* cartoon in which a laughing pair of pear-shaped middle-aged bourgeois announce themselves on an apartment intercom, “Open up. It's Bonnie and Clyde!” According to screenwriters Benton and Newman, the couple's real offenses were not robbing banks and killing policemen but, rather, crimes of lifestyle: Bonnie's insolent poetry and cigar smoking, Clyde's sexual hang-ups, the couple's “existential” relationship and self-absorbed desire for celebrity.

In their original film treatment, Benton and Newman wrote that “if Bonnie and Clyde were here today, they would be hip. . . . Their style,

their sexuality, their bravado, their delicacy, their cultivated arrogance, their narcissistic insecurity, their curious ambition have relevance to the way we live now." Bonnie, in particular, was for them "a kind of strange and touching vision: a pretty girl who was both tough and vulnerable, who was both Texas and universal, who wrote poetry and shot policemen, who loved life and courted death" (*Mademoiselle*, Mar. 1968). One wonders if the writers weren't responsible for the photo gallery of "Jail Birds," comely young women currently in jail for crimes of violence, that postscripted *Esquire's* dossier on violence.

From the perspective of thirty years, what is most striking about *Bonnie and Clyde* is the public's widespread and largely spontaneous desire to participate more fully in that which the movie seemed to be. Unlike *The Dirty Dozen*, *Bonnie and Clyde* inspired songs recorded by artists as disparate as Merle Haggard, Brigitte Bardot, and Mel Tormé. Bonnie Parker's sister cut an album-length interview. British singer Georgie Fame's mock ragtime "Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde" was banned in Norway (as was the movie itself) and France because it used the sound of machine-gun fire as percussion. Unprepared for the movie's extraordinary success, Warner Brothers scrambled to issue a soundtrack album six months after *Bonnie and Clyde's* original release had placed its bluegrass theme, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," in the top ten (number one in England).

By early 1968, when Warren Beatty prevailed upon Warner Brothers to rerelease *Bonnie and Clyde* with a new, more dignified advertising campaign that stressed its artistic merits, the film had ignited several clothing fads on both sides of the Atlantic. These included a return to calf-length "midi" or "maxi" skirts, a revival of fedoras, wide ties, and (for the first time in years) berets. Nor did viewers fail to notice that Faye Dunaway wore no brassiere. Even before the March issue of *Harper's Bazaar* showcased "The Gangster Game," *Life* put Dunaway on the cover of its January 12, 1968, issue as "Bonnie: Fashion's New Darling."

Newsweek's March 4, 1968, Dunaway cover proclaimed her "a with-it girl of the '60s," the first American actress to "electrify the world's moviegoers" since Marilyn Monroe. But was it the actress or the role that so captivated the public? Or was it the sense, articulated by the Weimar social critic Siegfried Kracauer, that "an idea bursts out of the darkness and can be formulated"?

The social world is at all times filled with countless spiritual forces or entities that one can simply call ideas [and] what these ideas have in common is that . . . they all want to become reality themselves. They appear within human society as a concrete, material should-being [*Sollen*] and have an inborn drive to realize themselves. (Kracauer, 1995, p. 143)

Women's Wear Daily announced that the hot shade for spring 1968 was "the gun-barrel gray of Bonnie's pistol" (*Newsweek*, Dec. 18, 1967). The March 1968 *Mademoiselle* gave Dunaway a "special award," explaining, in suitably Kracauerian terms, that "Every so often a new look comes into being. It may float the air unlabeled, unclaimed in origin, before it crystalizes and people say, 'That's it. That's what we're talking about.'" Which is what happened with *Bonnie and Clyde's* Faye Dunaway. Suddenly *she* brought a look to life, focused it by the way she walked and talked and wore her clothes. . . ." In short, the movie was an event. It meant something. It was Now.

Bonnie and Clyde as a Political Text

As Arthur Penn defended *Bonnie and Clyde* by pointing out that "violence was part of the American character" (1967), so the mayhem in his movie was not only unusually bloody and vivid but appreciated in a contemporary, as well as a period, context.⁷ Like an updated version of the anarchist Bonnot Gang, who robbed banks (and invented the motorized getaway) in pre-World War I France, *Bonnie and Clyde* even seemed to articulate a political justification for their criminal activities. They several times express their solidarity with dispossessed farmers and other victims of the Depression and link this to their hostility toward banks. Humiliating authority is another one of their specialties.

Moreover, the movie suggests that, for the sexually dysfunctional Clyde, guns are in some way compensatory. In the libidinal economy of *Bonnie and Clyde*, violence is thus a consequence of repression—sexual or otherwise. (As Andrew Kopkind wrote in the September 28, 1967, issue of the *New York Review of Books* that "to be white and a radical in America this summer is to see horror and feel impotent," so Dunaway cited the source of her identification with Bonnie: "The biggest thing about Bonnie was her frustration. She was up against a stone wall—a girl with potential who is blocked" [*Newsweek*, Mar. 4, 1968].) Just as *Bonnie and Clyde's* lack of sexual fulfillment is presented as a contributory cause of the Barrow Gang's violence, so their hard-won sexual happiness must be punished by the police.

To some degree, *Bonnie and Clyde* initially appeared as a semiotic jumble. The *Nation*—which, back in January 1931, had accused Hollywood of crowning the lawless "with the Romantic halo of bravery and adventure that helps to disguise their fundamental moronism"—had the sense that *Bonnie and Clyde's* actions would "strike the viewer with icy familiarity in our day of motorcycle gangs and flower children, Nazi insignia, cheap beads, incense, drugs, apathy and motiveless violence" (Cawelti, 1973, p. 90).

The same week that *Time* highlighted *Bonnie and Clyde* on its cover,

that of the *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 8, 1967) featured a David Levine caricature depicting President Johnson as a suitably degenerate Clyde, with Secretary of State Dean Rusk as his demure and diminutive Bonnie. Critic Stanley Kauffmann made a similar connection at a lower level, noting in the *New Republic* that Gene Hackman, who played Clyde's brother, looked and sounded like "a young LBJ." Indeed, the month *Bonnie and Clyde* opened, Rap Brown had called the president "a wild, mad dog—an outlaw from Texas" (*Time*, Aug. 4, 1967).

But the equation between *Bonnie and Clyde* and America's leaders got things backward. Although fundamentally anarchic in its celebration of self-absorbed hatred of authority, *Bonnie and Clyde* was generally felt to be a film of the left. Penn made a specific link to Black Power, proudly telling *Cahiers du Cinema* that, during one of the preview screenings, the "five Negroes present . . . 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'" (Cawelti, 1973, p. 19).

Penn's anecdote, his evident pride at this particular endorsement, and his subsequent observation that African Americans were at "the point of revolution" suggest that *Bonnie and Clyde's* appeal (as well as its danger) was less mayhem per se than a new attitude toward mayhem. The movie spoke to and popularized the neo-Sorelian cult of violence that Tom Wolfe would eventually label "radical chic." Reporting in the December 21, 1967, *Village Voice*, where *Bonnie and Clyde* was "the apotheosis of the New Style," in London theater critic and playwright Charles Marowitz summed up this stance in somewhat gentler terms: "If you are a bonnie-and-clyder, you are pro-camp and anti-Ugly; pro-permissiveness and anti-authoritarian; an advocate of the easy, improvised approach to life rather than a Five Year Planner. You pledge allegiance to the Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones and all they stand for, and walk imperturbably toward the exit-doors while the National Anthem is playing."

Marowitz maintained that "the heady ecstasy with which Bonnie and Clyde break the law is echoed in the arcane pleasure that attends pot parties in north and southwest London." In the United States, of course, the youthful outlaw culture not only encompassed taking drugs but equally included demonstrating against the government, evading the draft, and, in the most extreme case of the Black Panthers, shooting it out with the police.

No less than Arthur Penn, white protesters and student radicals were drawn to violence by the example of Black Power. The issue of *New Left Notes* (June 26, 1967) published to coincide with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) annual convention anticipated Bonnie as fashion's darling by emblazoning its cover with a smiling, rifle-toting "New American Woman." Appropriating a term from the Black Panthers, *New Left Notes's* September 25 issue would be the first to char-

acterize the authorities as “pigs.” Indeed, the period of *Bonnie and Clyde*’s production is identical to the development of the Black Panther Party, whose ten-point program was written in Oakland by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale as the movie began filming outside Dallas in October 1966.

The Dirty Dozen reigned as a box-office hit during the season of urban riots; the righteous outlaws of *Bonnie and Clyde* seemed to anticipate the fall 1967 escalation in antiwar political rhetoric and symbolic activity. “Here I was,” wrote Berkeley activist Michael Rossman of Stop the Draft Week, “trying to sing what it’s like to see the vectors of the war, the breaking black thing, the incipient hippy pogrom focus on our heads, and us on the streets of Oakland and at *Bonnie and Clyde* for the third time, trying to learn what to do next while the culture decides to eat its young” (1971, p. 238). The notion of *Bonnie and Clyde* as text (the great fear of the old Production Code) is striking. For Rossman, *Bonnie and Clyde* had an oracular quality. Nor was he alone. The first line of Abbie Hoffman’s proposed advertisement for the scheduled October 14 “exorcism” of the Pentagon was “Don’t miss *Bonnie and Clyde*” (Hoffman, 1968, p. 41).

An international revolutionary martyr had been born on October 7, when Bolivian soldiers captured and executed Che Guevara. Two weeks later, Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton was wounded and imprisoned after a gunfight with the Oakland police. From the point of view of the counterculture, then, *Bonnie and Clyde* was right on time. (At the same time, fall 1967 saw the use of incendiary buzzwords in various advertising campaigns for automobiles, liquor, cigarettes, detergents, and deodorants—the best-known of these being the “Dodge rebellion,” which cosponsored the 1967 World Series.)

SDS militant Gerald Long wrote a piece in the September 9, 1967, issue of the *Guardian* explaining that *Bonnie and Clyde*’s true subject was “the violation of bourgeois property relations.” *Bonnie and Clyde* is not a liberal or sociological film—times are hard, this is the result: “Anybody with a grain of sense would be out robbing these banks.” *Bonnie and Clyde*, C. W., et al. “are just out there doing their thing, the thing they should be doing, and the camera and the audience are digging it and zooming along with them on the flight of the banjos plunking in the background. The banjos are freedom, integrity, spirit, all the things that bourgeois bankers, sheriffs and undertakers are not.”

When the two “consciousness-expanding outlaws” drive into the service station where C. W. Moss is pumping gas, Long wrote, it’s as though “a Mustang convertible pulls up with Luis Turcos, Frantz Fanon, and Nguyen Van Troi inside and they hold the door open and say, ‘Hop in man, we’re driving on down to the Pentagon.’” Long, who would sign the Weatherman manifesto in June 1969, expressed his hope that *Bonnie and Clyde* would break attendance records: “The audience really

gets angry when the anonymous Minions of Bourgeois Order blast down the Blyth Spirit of the Revolution.”

Long’s celebration of *Bonnie and Clyde* was topped four months later when *New Left Notes*, which had never before reviewed a commercial movie, devoted fully a quarter of its January 8, 1968, issue to a discussion of the movie. Arguing that Long gave Hollywood “more ideological credit than it deserves,” Neil Buckley asserted that *Bonnie and Clyde* was revolutionary beyond the filmmakers’ intentions in part because historical context had overdetermined its reception. The current incidence of violence in America precluded viewing the movie as a “tragedy of youth gone bad.” Rather, *Bonnie and Clyde* was “the political equivalent of a horror movie” in its demonstration that the punishment for challenging the capitalist order is death: “The viewer leaves the film with a tingling sensation where the bullet holes might have been in his body had he too gone wrong—had he too violated property rights.”

Buckley’s reading of the movie deliberately blurs the distinction between the fictional scenario on the screen and the political scenario he imagines for himself and his comrades:

We are not potential Bonnies and Clydes, we are Bonnies and Clydes, the real things, challenging America in a real and fundamental way (which Bonnie and Clyde did not do—which makes us exceedingly dangerous).

In its essential element, *Bonnie and Clyde* is revolutionary because it defines possible futures for us based on the reality of conditions under which we struggle. The film does not depict a revolutionary ideology. It does much more than that; it defines a revolutionary’s lot.

What defines a revolutionary’s lot? For Sorel, violence had the additional value of acting as a scission to split a political movement from the larger society. Although both describe the mayhem committed against Bonnie and Clyde, neither Long nor Buckley directly addresses the Barrow Gang’s own capacity for violence—even though it is precisely this violence that not only defines the outlaw band but also creates that scission dividing the movie’s most appreciative viewers from those most offended.⁸

Post-*Bonnie and Clyde* Hollywood Cinema

Bonnie and Clyde grossed \$22.7 million—ten times its budget and the thirteenth highest grossing American movie up to that date—and was nominated for ten Oscars at a ceremony that had to be delayed for two days to acknowledge the assassination of Martin Luther King. By then, the movie had become the symbol of media violence. Three weeks after the King assassination, the *New York Times Magazine* (Apr. 28, 1968) published a symposium entitled “Is America by Nature a Violent Soci-

ety?” Two of the nine participating intellectuals cited *Bonnie and Clyde*. *Life*'s June 21, 1968, cover story, “The Psycho-biology of Violence,” by Albert Rosenfeld, links the assassination of Robert Kennedy to “the climate of violence . . . where real life and fictional—as in the popular movie *Bonnie and Clyde*—are filled with images of brutality.”

The same, of course, was true for *Life*. The first page of Dr. Rosenfeld's essay is illustrated with a frame enlargement of Faye Dunaway in the throws of Bonnie's death spasm: “The casual acceptance of violence, epitomized in the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*, creates a climate which some scientists believe can arouse susceptible people to violent acts.” Similarly, Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s 1968 broadside *Violence: America in the Sixties* deplored *Bonnie and Clyde* for “its blithe acceptance of the world of violence—an acceptance which almost became a celebration” (p. 53).

Within a week of Robert Kennedy's death on June 5, President Johnson's executive order established the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. *Bonnie and Clyde* was cited repeatedly (albeit frequently sight unseen, according to testimony) during the commission hearings held in December 1968. Asked about the movie, Jack Valenti obscured his own evident ambivalence by pointing out that it had been singled out for praise by the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures (*Violence and the Media*, 1969, p. 206).

Valenti's remarks prompted a reply from Representative Hale Boggs, Democrat from Louisiana, that echoed the complaints of the 1930s:

We had a murder in my town committed by an 18-year-old boy who had come out of *Bonnie and Clyde* one hour before. He killed a young man who was running a drive-in grocery store. And it was just a senseless murder. Now, whether or not what he saw in *Bonnie and Clyde* had any impact on the murder, I don't know. But I know that what I say to you is a fact—that he saw this movie which glorifies violence.

Boggs, who pointed out that “those *Bonnie and Clyde* characters lived in my State,” was particularly annoyed by Valenti's use of the award (for the best “mature” picture of 1967) by the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures to defend *Bonnie and Clyde*, citing in reply the new MPAA Code: “‘Detailed and protracted acts of brutality, cruelty, physical violence, torture and abuse shall not be presented.’ That's the essence of that movie” (*Violence and the Media* 1969, p. 206).

By the time Lyndon Johnson left the White House a few weeks later, in January 1969, with U.S. military personnel in Vietnam at a wartime peak of 542,400, violence was popularly understood as central to American culture and history. The introductions to the anthologies *Violence in America: A Historical and Contemporary Reader* (1969) and *American Violence: A Documentary History* (1970) are typical; the foreword to *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, a report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Vi-

olence, published in June 1969, took the even more radical position that “the growth of this country has occurred around a series of violent upheavals and that each has thrust the nation forward.”

That same month, *New Left Notes* ran a cover illustration of two young men, one white and one black, crouching on a rooftop above a burning city, both armed with automatic rifles and wearing crisscrossed ammunition belts (“in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun”), while the Museum of Modern Art concluded a lengthy retrospective series, *The American Action Movie: 1946–64*, having dropped the rubric *Violent America* for the retrospective after one film distributor refused to furnish prints for presentation in a program that was so called (Twitchell, 1989, p. 187).

Needless to say, none of the films MoMA screened had anything approaching the degree of mayhem by then available in contemporary Hollywood movies. Indeed, *Variety* opined that *The Wild Bunch*—which also appeared in June 1969—might be “the most violent US film ever made.” Among other things, *The Wild Bunch* was designed to obliterate *Bonnie and Clyde*. Dub Taylor, who appeared in both *Bonnie and Clyde*, as the father of C. W. Moss, and the first scene of *The Wild Bunch*, as a temperance movement leader, remembers director Sam Peckinpah boasting that *The Wild Bunch* would be “better than *Bonnie and Clyde*” (Fine, 1991, p. 124). Similarly, another co-worker, Gordon Dawson, recalls Peckinpah announcing that “We’re going to bury *Bonnie and Clyde*” (Weddle, 1994, p. 331).

The fourth- and fifth-largest hits of 1967 (behind one romantic comedy dealing with the generation gap, *The Graduate*, another on the subject of integration, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?*, and Walt Disney’s animated feature *The Jungle Book*), *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Dirty Dozen* offered a volatile mix of ultraviolence with blatant antiauthoritarianism. As period films, both advanced a revisionist view of the national past that, in effect, argued the centrality of excessive violence to American history. *Bonnie and Clyde* provided a contemporary form of the righteous outlaw while *The Dirty Dozen* effectively besmirched the reputation and questioned the conduct of the most justifiable of all American wars. At the same time, both movies were understood by initial audiences as articulating some hitherto unacknowledged aspect of their lives. If *The Dirty Dozen* provided an inchoate parallel to the riotous summer of 1967, *Bonnie and Clyde* was incorporated into the fall’s escalation in antiwar rhetoric and activity among white protesters and student radicals.

Bonnie and Clyde was further experienced as a harbinger of fashion and, not surprisingly, engendered all manner of cinematic progeny, including the top box-office attraction of 1969 (and, for a time, the highest grossing western ever made), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. At the same time, *The Dirty Dozen* spawned a 1968–1970 cycle of “dirty”

war movies concerning similar pariah groups sent on morally ambiguous commando missions.

The synthesis of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Dirty Dozen* was *The Wild Bunch*, which concerns a collection of aging western outlaws who jump from the frying pan of the closed American frontier into the fire of the Mexican Revolution. (Indeed, Kenneth Hyman, who had produced *The Dirty Dozen*, was now head of production at Warner Brothers.)

The Wild Bunch code of honor is founded on male camaraderie. Pike, the group's leader, proclaims that “when you side with a man, you stay with him.” No less than *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch* and even the insipid *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* embodied a striking inversion of values. At once cynical and romantic, both of these westerns presented the unregenerate criminal as a sympathetic figure, expressing regret at his elimination by the agents of law and order.⁹

Shadowed by a sense of inevitable catastrophe, *The Wild Bunch* is bracketed by the spectacle of civilians caught in a murderous crossfire. Repeatedly, the viewer watches disaster unfold—the botched stakeout that provides the movie's opening bloodbath, the collision on the railroad tracks, the explosion on the bridge, the final massacre. Like Arthur Penn, Peckinpah presented his project as essentially cautionary and demystifying, echoing Penn's assertion that “the trouble with the violence in most films is that it is not violent enough.” Unlike Penn, however, Peckinpah acknowledged something of his own fascination with mayhem:

The point of [*The Wild Bunch*] is to take this facade of movie violence and open it up, get people involved in it so that they are starting to go in the Hollywood television predictable reaction syndrome, and then twist it so that it's not fun anymore, just a wave of sickness in the gut. . . . It's a terrible, ugly thing. And yet there's a certain response that you get from it, an excitement because we're all violent people. (Weddle, 1994, p. 334)

Pauline Kael, who did so much to promote *Bonnie and Clyde*, had ambivalent feelings about *The Wild Bunch*, arguing that, although Peckinpah “thought that by making violence realistically bloody and gruesome he would deglamourize warfare and enable the audience to see how horrible it is,” he became “so intricately involved in the problems of violence that [the movie] tore itself apart. A brilliantly directed and photographed study in confusion, it played to audiences who apparently didn't take it as an attack on violence but simply enjoyed it as a violent Western (*New Yorker* Mar. 21, 1970).”

William Wolf observed in the August 30, 1969, issue of *Cue* that “the killings in *Bonnie and Clyde* were necessary to illuminate a subject. The cop shot in the face was a horrible sight, as was the demise of the



FIGURE 6.3 William Holden in *The Wild Bunch*. Imbuing a western with a carnage of a war movie was understood, in 1969, as a form of naturalism. Courtesy of Warner Bros.

gang. But the violence was meaningful in a context of larger drama. We could hardly enjoy it.” Even if one accepted Peckinpah’s antiviolence intent in *The Wild Bunch*, “he sure as hell wasn’t getting any such message across to the more vocal members of this audience—or to me.”

At one point, after someone is shot in the head, the audience laughed at the high-pitched voice of a little boy in the theater exclaiming: “I like this picture.” It is the kind of film that makes many grown-ups behave the same way. Perhaps we have become so conditioned to violence that we delight in the audacity of a film that piles it on with such gusto.

Perhaps because, as a western, *The Wild Bunch* seemed targeted at a less sophisticated segment of the movie audience, the movie inspired some of the same anxieties as did *The Dirty Dozen*. On the other hand, possibly as a result of the controversy that had dogged *Bonnie and Clyde*’s, *The Wild Bunch*’s reception was characterized by an unusually high degree of historical consciousness. The *Daily News* was reminded of the “hue and cry” over the gangster cycle of the 1930s. Richard Schickel employed multiple oxymorons in praising *The Wild Bunch* in

Life as "the first masterpiece in the new tradition of the 'dirty western,'" pointing out that the old "clean" western was "no more firmly located in time than a dream . . . referring us endlessly to a lost Eden that we probably never inhabited, a land whose inhabitants, when they killed one another, usually did so for an understandable reason" (1970).

For Schickel, excessive violence enhanced naturalism in *The Wild Bunch*. The same point was made even more forcefully by the *Catholic Film Newsletter* (June 30, 1969). "It would be an easy matter to dismiss [*The Wild Bunch*] as simply another celluloid blood-bath," noted the anonymous representative of the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures. Yet, earlier westerns, in which "death was shown as a bloodless, almost painless action," were in their obfuscations at least partially responsible for "the violence in our society today." Peckinpah, by contrast, deserved credit for aiming "to demythologize the conventional past and present it as it really was." *The Wild Bunch* made violence central and inescapable. Peckinpah's movie, the reviewer concluded, "could help thoughtful viewers to understand who we are and where we have come from in a way that, considering the history of the Western genre, is singularly healthy." This, of course, presupposes a reasoned response to the movie.¹⁰

Conclusions

That Warner Brothers's recent silver-anniversary rerelease of *The Wild Bunch* was held up for a year when the MPAA deemed the movie's restored version too violent for its original R rating suggests that public attitudes toward violent imagery are historically determined. Indeed, spectator antipathy or attraction to screen violence may, in fact, concern something other than the violence itself. The controversy around the 1991 movie *Thelma and Louise* demonstrates that an otherwise unremarkable movie scenario—two fugitives on the run from the law after committing an unpremeditated (and almost justifiable) act of murder—can be considerably transformed by shifting the identity of the protagonists, in this case from male to female. Albeit minimal (as well as imaginary), *Thelma and Louise*'s mayhem was perceived by many commentators as a form of dangerous hyperbole, its rhetoric akin to irresponsible demagoguery.

Thus, *The Dirty Dozen* disturbed reviewers by presenting criminals trained as commandos to perform a job more virtuous soldiers could not accomplish and *Bonnie and Clyde*'s popularization of a previously unusual attitude toward criminal violence—a willingness to suspend moral judgment—was regarded as all the more dangerous for being placed in the context of "a squalid shoot-'em up for the moron trade."

Criticized for expanding the parameters of "outlaw" violence, *The Dirty Dozen* and *Bonnie and Clyde* were understood and appreciated

by their initial audience as articulating some aspect of contemporary life hitherto unacknowledged by the movies. Similarly, at the time of its first release, *The Wild Bunch* reflected a new permissiveness regarding the representation of sex and violence on the screen, as well as the free use of taboo language. Moreover, in elaborating on *Bonnie and Clyde*'s redefinition of group morality and by raising comradeship to the ultimate value, *The Wild Bunch* presaged all the postwar Vietnam films where the idea is to stay alive, help your buddy, and get the hell out.

In the context of 1969, Peckinpah's outrageously stylized violence, which imbued a western with the carnage and body count of a war movie, was perceived as a form of naturalism—by idealists and cynics alike. Hence the truth of producer Phil Feldman's grandiloquent pronouncement when *The Wild Bunch* had its stormy preview at a Warner Brothers junket: "The era of escapism is over; the era of reality is here. . . . The entertainment industry has a right and duty to depict reality as it is."

Notes

1. While the study's findings did not support the argument that exposure to such material contributed to "the elicitation of aggressive acts in the severely provoked individual," the authors, Dolf Zillmann and Rolland C. Johnson, concluded that filmed violence served to "sustain aggressiveness."

2. During this period as well, an old-fashioned gangster film, *Black Tuesday* (1954) and the cavalry western *Fort Yuma* (1955) were reedited for violence.

3. Other current and recent movies deemed excessively violent, at least by *Esquire*, were the psychological thrillers *Straight Jacket* and *Lady in a Cage* (both 1964), the westerns *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964; U.S. release 1967) and *Nevada Smith* (1966), *The Chase* (1966), and Andy Warhol's avant-garde talkathon *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), as well as such imports as Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) and Elio Petri's futuristic *Tenth Victim* (1965), in which the violence "problem" is solved by the sport of legal murder. Two upcoming releases, *The Saint Valentine's Day Massacre* and *In Cold Blood*, were expected to contribute to the trend.

4. *The Dirty Dozen* was shot in the spring and summer of 1966 and completed postproduction in October. Robert Aldrich, a director who had previously experienced censorship problems with his *Kiss Me Deadly*, expressed some concern that *The Dirty Dozen* be "a 1967 picture and not a 1947 picture"—telling the *Saturday Review* (June 17, 1967) that "in the midst of a highly unpopular war, I certainly didn't want to do a film either about the hawks or the doves." While Aldrich himself seems to have been a political liberal, the presence of star Lee Marvin (in a role first offered to John Wayne) gives the movie a right-wing militarist inflection. In March 1966, Marvin, a decorated ex-Marine, had hosted *Our Time in Hell*, an ABC documentary on the Marine Corps so enthusiastically gung ho that even *Variety* (Mar 29, 1967) deemed it "an hour-long public relations plug."

5. This unusually callous sell line appeared almost simultaneously in the

national consciousness with H. Rap Brown’s memorable formulation that “violence is necessary and it’s as American as cherry pie.”

6. A parallel, unmentioned by Crowther, could be found in a contemporaneous issue of the *New York Review of Books*, which was notorious for featuring a diagram of a Molotov cocktail on its cover.

7. As *Esquire*’s violence issue repeatedly noted the murder of John F. Kennedy as the prologue to America’s season of violence, so *Bonnie and Clyde* referenced the Kennedy assassination in several ways. For one thing, the production was based at the North Park Motor Inn in Dallas on the third anniversary of the Kennedy assassination and, as David Thomson reports in his Beatty biography, “people on the crew [were] impressed by the local aftershock.” Then too, director Penn, who had helped coach Kennedy for his televised debates with Richard Nixon and had contrived an iconic reenactment of Lee Harvey Oswald’s shooting in his previous movie *The Chase*, connected *Bonnie and Clyde*’s savage denouement to the same Zapruder footage cited by Tom Wolfe: “There’s even a piece of Warren’s head that comes off, like that famous photograph of Kennedy” (Comolli and Labarthe, 1973, p. 16).

8. *New Left Notes* (Feb. 19, 1968) includes a sympathetic review of Sorrel’s *Reflections on Violence* that, among other things, notes that “proletarian violence makes the future revolution certain.” The author, Tom Rose, is identified as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee writing his dissertation on the theory and practice of violence in America. Rose subsequently edited the Random House anthology *Violence in America: A Historical and Contemporary Reader* (1969), one of the numerous books on the subject published between 1968 and 1970.

9. *The Wild Bunch* had its origins in a screenplay drawing on the same historical material that inspired *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Butch Cassidy was the leader, and the Sundance Kid a member, of the Wild Bunch. “The biggest gang of outlaws that ever harried the West,” according to Dorothy M. Johnson’s survey *Western Badmen* (1972), the Wild Bunch was active, robbing banks, trains, and payrolls from 1897 through 1901. Cassidy and Sundance subsequently relocated to South America, where they resumed their criminal careers until they were killed in a gunfight with Bolivian police.

10. Writing in the *Nation* (July 14, 1969), Robert Hatch described a less cerebral reaction to *The Wild Bunch*:

Peckinpah has rediscovered something that I suspect was known to the Elizabethans: if you carry violence far enough, the audience will laugh. . . . The director has also picked up, possibly from *Bonnie and Clyde*, the device of showing the actual instant of annihilation in slow motion, so that scenes of hysterical activity are constantly punctuated by floating, dreamlike vignettes of death. And finally, he has decided, on what medical authority I do not know, that when hit by a bullet the human body bursts like a ripe melon. At this the audience laughed (and so did I), not with merriment, exactly, but in tribute to such virtuosity of gore.

This is far closer to the audience response noted at showings of *The Dirty Dozen* and unlike that observed at *Bonnie and Clyde*, the original movie that sought to make viewers pay for their enjoyment of violence.