

# Bonnie & Clyde Shot Down

Thomas Haroldson

1967

It is usually unwise and often physically dangerous to laugh at another man's religion. When a person believes fervently in something, no matter how absurd the object of his faith appears, there is no safe way to tell him that he is wrong.

Therefore, when one attacks the movie "Bonnie and Clyde," there is no way to avoid infuriating the worshipping instant cult that the movie has produced.

If the picture were nothing more than an object of veneration, it would be unnecessary to say anything more about it. But the fact remains that "Bonnie and Clyde" is, or purports to be, a work of art, and as a work of art it is subject to valid and objective criticism.

If director Arthur Penn seriously attempted to create an honest picture (and there isn't any reason to doubt this), then he must be held responsible for the results. I see no reason to question Penn's integrity, as many reviewers do but I see ample justification for questioning his artistic judgment and taste.

Ernest Hemingway once said, "The most essential gift for a good writer is a built in, shock-proof, shit detector." Unfortunately, Penn is lacking this "most essential gift."

If cinematic blunders were sins, Penn would spend the rest of eternity in Hell. For one thing, it seems incredible that he decided to film the picture in color. If there ever was a movie that cried out for black and white photography, it's "Bonnie and Clyde." Even the veiled lens technique which is clumsily inserted (for one scene only) near the end of the picture would have been preferable to the "gorgeous" Technicolor that was used.

There are many things in the picture that even its staunchest supporters can't explain. For example the bluegrass music of Flatt and Scruggs is used consistently to indicate that something amusing is happening. This musical applause sign, ordinarily used in third-rate comedies, "plays", as one fan put it, "havoc with the story's serious intent." To say the least!

But the most serious defect in the picture is the fact that it is burdened, nay, overburdened, with tons of unabashed hokum. When Bonnie and Clyde first meet she is, of course, stark naked. Every robbery scene is milked for laughs and the chase scenes are straight out of Max Sennett.

The symbolism (if anything so obvious can be called symbolism) is heavy-handed and often trite. Note how the sex-starved Bonnie caresses the long barrel of Clyde's revolver. Very subtle. And how Clyde lets a poor farmer shoot up a bank sign. Get it? Social criticism, etc. A real mixed bag. Freudianism to Robin Hoodism. Take your pick.

Of course, no one admits that they like the movie because it's filled with blood. The cultists claim that there's a message behind every questionable scene, but apparently this fact is lost on most audiences. They applaud with gusto every time a "dumb cop" is cut in half by a machine gun. They go wild every-time the gang blasts its way to freedom. For them, it's still fun and games time Hollywood style. "Shoot-em-up for the moron trade," as one critic said, it is still not entirely an honest picture.

In fact, it's a lie. Not only does Penn fail to "tell it like it is," he fails to tell it like it was, or like it will ever be.

When the real Clyde Barrow killed a poor grocer in cold blood, there was no comic escape scene to erase the horror; no blue grass music to help people forget that a human being had just had the top of his head blown off.

In real life a murder's innocent victim is not so easily forgotten. If anyone dies wretchedly wallowing in his own blood, it's usually the victim, not the murderer. And if a killer does meet the same fate as his victim, at least a certain "balance of horror" is established.

In "Bonnie and Clyde", however, the victims remain conveniently anonymous, and the killers receive what sympathy there is by default. With the focus of the movie entirely on them, the true nature of their crimes is completely obscured.

Once freed from any meaningful connection with reality, Bonnie and Clyde drift off into a pop-art world where comic book adventures finally come true—almost.

## **Related**

- See response, "Bonnie & Clyde" Defended, FE # 41, November 1–15, 1967.
- See letter response by Donald Jennings, FE #41, November 1–15, 1967.

# fifth Estate

Thomas Haroldson  
Bonnie & Clyde Shot Down  
1967

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/40-october-15-31-1967/bonnie-clyde-shot-down>  
Fifth Estate #40, October 15-31, 1967

**[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)**