

# Bonnie and Clyde

(1967, Penn, USA)

**Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making (AL)**  
**Component 1: American Film (AS)**

**Core Study Areas:**  
**Key Elements of Film Form**  
**Meaning & Response**  
**The Contexts of Film**

**Specialist Study Area:**  
**Auteur (AL)**

## Rationale for study

- Critical Acclaim: The film received Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actress and Best Cinematography. It was among the first 100 films selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry and is on the AFI's list of the top ten gangster films of all time. The film was also one of the first films of the New Hollywood era, since it broke many cinematic taboos and created controversy with its portrayal of sex and violence.

## STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- 0:00 – 5:22 Opening scene introduces the two protagonists and their respective roles in society, establishes the genre and introduces some of the taboos that make this film a 'New Hollywood' classic.
- 1:42:33 to the end – Closing scene is particularly useful in demonstrating the level of violence in the film, the creative cinematography and the influence of other filmmakers on Penn.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

### Cinematography

- Use of extreme close ups of Bonnie in the opening scene (lips, eyes) sexualise her and suggest this film will explore her identity. These shot choices also challenge classical Hollywood conventions establishing the film as a 'New Hollywood' production.
- Unconventional and creative framing of shots e.g. Bonnie shooting the tyre, the bank teller being shot through the car window.
- Use of a filter in the scene when Bonnie meets up with her mum lends the scene a dreamlike quality – a fantasy of how things could be if Bonnie had made different choices.

### Mise-en-Scène

- Blood – although the film was stylised it did incorporate blood in a way that was uncommon in Hollywood films of that era making the crimes more visceral and real.
- Costume – Bonnie's costumes and styling become more polished as their crime spree continues and her confidence grows.
- Colour – use of black in the scene where Bonnie meets her mother for the last time creates a funereal tone and foreshadows the death of the protagonists.

### Editing

- Use of shot-reverse-shot in the diner conversation – the simplistic editing and use of close ups encourages the audience to focus on the dynamic between the characters as Clyde is revealed to be insightful and intuitive and Bonnie to be surprised and impressed.
- Closing scene – shot with numerous cameras capturing the scene from different angles with some of the frames edited into slow motion and others not, to create an overwhelming and disturbing spectacle. The scene was shaped by editor Dede Allen of whom Penn said, "she wasn't an editor, she was a constructionist."
- Jump cuts used inspired by French New Wave directors like Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut show Penn's Film School background.

## Sound

- Use of the bluegrass song Foggy Mountain Breakdown by Earl Scruggs & Lester Flatt keeps the tone light during crime scenes lending a comedic tone to some moments. The song also anchors the film geographically.
- Lack of music in robbery scenes lends them a sense of realism.
- Loud and explosive gunfire as the only sound in the closing scene emphasises the excesses of Frank Hamer's attack on Bonnie and Clyde.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- Gender – Bonnie starts the film 'trapped' inside the home and Clyde is first seen out in the world reflecting the gendered norms for the era the film is set in. The rest of the film challenges these roles.
- Sex – Bonnie breaks taboos of the time by initiating intimacy and oral sex is alluded to which was very controversial at the time of the film's release. Clyde's impotence, 'I aint much of a loverboy', was also a taboo subject and challenged stereotypes of the masculine virile hero.
- Class – Bonnie and Clyde support the working classes throughout e.g. encouraging the evicted Otis Harris to shoot at the bank sign, letting the man in the bank robbery keep his own money.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including Visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Very diverse shot types, varying pace and discontinuity edits - the lack of clear patterns convey the unpredictability of New Hollywood and the film's protagonists.
- Inspired by Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* for the closing scene of the film.
- Influenced by convention challenging French New Wave directors. Truffaut even made contributions to the script.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Historical

- The film was released at a time of social

unrest in America when people, particularly the young, were challenging the government's role in the Vietnam war, there were race riots and a large counterculture developing. The film's anti-authority message reflected this.

### The rise of New American Cinema of the late 1960s

- Economic breakdown of the studio era
- Audience decline / fragmentation – appeal to younger audiences and 'art-house'
- 1967 – audience attendance rises for the first time
- Counterculture of late 1960s - counterculture, civil rights movements, unrest, polarisation.
- Escalation of the war in Vietnam
- New directors - film buffs
- Aesthetic influence of European art-house ink. French New Wave
- New technologies- zoom lens, stedicam
- 1968 –the new X certificate

### Institutional

- The Hollywood studios were in decline and willing to take less financial risks so increasingly films were being produced by independent studios who, encouraged by changes to the MPAA ratings system, tackled more taboo subjects and experimented with new film making techniques. The film marked a turning point in Hollywood as although it was produced by Warner Bros, home of the gangster genre, a lot of control was given to Penn and Beatty. Penn said of Hollywood at that time, "It wasn't just that we were sick of the system. At that point, the system was sick of itself."

## SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur - STARTING POINTS

- Arthur Penn's leftist politics and interests in social justice pervade this film and his earlier work (see *Mickey One*)
- Combining comedy and tragedy whilst working within clear genres (see *Little Big Man*)
- Theme – façade vs reality – "Your advertising is just dandy"
- Screenwriters David Newham and Peter Benton influenced by French New Wave and auteurs of classical Hollywood (Hawks, Hitchcock, Ford & Welles)