

“Bonnie & Clyde” Defended

Frank H. Joyce

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As a charter member of the “Bonnie and Clyde” cult, Thomas Haroldson’s hostile review of the movie in the last issue of the FIFTH ESTATE [“Bonnie & Clyde Shot Down,” FE #40, October 15–31, 1967] was slightly disconcerting. Enough so that I went to see the movie. For the third time.

My faith was restored. “Bonnie and Clyde” is one of a small number of great American movies. Haroldson’s review is wrong about nearly everything except the fact that some scenes would have been more effectively shot in black and white. Some wouldn’t.

Many of his comments are not particularly substantive. He says the scene utilizing the veiled lens technique is “clumsily inserted.” I say it is effectively inserted. So there. And so what.

The symbolism Haroldson says is “heavy-handed, obvious, trite, and not subtle.” Alas it may be so. Men and women are often reduced to the triteness of shooting signs instead of the men who are responsible for putting it there. Why only recently I remember seeing a sign announcing that whole devastated blocks had been leveled for urban renewal. The sign had been defaced. Pretty obvious, I thought.

And as for pistol fondling, what could be less subtle than referring to it as “heavy-handed” as Haroldson did. but alas again, men’s symbols are often weak. (Did you ever meet a policeman’s wife—or for that matter a policeman?)

Men and women do unfortunately find sex in pistols. That is hardly a reason for not including it in a film.

Like most reviewers, including Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, Haroldson centers his criticism on the use and treatment of violence in the film.

It may be that the movie appeals to violence freaks. That there are many such people in our society is hardly the fault of producer Warren Beatty or director William Penn. What is remarkable about Bonnie and Clyde is that unlike most American movies it does not glorify violence. Rather, it horrifies it.

For a large number of people, the film is an argument for anti-violence. It is all the more so because of the sudden transitions from “unabashed.

Max Sennett hokum” accompanied by the music of Flatt and Scruggs to the song of the tommy gun. The color also helps. Most cinematic violence is quite painless and quite bloodless. If there is blood it is usually black and not red. Victims do not usually endure pain. Nor do they suffer. They only die. That bullets have consequences when they strike people, other than making them disappear for the rest of the film is not the usual treatment in movies.

If the violence seems interspersed with hokum in Bonnie and Clyde then it is nevertheless an accurate reflection of American life. And particularly what American life must have been like during the depression. Those were, after all murderous times and most of the murders didn’t have any thing to do with guns.

It is true that the film is concerned with only some of the victims. Only some of the violence is personal. In part that may be explained in terms of the plot and the limitations of time.

“Bonnie and Clyde” is a complex film. It attempts most often successfully, to accomplish many things. It does not however have to be a study of all the victims of the depression. Nor does it pretend to tell the story of those murdered by the Barrow gang. Indeed their deaths could not have been personal.

Once certainly gets the sense from the movie itself that had Bonnie and Clyde known their victims personally they could not and would not have killed them. What they did was illegal and wrong. It was not necessarily in the deepest sense of the word evil.

What is remarkable is that there are victims at all. American society pretends not to have any victims. Most liberals support the pretension as does the media. Violence is almost always portrayed from behind the dun and not from in front of it.

Generally in the American media, as for example, in American foreign policy, getting shot is evidence of having done something wrong and hence not being a victim. There seems to be a direct correlation between getting shot or bombed or napalmed or whatever and having done something wrong.

It is not that one is shot because one deserves it. Rather that one must have deserved it because one is shot. The reason North Vietnam is being bombed we are told is because they are trying to shoot down our bombers.

It is part of a general confusion on our society about who are the criminals and who are the victims. Most whites seem to have convinced themselves that they are being oppressed by black people rather than the other way around. And so on.

The paradox of Bonnie and Clyde is that they ultimately meet their death not because they murdered, not to avenge their victims. They are murdered to avenge the embarrassment of a bounty hunter they had quite properly humiliated.

It's almost enough to make one agree with Camus that we are all victims.

Finally, this is all too defensive. "Bonnie and Clyde" combines more good screenwriting, acting, cinematography, and direction than any movie I've seen in some time.

Go and see for yourself and fill out the coupon below.

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