Bonnie and Clyde’s “Other Side”: the Good-Bad Outlaws of Larry Buchanan

by Mary Elizabeth Strunk

Arthur Penn’s 1967 film, Bonnie and Clyde created a cultural sensation and still appears on critics’ lists of the best and most influential films ever made. Remembered for having sealed the folk-heroic myth of 1930s bandits Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, Penn’s film actually did far less to humanize and romanticize the outlaws than did The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde, an allegedly anti-Bonnie and Clyde docudrama shot by Larry Buchanan in 1968.

It used to be the task of the troubadour to keep outlaw legend alive. Later, broadsheets replaced balladry as a key technology in folkloric transmission. Along with the cheap and plentiful “pulps,” the wanted poster kicked off a new genre of outlaw iconography, especially after the advent of photography in the mid-1900s. By the twentieth century, outlaws were ready for their close-up, and the outlaw film was born.

Celluloid fame came early for Depression-era bandits Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, who appeared in their first movie shortly after their gory demise on May 23, 1934. That morning, on a quiet stretch of highway in Gibsland, Louisiana, Texas Ranger Frank Hamer and his posse shot the couple and their vehicle to pieces. Minutes later, a posse member shot the couple and car in pieces with his 16-millimeter movie camera. In nearby Arcadia, where the couple was autopsied, a local photographer shot Bonnie and Clyde again, taking flash pictures of their bloody, disfigured bodies and then selling the prints for $5 to individuals and $50 to members of the press.

Images of Bonnie and Clyde had appeared in the press before. The most famous of these, of Clyde and Bonnie posing with various firearms, were seized in an otherwise unsuccessful police raid on the Barrow gang’s hideout in Joplin, Missouri. The gang escaped, but left behind a trove of strutting images for the police to propagate on wanted posters and in newspapers across the country. Much to Bonnie’s chagrin, a playfully staged photograph of a beret-wearing Bonnie with a revolver drawn to her hip and a cigar clenched in her teeth would become the most iconic.

Early children of the movie celebrity age, Bonnie and Clyde consciously burnished their public image. Bonnie wrote poems about romance on the lam. With Bonnie’s help, Clyde wrote open letters to his enemies. Although not nearly as criminally “accomplished” as Depression-era bandit John Dillinger, like Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde were assailed, in death, by frenzied crowds who snatched hair, buttons, and other personal items from their corpses. What did those gruesome artifacts symbolize to those who carried them away? Did they represent glamour? Rebellion? Comeuppance? Surely, the meaning of such artifacts—and, by extension, of “Bonnie-and-Clyde”—shifted depending on who regarded them and in what circumstances. Attentive as the couple had been to self-image, it would fall to others to determine which of their photo-images would prevail: that of Bonnie and Clyde, daring, romantic outlaws, or that of Bonnie and Clyde, despised and mutilated bandits.

The most pitched battle over the legacy of Bonnie and Clyde took place in the late 1960s, long enough after their deaths for the couple to be reinvented as tragic, countercultural heroes. Other Hollywood actors had portrayed the outlaws on-screen before, but none with the glamour or charisma of Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in Arthur Penn’s 1967 film, Bonnie and Clyde. Dunaway’s and Beatty’s young faces became synonymous with the title characters and, arguably, remain the prevailing images associated with the historical Bonnie and Clyde. Never mind that Penn’s film famously concludes with a graphic, slow-motion reenactment of the couple’s death in a barrage of gunfire. Contemporary audiences reportedly left theaters in solemn hush, but their silence was born of horror rather than of a sense of justice done. That is because the preceding 110 minutes of screen-time privilege Bonnie and Clyde’s vantage-point, encouraging empathy for the pair’s frustration and their self-importance. Yes, Bonnie and Clyde commit reckless acts of violence, but they look so good doing it. Against the film’s stagy Depression-era backdrop, the couple becomes the embodiment of youth, romance, and yearning. By contrast,
their victims barely register, save as faded cardboard cutouts lacking names or narrative. The camera affirms Bonnie and Clyde as the only living things on an otherwise inert and colorless landscape.

Paradoxically, it was the fact of the original Bonnie and Clyde’s violent deaths that made it possible to remember them as so vital. However people might cluck at the circa-1933 photograph of a pistol-packing, cigar-smoking Bonnie, that indelible image became all the more potent after she died, when it was released into the “afterlife of the imagination.”

It is fitting that Bonnie and Clyde begins with a reference to a camera. The film’s opening credits are interspersed with sepia-toned, still photographs from the 1930s. Over the slow rise of a scratchy phonograph recording, the photos “click” as they appear against a black background, suggesting an historical slide show. Photo-images of actors Beatty and Dunaway, identified as Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, are included with the authentic period photographs, lending verisimilitude to the story and characterizations that will follow. In fact, screenwriters Robert Benton and David Newman took generous liberties with the biographies of their subjects, downplaying certain details (the nine law enforcers slaughtered by the Barrow gang; Bonnie’s marriage to another man) that would have detracted from their tale of Bonnie and Clyde as doomed lovers, destroyed at the hands of a resentful Establishment generation.

Initial critical disgust for Bonnie and Clyde rapidly gave way to critical acclaim, and no less a mainstream outlet than TIME magazine embraced the film as herald of the anti-authoritarian “New Cinema.” Audiences from the 1960s and later have read the film as commenting on everything from Civil Rights to the war in Vietnam. But the film didn’t need a clear politics to revive Bonnie and Clyde as folk heroes, or to spark an international appetite for 1930s-style fedoras and double-breasted suits. The sudden ubiquity of young people in Bonnie berets and other gangster-inspired fashions hearkened back to the snatching of artifacts from the bodies of dead outlaws, albeit on a new, mass-culture scale. Thanks to Penn’s film, Bonnie and Clyde had become ideal symbols for a youth culture (and brewing counterculture) suspicious of those in power. As the screenwriters Benton and Newman observed, If Bonnie and Clyde were here today, they would be hip. Their values have become assimilated in much of our culture—not robbing banks and killing people, of course, but 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.

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If Bonnie and Clyde succeeded because of its “relevance” in 1967, it also drew the ire of those who were old enough to have known the real-life Bonnie and Clyde or who had known Bonnie and Clyde’s victims. To revel in the outlaws’ style without acknowledgement of their crimes seemed to many a worrisome index of the culture’s growing immorality. Among those most unhappy with Penn’s film was the family of the late Frank Hamer, whom the film employed as its title characters’ homely, villainous foil.

Enter Larry Buchanan, the maverick director of low- and no-budget B-movies who grew up in Dallas, just like Bonnie and Clyde. A self-described “guerrilla filmmaker” who often did contract work for the self-consciously outrageous American International Pictures, Buchanan had been planning a re-make of the campy The Bonnie Parker Story (AIP, 1958) when Arthur Penn hired him to scout Texas locations for Bonnie and Clyde. Buchanan did so, and even supplied Penn with extras from his stock acting company. He also smelled opportunity, and quickly converted his Bonnie Parker project into The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde (1968), a “personal, out-of-pocket send-up of Arthur Penn’s classic” Buchanan’s 60-minute documentary ostensibly examines the runaway success of Bonnie and Clyde as a social problem, incorporating stories and photographs of the real-life Bonnie and Clyde as a corrective to Penn’s film. The Other Side also won the cooperation of the estate of Frank Hamer, whose biographer, widow, and son were eager to counteract the portrayal of Hamer as an opportunistic bounty hunter.

Like Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde, Buchanan’s The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde also opens with a simulated slide show, albeit one that takes the tone of a police briefing. Mug shots from the wanted poster of the real-life Clyde Barrow, young and jug-eared, are “projected” with a loud click onto the screen. A voiceover intones:

The next image is a close-up of the real Bonnie Parker. The “slides” click twice more to reveal the fuller photograph, in which Bonnie playfully points a rifle at Clyde. Again, the voiceover:

Bonnie Parker, companion of Clyde Barrow. 4 feet, 10 inches. 85 pounds light. Hair: dyed red. This pair is dangerous and their car is known to be an arsenal on wheels. She reads romance and movie magazines and writes poetry. He fancies himself a musician, plays the saxophone.

Larry Buchanan loved the detail of Clyde’s saxophone, an incongruous item that turned up in the “arsenal on wheels” that became Bonnie and Clyde’s death car. A former actor and contract player for 20th Century-Fox, Buchanan gravitated to all such quirks and clues of character, especially those that improved the theatricality of his subjects. The youngest son of a widowed Texas constable, the charismatic Buchanan had once considered the ministry before he discovered the movies. The strict Baptist orphanage in which he grew up made use of his showman’s instincts and put him to work as their traveling ambassador, touring rural churches to rile up the faithful and drum up donations. Buchanan’s script for The Other Side reflects Buchanan at his entrepreneurial best, shrewdly framing his film in opposition to Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde and using that film’s own rhetoric against itself.

The mugshots that open Buchanan’s The Other Side shortly give way to a color image of a bank foreclosure sign: “Property of Midlothian Citizens Bank. Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.” Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde featured an identical sign, and, in that film, it was both an impetus and symbol of Bonnie and Clyde’s empathy for the dispossessed. Upon meeting a homeless farmer and his family who have lost their farm to the Midlothian Bank, Beatty’s Clyde shoots the bank’s sign and declares his new profession: “We rob banks.” The Other Side relies on audiences’ memory of this scene. Following a tight shot of bullets splintering the Midlothian sign, the film cuts to a 1930s Ford V-8 speeding down a rural highway. The sleek, golden hair of the vehicle’s female occupant suggests that this is the car of Bonnie and Clyde (or at least of actors Dunaway and Beatty), and it is they who abruptly halt the car to shoot at a “Chism for Sheriff” sign on a telephone pole.

Lest anyone miss the Bonnie and Clyde reference—and the anti-authoritarian gesture of the defaced sheriff’s poster—narrator Burl Ives gravely intones:

Entertainment History will record that in the closing months of 1967 a motion picture rose to inordinate and frightening importance on the American and international scene. The film was based on the exploits of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, America’s most wanted criminals in 1934. And of Captain Frank Hamer, the Texas Ranger who tracked the pair down and put an end to their bloody careers.

The Ford rolls past a roadside cemetery, the first of several to appear as backdrop to Bonnie and Clyde’s travels. The voiceover continues:

Because of the film’s instant and spontaneous global influence on young people, their behavior, their dress, their hairstyles, their language, even on the film medium itself, the motion picture has raised certain sobering questions. Was this film, and others like it, another transitory fad for audiences that need to be shocked to feel any kind of emotion?

The film flashes a preview of a sequence that will appear again later in The Other Side. Bonnie raises her rifle through the car window and shoots an unarmed police officer in the face. The officer slaps his hands to his injury, then slumps and falls in agonizing slow motion, bleeding from the eyes.

When viewers in Tokyo, New York City, and London applaud and cheer at the death of law enforcement officers on the screen, is it just more fuel for the violence that grips our cities?

Cut to a shot of the book “I’m Frank Hamer”: The Life of a Texas Peace Officer. The camera zooms in on the book cover to highlight a circular motto on the lower right: “The True Story of Bonnie and Clyde.”

The document you are about to see will be as factual as three decades of research can make it. We will examine the crimes, the criminals, and the man who put an end to their brutal killing. We are searching for answers to these questions: Is the cult of Bonnie and Clyde cause or effect—or both? Is it escapism or a sedative? Is it myth or madness?
A montage of fashion stills of models in 1960s-filtered gangster- and gun moll-inspired fashions stand in for the Bonnie and Clyde “cult” (One male model wields a machine gun prop.) Next appears the elderly, bespectacled “Mrs. Frank Hamer,” widow of the Texas Ranger. She reads aloud a letter from a 12-year-old girl who laments her peers’ response to Bonnie and Clyde.

My friends think the [Ranger] Captain was so cold to kill Bonnie and Clyde because they were so much in love. I tell you, if Captain Hamer were alive I would congratulate him on his actions, and since he is not, I must congratulate his wife instead.

Juxtaposing the frankly earnest (letter-reading widow) with the frankly evil (officer-slaying Bonnie), The Other Side plunges ahead with two ostensible aims: to de-glamorize the outlaw lovers and to recuperate the figure of the law. Burl Ives’ opening speech might sound campy to contemporary audiences, but the avuncular folksinger and native Texan was playing it straight. Director Buchanan himself had penned the lines insisting on the authenticity of his “document,” citing the gravity of “three decades of research” and, by implication, the moral upper hand.

Buchanan’s Other Side editorializes with reversals—reversals recognizable to anyone familiar with Bonnie and Clyde. The Midlothian Bank sign appears just before Bonnie and Clyde symbolically shoot a sheriff. The outlaws’ Ford seems forever to be driving past a graveyard. Having schooled himself as a director through careful study of others’ movies. Buchanan insisted that Arthur Penn had lifted his Barker brothers’ reunion scene, shot-for-shot, from AIP’s The Bonnie Parker Story. As he wrote, “[T]he fisticuff exchange is, cut to cut, an identical sequence! Th similarity is remarkable” (It Came From Hunger! 115). It is no accident that Buchanan filmed parts of The Other Side by turning Penn’s sequences inside out, foregrounding the vantage-point of the law or of Bonnie and Clyde’s victims. For instance, The Other Side includes a reenactment of the 1933 standoff between the Barrow gang and authorities in Platte City, Missouri. In Penn’s film, the shootout scene privileged the experience of the gang, trapped and frightened in their motel. There is no such opportunity to identify with the non-descript officers who have them surrounded. By contrast, in The Other Side, Bonnie and Clyde are the ciphers, represented primarily by the gun barrels that smash the motel windows and poke, anonymously, through Venetian blinds. The camera creeps along the ground with a lawman as he tentatively approaches the building where the shooters have concealed themselves. The audience therefore feels the lawman’s tension and vulnerability as he scramble to avoid the outlaws’ bullets.

In another sequence, Clyde harangues an elderly gas station owner in the middle of the night. The camera assiduously avoids Clyde’s face, representing him only by a pair of legs, as he steps out of his automobile, and by a pair of fists, as he pounds the old man’s door. A moment later, the gas station owner’s frail wife steps out into the moonlight, more curious than concerned. The camera’s zooms in on the woman’s lined face, as she placidly brushes her long, silver hair. “Give us some gas!” Clyde commands the station owner, off-camera. “And your money!” says the faceless “female with Clyde.” (The film hints that Clyde may have cheated on Bonnie.) The unnamed female, who appears only as a torso and skirt in the passenger seat, levels a gun at the station owner, and his surprise and fright registers in tight close-up. She shoots, and as he pitches forward, the camera cuts to the anguished face of the silver-haired wife, who gasps and faints in horror. The outlaws’ car roars off, and, as never happens in Bonnie and Clyde, the audience is left behind with the bloody aftermath of a violent encounter.

Buchanan also reversed and reframed Bonnie and Clyde’s storytelling by using the faces and recollections of people who had encountered the real-life Bonnie and Clyde. Thus, The Other Side’s audience meets Sophia (Stone) Cook, one of two people impulsively kidnapped by the Barrow gang in April 1933 for having witnessed a car theft. According to lore, Bonnie chatted eagerly with the captives and was amused to learn that one of them, H.D. Darby, was a mortician. “You probably recognize us from seeing our pictures everywhere,” Bonnie reportedly said. A frightened Darby and Cook were eventually released after hours of driving along country back roads at speeds exceeding 90 miles per hour. Once the captives disembarked, Bonnie may also have grandly tossed from the car window a five-dollar bill to help the pair make their way back home. The 1967 Bonnie and Clyde screenplay tweaked this anecdote to underscore the Barrow gang’s geniality and loneliness. So desperate are they for company, they treat their captives like party guests and soon have them laughing and at ease. Bonnie approvingly declares them in allegiance with the gang because they, too, are “just folks.” She reminds them, “It’s not like you was the laws or something.” The detail of the mortician’s profession is
used to tragicomic effect, when a shaken and superstitious Bonnie abruptly orders him from the car. The scene telegraphs her character as sympathetic—and keenly aware of the early death her love affair with Clyde has made inevitable.

Because Bonnie Parker died young, she remains frozen in time, forever twenty-three. Had she survived, she would have been in her late fifties in 1968. In The Other Side, Bonnie’s one-time captive and contemporary, Sophia Cook is middle-aged and matronly, a reminder of the “typical West Dallas” woman Bonnie might have become. Buchanan uses Cook as a voice of reproach, and re-plays several of her comments over footage of Bonnie and Clyde’s death car. (“They wanted something for nothing and they knew that the officers stood for what was right.”) Cook’s recollection of the kidnapping recalls Penn’s fragile and romanticized Bonnie and rewrites her as hard and unsentimental. According to Cook, when Mr. Darby revealed his profession, “Bonnie laughingly said, ‘We know one of these days that we’ll get it, but we’ll have one last request and we’ll request that you get to embalm our body.’ She said, ‘now won’t you get a big kick out of that?’ and she gave a ‘ha ha ha.’”

If Cook seems pleased to testify in Buchanan’s movie, it may be because the 1967 Bonnie and Clyde had portrayed her character as such a silly thing. The Other Side positions Cook as a sober moral authority, the home demonstration agent who taught Depression-era families about canning and self-sufficiency. Sewing as she talks to the camera, Cook muses,

To them [Bonnie and Clyde] a life didn’t mean anything. They would just as soon kill as to talk to you. Honor comes first. If you are hungry, most people will help you as they did here. I was working for the public here and there were many people that were helped [and] they didn’t rob banks and they didn’t kill and do things of that kind.

While Cook worries for “the young people” who might take the wrong message from Penn’s movie, she also exhibits some ambivalence toward the outlaws who made her briefly famous. Proudly relating how she and Mr. Darby were asked to identify Bonnie and Clyde’s bodies in Louisiana, she says, “I don’t know that Mr. Darby really helped with the embalming but he was there. He had his finger in the pie enough to know that he was there anyway.” Leaving aside the distasteful image of an undertaker’s “finger in the pie” of an autopsy, Cook’s comment suggests that she regarded the figurative honoring of Bonnie’s embalming request as having contributed to the outlaws’ punishment. But Cook’s emphasis also asserts that having had a connection to Bonnie and Clyde was itself an honor.

Larry Buchanan would not have disputed the special status of such a connection. Indeed, the success of his film depended on deflected glory—from Arthur Penn, from Bonnie and Clyde, and also from the legendary Texas Rangers. The Other Side parrots Bonnie and Clyde’s rollicking soundtrack. But the outlaws’ jaunty theme is undercut by the “noble hero” harmonica music accompanying the film’s homage to Frank Hamer, the long-time Texas Ranger who patrolled the U.S.-Mexican border during the time of the Mexican Wars through World War I and Prohibition. The Other Side draws heavily from the 1968 biography, “I’m Frank Hamer,” so named because of Hamer’s ability to calm a volatile situation just by announcing his presence.

If all the criminals in Texas in 1934 were asked to name the man they would most dread to have on their tail, they would all have named Captain Frank Hamer. There was not an outlaw of the period that did not fear and respect him. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover deemed Hamer “one of the greatest law officers in American history,” a testimonial Hamer’s biographer could still cite without irony in 1968. The Other Side also boasts that Hamer was

Known to have participated in 100 individual gunfights and to have killed 53 men defending himself in the line of duty. Wounded 17 times and left for dead on four occasions. He was the best, most fearless, and most efficient peace officer Texas ever had.

Brawny, autonomous, and taciturn, Hamer might have gone down in history as a classic Western lawman-hero had he not orchestrated the ambush of Bonnie and Clyde. That Hamer had tracked the outlaws for 102 days, or that he had been done so at the urgent behest of the Texas governor who begged him out of retirement, meant little once Bonnie and Clyde were brought down not in Texas, but in Louisiana. Reviled by some as an opportunistic bounty hunter, Hamer’s reputation took an even worse turn a decade after his death.
In 1967, the actor Denver Pyle had played Frank Hamer as ugly and humorless snake of a man, with stained teeth and traditional villain’s mustache. Pyle’s Hamer spends the film in a state of simmering hatred for Bonnie and Clyde, especially after they take him prisoner, photograph him in their mocking embrace, and distribute the photo to the press. Although many movie-viewers assumed otherwise, no such humiliating encounter ever happened between the real-life Hamer and Bonnie and Clyde. But the screenwriters’ invention did reflect a very real public relations battle between 1930s bandits and law-enforcers. Pyle’s reptilian Hamer schemes to recuperate his image by killing Bonnie and Clyde and then having himself photographed with the trophy of their bodies: “I aim to have my picture taken with them once more.”

Hamer makes good on his aim, although Bonnie and Clyde never gives him his moment of triumph. The film ends in a moment of silent shock, just seconds after the outlaws’ death. The camera peers through the automobile’s shattered rear window and over Bonnie’s blood-stained white dress. The final shot, before the screen goes black, is of Hamer in his bad guy’s black shirt. Gun in hand, he stands before his posse, grimly surveying the carnage they have wrought.

Bonnie and Clyde’s Frank Hamer is the quintessential enemy of a youthful counterculture. Like the sixty-ish character Malcolm Moss, who clobbers his son, C.W., for getting a tattoo, and then berates him for failing to achieve the same notoriety as Bonnie and Clyde, Hamer stands for the corrupt and out-of-touch father figure who makes the Barrow gang look like innocents by comparison. In the 1967 film, young characters who play by the older generation’s rules are dupes. Hamer uses the lure of propriety to con the blinded “preacher’s daughter,” Blanche Barrow, into giving up information. Hamer and Moss conspire to slaughter Bonnie and Clyde by setting a trap that exploits their kindness. Significantly, in Penn’s film, the outlaw lovers go to their deaths completely unarmed, with no chance of firing a return shot.

The living principals of The Other Side—Sophia Cook, Mrs. Frank Hamer, Frank Hamer, Jr., and John Jenkins, co-author of the Hamer biography—lament the late-sixties’ prevailing distrust for authority. Jenkins sees a parallel between circa-1968 suspicions and Depression-era disenchantment with law enforcers: “In our time, they call them the fuzz. In those days, they called them the laws.” It is Jenkins who most strenuously asserts Frank Hamer as honorable hero by emphasizing the murderous, anti-law impulses of Bonnie and Clyde:

A dozen proven murders – there must have been three times that many that they actually killed – but 80 percent were law officers. And some of the others were killed as bystanders, when they [Bonnie and Clyde] were actually after law officers. It wasn’t disrespect for the law, it was an absolute psychotic hatred for the law that these two people had.

Jenkins’ statement is bracketed by two reenactments: one of an April 1934 shooting in Oklahoma and one of an Easter Sunday murder of two police officers at Grapevine, Texas. Although Bonnie and Clyde were never conclusively attached to the latter crime, The Other Side dramatizes an eyewitness’ initial (later recanted) account. An excerpt of this sequence, in which Bonnie shoots a police officer in the face, appeared in film’s introduction. The violence grows more disturbing when Bonnie marches over to a second, fallen officer and shoots him point-blank in the head. “His head bounced just like a rubber ball!” she gloats.

In the next reenactment, a middle-aged constable and his deputy approach Bonnie and Clyde’s automobile, which is stuck in the mud in the middle of graveyard. “You folks seem to be needing some help,” says the constable. The camera zooms in on Bonnie’s angry face. Although her lips do not move, we hear her shout, “We don’t need any help from the law!” “Go!” yells Clyde. He ducks, and up comes Bonnie’s shotgun. She shoots and kills the deputy. Clyde fires a pistol at the constable, who writhes on the ground, clutching his bloodied shoulder. The camera’s shot/countershot shows him making direct eye contact with Bonnie, whose gun is still raised. On these events, the film’s voiceover gives Hamer the final word: “Recalling Bonnie’s slayings of the officers in cold blood, Frank Hamer remarked: ‘She was, begging your pardon, a bit of a female dog.’” The sequence ends with the famous image of the cigar-smoking Bonnie Parker.

Jenkins, like The Other Side more generally, downplays Bonnie and Clyde’s Robin-Hood appeal by underscoring their frequently deadly hostility to the law. Where Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde garnered sympathy for the bandits by privileging their vantage point, motives, and family ties, The Other Side deliberately obscures those elements,
foregrounding instead the most revolting versions of their crimes. All positive and humanizing traits are ascribed exclusively to Hamer, whose family and admirers structure the film’s narrative. Director Buchanan also found in his interview subjects—and in photos of the outlaws—insinuations about Bonnie and Clyde that were calculated to repel audiences in 1968. For instance, an image of Clyde Barrow holding with another member of the Barrow gang, Raymond Hamilton, becomes proof both of Clyde’s bisexuality and of Bonnie’s promiscuity. (As Ives archly explains: “Hamilton was one of a succession of men who would, for a time, be a friend to both Bonnie and Clyde.”)

The real Bonnie Parker was disfigured in a fire that resulted from Clyde having fallen asleep at the wheel of their automobile. She walked with a pronounced limp ever after, and frequently had to be carried by Clyde. This was not a tale that made it into the script of Bonnie and Clyde, but The Other Side makes much of it. The Other Side also mentions the possibility of Bonnie’s alcoholism (she “turned to whiskey for the strength to go on”), Clyde’s infidelity, and, most damning of all, the couple’s vanity and bad taste.

A friend of the couple described them thusly: ‘He was a little man. What he liked about Bonnie was that her Lilliputian dimensions seem—to himself—seem big and strong. She had a hard angular little face and looked older than her years.’

A photo of Clyde hoisting Bonnie on his shoulder gives way to a fanciful re-creation of Bonnie’s world. A woman’s disembodied hands brush enamel on her toenails, then twist the knob on an old radio. Screen magazines with the faces of 1930s starlets litter the floor. Ives signals his disapproval by continuing wearily:

‘She read magazines of romantic confessions, painted her toenails pink, and upset color conscious people by trying to match her dyed-red hair with red hats, dresses, and shoes. It was said she had a loud mouth.’

In Bonnie and Clyde, Clyde marvels at the publication of Bonnie’s poem, “The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde.” “You made me somebody they’re gonna remember,” he crows. The scriptwriters got that right. Had Bonnie been a man, she and the rest of the Barrow gang would likely have faded into obscurity with other Depression-era desperados who stole for survival or amusement in the weakly policed mid- and southwestern United States. The novelty of Bonnie’s diminutive, feminine presence earmarked the Barrow gang for celebrity, and certainly was crucial to the fascination surrounding her and Clyde’s dramatic end.

Both Bonnie and Clyde and The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde fetishize Bonnie, her death, and her relationship to violence. Previous cinematic representations of the Bonnie and Clyde story had the Bonnie character expired bloodlessly, even if she were shown to die in a hail of bullets. By 1967 however, not only does Bonnie bleed, the whole gory process of flailing limbs and contorted expressions is presented in slow motion. Arthur Penn claimed that he directed actress Faye Dunaway’s dying movements to resemble orgasm. For The Other Side, the death car is the film’s literal climax, to which the film’s entire narrative builds. Images of the outlaws’ ravaged bodies, slumped in the automobile and laid out on improvised coroner’s slabs, serve as ghoulish morality tales. But Buchanan cannot resist sneaking in some titillation in the form of the exposed bosom of Bonnie’s corpse.

By 1968, the 44-year-old Buchanan had co-written, produced, and directed 18 of his own films, including The Naked Witch (1957), Naughty Dallas (A.K.A. A Stripper is Born) (1958), and Mars Needs Women (1966). His 1996 autobiography, It Came From Hunger! Tales of a Cinema Schlockmeister lovingly describes the various screen
actresses with whom he fell in “movie-love” (12). It also relates an apparently formative incident in which the young Buchanan happened upon a couple making love in a Baptist church’s baptismal font. (“With a whoosh of delight, a pretty girl in a clinging wet dress shot up out of the real water...”). For much of his career, Buchanan was drawn to stories with three ingredients: sex, piety, and an unconventional female lead. His attraction to Bonnie Parker makes sense in the context of a filmography that included cinematic ruminations on Marilyn Monroe (twice), Janis Joplin, and Mary Magdalene.

The Other Side’s ersatz documentary established Frank Hamer as its protagonist. Yet the film was not marketed as a film about the Texas Ranger. Bonnie and Clyde’s posters had said of its subjects: “They are young, they are in love, they kill people.” Ads for The Other Side also focused on the outlaws, promising, “Their thing revealed like it happened! Love! Perversion! Blood and Death!” Bonnie’s tousled head occupies the bottom half of The Other Side’s poster. She reclines, one hand draped over her slack mouth. The image is deliberately ambiguous; Bonnie may just have been killed, or she may be about to lick her trigger finger in a moment of eroticism. Buchanan knew well that a soft porn-style poster would sell movie tickets, even if it didn’t match the content of the film it advertised. There is no sex in The Other Side. There is, however, a charged hatred between Bonnie and the lawmen she, and she alone, is shown to massacre. Part fetish, part storytelling foil, a murderous Bonnie accentuates the heroism of Hamer, the only lawman shown to survive his encounter with her.

The difference between a “criminal” and an “outlaw” is that the story of the latter must be amenable to sympathetic interpretations. The outlaw’s career must have begun with a perceived injustice, have hurt only those who had it coming to them, and have ended at the hands of a draconian, or at least miscomprehending, authority. The anxiety that surrounded Bonnie and Clyde, and that gave rise to The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde, concerned the ownership of Bonnie and Clyde’s story and how it was deployed.

In its final reel, Bonnie and Clyde symbolically condemns the law as having destroyed something lovely and beautiful. Penn literally positions his audience with the dead outlaws at the end of his film. That his Bonnie and Clyde died unarmed and trying to help a friend allays the memory of the people they murdered—or, according to Penn’s telling, the memory of the people whom they killed out of desperation rather than malice. In The Other Side the law owns the story of Bonnie and Clyde. The story of the ambush belongs solely to Frank Hamer: “There are many conflicting versions of the last hours of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker. We tell it now in the words of the one man to tell it the way it was.” Narrator Ives reads aloud an account from Hamer’s biography, detailing his discovery that the Barrow gang maintained a “post office” for communication with gang members and family. The post office box was tree stump about eight miles from Gibsland.

The trail always lead back to Louisiana. Barrow was hot in Texas and Missouri. He had killed no one in Lousiana. I had valuable sources of information, which every successful officer must have… We [Hamer and his posse] hid our cars in the piney woods and made arrangements to finally capture the bandits. We constructed a blind from pine branches about 25 feet from the point where the car would stop. The men were spaced at intervals of about 10 feet parallel to the road. We were to take Barrow and the woman alive if we could. With everything ready, we had nothing to do but wait for about 7 hours, without breakfast or coffee. Waiting is the hardest thing an officer has to do.

The film cuts for a moment back to Hamer’s elderly widow, who recalls how her husband offered his posse the chance to back out of the potentially dangerous mission.

[He said] ‘Now there might be some of us that will bite the dust, but if any of you men want to back out now is the time to do it and I’ll think nothing about it. I won’t think less of you’—that’s what he said…. but everyone of them to a man stayed.

The bravery of the posse having been established, the film, and Hamer’s story, assert Hamer’s own fortitude and fairness. Bonnie and Clyde’s car appears and then stops by the stump mailbox.

Both he [Clyde] and the woman peered with all their attention to the stump. I stepped from the bushes and commanded Barrow to surrender. Instead of obeying the order as I had hoped and prayed, they grabbed for their weapons and all hope for a capture alive perished.
Clyde and Bonnie’s heads snap to the direction of the camera. Bonnie swiftly raises her rifle and the camera zeros in on her face and the gun barrel. The barrel points squarely at the audience, whom she symbolically threatens. The film cuts to the discharge of Hamer’s gun, which is pointed away from the audience. After several seconds of gunfire from the rest of the posse, there is silence. The camera tilts up and arcs to the left, to pan a row of pine trees against the sky. When the shot swoops down again to the road, it is taken from the 16-millimeter footage recorded on the day of the ambush. Grainy and green, the wreck of the real Bonnie and Clyde’s automobile appears. The camera zooms in on the bodies, still in the car’s front seat, but mangled beyond recognition. Posse members mill about the automobile and remove its contents, which are inventoried in a list that appears on-screen:

Inventory
One Saxophone [sic]
3 Browning automatics rifles
1 sawed-off Shotgun (guage [sic] 10)
1 sawed-off Shotgun (guage [sic] 20)
1 Colt automatic pistol (cal. 32)
1 Colt automatic pistol (cal. 380)
1 Colt revolver, double action (cal. 45)
7 Colt automatic pistols (cal. 45)
3000 rounds of ammunition

A solo saxophone plays a sluggish version of outlaws’ musical theme. The image of the bullet-riddled car is abruptly replaced by footage of a crowd amassing in Arcadia. Throngs of adult men mill about, waiting for the bodies to arrive. According to the voiceover, “Thousands came to view the death car. Harassed police officers, busy undertakers, busy restaurant owners, and people – people everywhere – breathing a sigh of relief at the finish of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker.”

Hamer was “applauded by the press, and honored on the floor of Congress.” The Other Side concedes that he also received some harassing letters in the wake of the ambush. Ives reads aloud a portion of one such letter from Clyde Barrow’s father, who wrote to request that his son’s guns be returned to the Barrow family. The Texas state legislature denied the request and awarded the guns to Hamer. (In The Other Side, Hamer’s son proudly exhibits the guns, one of which bears a smear of Bonnie Parker’s own blood.) The documentary ends with the image of an oil painting of Hamer, a few defensive statements on behalf the Texas Rangers of 1968, and a restatement of The Other Side’s purported aim: “If the film you have just seen has given you a new awareness and appreciation of law enforcement, then Frank Hamer would have been pleased that you saw it.”

Lest a viewer harbor any reverence for Bonnie and Clyde, The Other Side offers a final stunt as dissuasion. Buchanan’s partner, Harold Hoffman, appears seated at a table with a white-haired man. Hoffman directly addresses the camera:

When it comes to writing about Bonnie and Clyde, it seems that every writer uses a different set of facts—or, particularly motion picture writers prefer to work with no facts at all. This makes it very difficult to get at the truth about Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. Now here today in the studio, we have set up a rather unique method of getting at the truth about this pair. What you see here is a lie detector, commonly called, or preferably called, a polygraph. This man is Floyd Hamilton, and we’re going to give Floyd a lie detector test and ask him some of the most controversial questions about Bonnie and Clyde.

Floyd Hamilton was a former compatriot of Bonnie and Clyde’s and the brother of Ray Hamilton, who was “executed by the state” in 1935. A former bank robber and car thief, Floyd himself spent 20 years in prison, many of them in Leavenworth and Alcatraz. He appears to have his own critique of Bonnie and Clyde’s flattering portrayal of the outlaws, but not because he objects to that film’s treatment of the law. As he tersely explains, Clyde simply wasn’t that skilled as a bank robber, and so Hamilton and the other gang members’ families frequently had to bring him food, money, and gasoline. Floyd further insists that Bonnie never killed anyone, nor participated in any crime, save “by being present.”

Hoffman poses the “most controversial” queries after Hamilton is attached to the polygraph machine. Once
Hamilton has confidently answered “no” to the question of whether Clyde were a homosexual or Bonnie a “girl of bad virtue,” the polygraph operator tells Hoffman that the polygraph results prove nothing, as Hamilton is probably too old to remember Bonnie and Clyde with any accuracy. On this confounding note, and with a tight shot of the polygraph machine, the film ends. Audiences in 1968 were thus left to deduce that neither technology nor certain eyewitnesses would shake the truth as The Other Side sought to tell it.

* * *

Fast forward twenty-five years to 1993. At the Library of Congress, a young woman sits in the darkness, watching a scratchy print of The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde. The print is faded, but its images remain vivid for the woman, who returns seven years later to see it again. She arranges a third screening in 2004, this time to finish a transcript of the film that she could locate no where else. She also impulsively emails Larry Buchanan, who has been coaxed out of retirement by Mel Gibson’s The Passion of Christ and Dan Brown’s Da Vinci Code, and who will soon release his “magnum opus,” The Copper Scroll of Mary Magdalene.23 “Dear Mr. Buchanan,” the email begins. “Congratulations on your forthcoming release. I write to you today about another of your films....”

* * *

Larry Buchanan responded enthusiastically to my query about The Other Side. He telephoned immediately, eager to talk about the movie, Bonnie Parker, and the 1930s outlaws who he had once worried would take the life of his constable father.24 By funny coincidence, Something Weird Video was about to issue a DVD with The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde as the second film on a disc featuring The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald, Buchanan’s oft-copied “what if?” documentary from 1964. Buchanan offered to send me an advance copy, complete with his freshly recorded director’s commentary. True to his word, the DVD arrived within the week, and suddenly I had in my possession as bright and clear a version of The Other Side as had once been shown in drive-in movie theatres all over the Southwest and New York state.

There was, however, one crucial difference between the new digital version and the original. The DVD wraps with the Floyd Hamilton interview, and lacked the original film’s polygraph test conclusion. Neither Buchanan nor Harold Hoffman could tell me why the polygraph test had been left off, and Buchanan passed away before he could inquire with his distributor. It seems likely that the final minutes were lopped because they contradicted much of The Other Side’s argument and because the interview’s insinuation that homosexuality is a form of outlawry no longer matched prevailing political sensibilities.

Buchanan later described The Other Side as a “send-up” of Penn’s movie, which would suggest that he regarded his documentary as more coy than cutting toward the film it burlesqued. While The Other Side remains but a footnote to Arthur Penn’s far more successful film, Buchanan was, on some level, more aware of the instability of outlaw storytelling. He also may better have understood the manipulability of image. The Other Side was, after all, responding to Bonnie and Clyde as a manipulation. And here lies another reason that the polygraph test was an awkward fit. In its desire to recuperate the law, The Other Side reached for the “truth” about Bonnie and Clyde. Yet, once Bonnie and Clyde had been released to the afterlife of the imagination, their story would be refracted through whatever lens matched the needs of a contemporary audience. To paraphrase the TIME magazine reviewer who was among the first to defend Penn’s movie, insisting on the “real” Bonnie and Clyde became a fun exercise, but also an irrelevant one.

Now, forty years after the release of Bonnie and Clyde and its send-up, one film routinely makes reviewers’ Top 100 Films lists. The other, until recently, could only be seen in the Library of Congress. The first film is still gorgeous—each frame a canvas, striking for its composition, and thick with period details. Faye Dunaway’s obviously fake eyelashes may scream 1960s, and at times the blood looks embarrassingly fake, but Bonnie and Clyde remains a work of art. What the film does not do—and never did—is champion its outlaws, who are beautiful, but dim-witted, and too often shown in moments of depression and doubt. By contrast, The Other Side attentively searches out the details of period photographs that did not become iconic, and inadvertently uncovers moments of apparent normality and tenderness: Bonnie and Clyde on a picnic blanket, Bonnie and Clyde lounging in intimate embrace.

Both Bonnie and Clyde and The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde have their scolds. The Other Side has Burl Ives,
although his disapproving narrative is undermined by many of the photographs, which do too much to humanize the outlaws. (Years later, Ives is also undercut by Larry Buchanan's DVD commentary. “The yeast of a thing is poverty,” Buchanan observes, hinting that the Bonnie and Clyde’s actions were not entirely without just cause. He also professes admiration for Clyde’s musicianship and Bonnie’s beauty.) Bonnie and Clyde’s Cassandra is Mrs. Parker, who points out the obvious to her daughter and her lover: “You try to live three miles from me and you won’t live long, honey. You best keep running, Clyde Barrow. And you know it!” The actress Mabel Cavitt delivers the line with a hopelessness that is chilling. Nothing in The Other Side is so unambiguous or so bleak. The condemning film is ultimately less condemnatory of Bonnie and Clyde than was the film that supposedly romanticized them.

Notes

1 Ted Hinton and Larry Grove, Ambush: The Real Story of Bonnie and Clyde (Austin, TX: Shoal Creek, 1979), 173.


5 See Robert Pogue Harrison, The Dominion of the Dead (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Harrison describes funeral rites as separating the corpse from its image. Once Bonnie and Clyde had died, their images could more readily accommodate fantasy projections steeped in censure, admiration, or ambivalence.

6 The official death count of the highly mobile Barrow gang varies. Not all the crimes ascribed to gang could be proved as happening by their hand. John Toland’s Dillinger Days, which inspired Benton and Newman’s script, claims Bonnie and Clyde killed 18 people. Most other histories count 12 or 13 victims. All accounts agree that Clyde, Bonnie, and their gang had fatal run-ins with nine law officers and at least three private citizens. At age 16, Bonnie Parker married a schoolmate, Roy Thornton. The marriage was short-lived, and Roy Thornton was eventually sent to prison. Bonnie reportedly considered it cold to divorce him while he was in jail, and so remained married to him when she died. Many 1930s news accounts therefore identified her as Bonnie Parker Thornton or Mrs. Roy Thornton. See “Lovers in a Car,” Time, 4 June 1934, 16.

7 TIME’s initial review (“Low-Down Hoedown,” 23 August 1967, 13) panned Bonnie and Clyde for its “sheer, tasteless aimlessness.” Five months later (after Pauline Kael’s bold defense of the film in the pages of The New Yorker), the magazine famously re-reviewed Penn’s movie as centerpiece of its December 8, 1967 feature on “The New Cinema: Violence… Sex… Art.” An Andy Warhol-inspired collage of Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty as Bonnie and Clyde appeared on the issue’s cover. As the second, laudatory piece explained, “TIME’s review made the mistake of comparing the fictional and real Bonnie and Clyde, a totally irrelevant exercise” (8 December 1967, 73). TIME further justified the film’s unsettling shifts from comedy to violence as making sense to the first-ever TV generation. “Television’s abrupt leap from news about Viet Nam to Gomer Pyle to toothpaste ads expands people’s vision,” observed a former television director (67).

8 Director Arthur Penn suggested that Bonnie and Clyde was a social justice picture, with special appeal to traditionally oppressed groups. As Penn reported: “[F]ive Negroes present there [at a 1967 screening] 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.’ They really understood, because in a certain sense, the American Negro has the same kind of attitude of ‘I have nothing more to lose” that was true during the Depression for Bonnie and Clyde. It is true now of the American Negro. He is really at the point of revolution – it’s rebellion, not riot.” Screenwriters Newman and Benton denied having intended any such thematic overlay: “Critics and interviewers have told us that Bonnie and Clyde was really about Vietnam, really about police brutality, really about Lee Harvey Oswald, really about Watts. After a while, we took to shrugging and saying, “If you think so.” But to us, it is really about those facets of American sensibility… Today, in a time when everybody likes to talk about being ‘aware,’ we have inherited a legacy from [the] underworld. What we now call “the underground,” what the hip people do and are and feel, stems
in great part from ‘the underworld.’ Of course, what makes [Bonnie and Clyde] beautiful is that they didn’t know it. They knew they had something to say, but they went about it in a way which inevitably brought doom. But even in the light of their brief lives, we can see they were not squares. Al Capone, he was square. Clyde Barrow, no.’


Buchanan did contract work for American International Pictures’ Sam Arkoff, who hired Buchanan to churn out cheap knock-offs of horror films by AIP’s reigning star, Roger Corman. The inexpensive copy-cat films could then be shown on late-night television or as the lesser half of a cinema double feature.


In his 2003 director’s commentary, Buchanan twice mentions the saxophone. Buchanan described his Sears-Roebuck guitar as having once been his “bread and butter”; the instrument was the ticket to his first-ever film role. It’s possible that Buchanan therefore felt a musician’s kinship with Clyde Barrow.

Marcus Seale signed an acting contract with 20th Century-Fox Pictures, which renamed him Larry Buchanan, the name he (and his wife and children) would keep for the rest of his life.


Director’s DVD commentary, 2003. The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde.

In Bonnie and Clyde, Sophie Stone and Mr. Darby became “Velma Davis” and “Eugene Grizzard,” both played for comedic effect by Evans Evans and Gene Wilder, in his first-ever film role. In 2003, Larry Buchanan mis-remembered Sophie Stone and Mr. Darby as having been romantically linked, and this was probably because the Bonnie and Clyde script had suggested as much.

The eyewitness, a local farmer, later claimed that the woman who shot the police officer might have been Billie Parker, Bonnie’s sister.

The reenactment departs from the account in “I’m Frank Hamer”: The Life of a Texas Peace Officer, which says that it was Clyde who first pulled up a shotgun and killed Constable Cal Campbell. The biography reports that Bonnie and another gang member, Henry Methvin, then fired on policeman Percy Boyd, who was sitting in the constable’s cars. Many histories describe how the trio forced a wounded Boyd to push their car from the mud and took him on a wild, fourteen-hour ride before releasing him. All accounts agree that Bonnie and Boyd struck up a friendship. “We liked him,” Bonnie said. “When we let him out, we gave him a new shirt and tie and expense money to get back home. He asked me: ‘Bonnie, what shall I tell the world when I go back?’ And I said, ‘Tell them I don’t smoke cigars!’ He did it too. It was in all the Oklahoma newspapers. This pleased Bonnie greatly.” Jan Fortune, Fugitives, the Story of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, as Told by the Mother of Bonnie and the Sister of Clyde (Dallas: Ranger Press, 1934), 61, qtd. in H. Gordon Frost and John H. Jenkins, “I’m Frank Hamer”: The Life of a Texas Peace Officer (Austin: Pemberton, 1968), 221.


Director’s DVD commentary, 2003. The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde.
As a very young man, Buchanan became keenly interested in the Nazarene, or historical Jesus. He began filming *The Copper Scroll of Mary Magdalene* in 1972, and tinkered with it on and off for the next 32 years. He finally finished the post-production stages just a few months before his death on December 2, 2004. The film is set to debut in 2007.

In our first conversation in May 2004, Larry told me that his father had been killed by Bonnie Parker. He may have been teasing. He encouraged me to check the story in his 1996 autobiography, *It Came From Hunger: Tales of a Cinema Schlockmeister*, which reports the shooter as Floyd Hamilton. Hamilton “pumped buckshot into Papa’s chest” and from a far enough distance that the injury “was not serious, but it was sobering.” (10).

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