Bonnie and Clyde is now understood as the film that finally broke the hold of the Production Code on Hollywood moviemaking. The graphic presentation of violence, the portrayal of Clyde’s sexual impotence, and the relatively sympathetic portrayal of characters who would be considered “villains” in classic Hollywood films not only subverted the Code, but openly flaunted it. In a sense, this film brought the kind of realism that had long been practiced in international cinema into the Hollywood mainstream, and film viewing in America would never be the same again.

In fact, the film’s sensational initial impact tended to obscure just how much director Arthur Penn and producer/star Warren Beatty had learned from the European neo-realistic and auteur films of the 1940s through the 1960s: (1) the film is shot entirely on location, in the gritty Texas towns where the notorious couple first started their crime spree; (2) non-professional actors are used for a number of the supporting speaking parts; (3) the main characters are clearly anti-heroes, making up their own existential code and identity as they go along (sometimes literally, since Bonnie’s “poetry” is an attempt to mythologize Clyde and herself).

Despite these influences, Bonnie and Clyde is an entirely American story about ambition, adventure, and family, standard themes to which classic Hollywood movies from the studio era had returned again and again. Yet, Bonnie and Clyde effectively ended the studio era in American moviemaking and introduced an era of experimentation in form and content sometimes called the American Film Renaissance. A new generation of American directors and actors during the period 1967-1975 would revolutionize the content and style of American film by taking a fresh, revisionist approach to classic American stories and film genres. How was such a radical revolution possible?

By the early 1960s, the major studios were falling behind the curve of American culture. The big-budget, producer-controlled films that they had favored during the 1950s and 1960s had not managed to overcome the pervasive popularity of television, and their loss of control over exhibitors after the downfall of vertical integration in the late 1940s had made producers hostages to large, risky ventures that needed to be “blockbusters” to earn a profit. Occasionally an early 1960s “spectacle film” like Lawrence of Arabia, The Sound of Music, or Dr. Zhivago would be a hit, but if one of these behemoths failed, it could take the studio down with it.

Plus, audiences were no longer wedded to the idea of “glamorous stars,” like they once were. Marlon Brando was as big a star as there was in Hollywood in the 1950s, but his 1962 epic version of Mutiny on the Bounty was a critical and box office disaster; Cleopatra, released in 1963, with Elizabeth Taylor at the height of her beauty and charisma, tanked, and nearly bankrupted Twentieth Century Fox studios. By the middle of the decade, audiences, especially the young, were becoming less interested in traditional “star-studded” romance. Mainstream moviemaking had become too identified with what the younger people came to call the establishment. With their attachment to the new medium of rock and roll music, with its celebration of youthful, communal sensuality, younger audiences wanted something in film that would deliver the same thrills, not Dr. Doolittle and The Sound of Music. Controversy over the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and
the influence of psychedelic drugs motivated more and more young people to create a counter-culture of their own, and they implicitly wanted films that would capture its spirit.

*Bonnie and Clyde* filled the bill. The two desperados and their madcap adventure in crime set in the 1930s gave young people anti-heroes that they could identify with. Being doomed did not really seem to matter; in fact, the pair’s violent end tied in nicely with apocalyptic sense of national self-destruction that many saw happening in Vietnam. The youthful hero John F. Kennedy had also gone down in a hail of gunfire (Martin Luther King and John’s brother Robert Kennedy soon would, too). The setting of the film resonated as well. The 1930s and the accompanying Great Depression were also a time of disillusionment with an establishment of government and bankers who were “oppressing the masses.” The violent, doomed couple were easy to idealize as prototypes of young people seizing the media and moment to humiliate and confuse the powers that be, no matter what the consequences.

The Film’s Sensational Themes and Imagery

Once Clyde’s Brother Buck Barrow and his wife Blanche join Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, family relationships come to the fore. Clyde and his brother knock each other around like teenage boys sharing a room at home; Buck and Blanche are behave towards each other like a standard, middle–class couple (at least in the beginning); Bonnie and Blanche squabble like in-laws; Bonnie insists on a secret meeting with family members; and, finally, C.W. Moss’s offense to his father’s sense of personal values motivates the ultimate betrayal. Plus, criminality is pretty much a “family business” for both the Barrows and the Mosses. This degree of conjunction between American family norms and outlaw identity would reach its logical culmination with *The Godfather* in 1972, when another young, maverick director, Francis Ford Coppola, would begin to tell the tragic story of the Corleone family of Sicilian mobsters.

Sexuality receives jarring treatment in the film as well. Clyde’s sexual impotence runs exactly counter to the typical notion, emblemized at the time by the popular James Bond spy movies, that violent adventures are a sexual stimulant. Bonnie certainly thinks so at first, but Clyde makes it clear that “I ain’t no lover boy,” and the idea that his guns become a substitute for sexuality rather than a stimulant for it becomes running issue in the movie, making the couple’s romantic interlude before their final ambush seem especially poignant: note their final exchange of looks before they are gunned down by Captain Hamer and his posse.

Of course, the depiction of violence made the most sensational impact on audiences in 1967. Violence had been a staple of film entertainment since its beginning, but from the advent of the Production Code, the full consequences of it had been carefully censored. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, though, the suffering and death caused by violence are honestly shown, and the initial effect is literally shocking, because the audience has been drawn into the simplicity and innocence of the couple’s first attempts to be outlaws: the bank robbery foiled by the bank having failed; Clyde’s horrified shock at the store owner’s attempt to kill him over the theft of a few dollars worth of graceries. But when Clyde spontaneously shoots a bank manager after the driver C.W. Moss botches the getaway, the bullet clearly hits the man in the forehead and he dies in a splash of blood. At that point, not only do Bonnie and Clyde lose their innocence, but American movies lose their censor-enforced artificial innocence about violence and its consequences. From that point on, the movie delves into the results of violence in ways that were stunning at the time, and can still shock us today: the transformation of Blanche from a preacher’s daughter to a full accomplice in crime who
wants “her share”; Buck’s death agony after a gun battle, accompanied by Blanche’s screaming grief and horrified discovery that her own wounds have blinded her. And then there’s the film’s final scene, based on the real-life ending of Bonnie and Clyde: a slow-motion “dance of death,” in which the couple and their car are perforated with hundreds of machine gun rounds. On a personal note, when I first saw this film at the old Pix theatre in Rock Hill, at the age of seventeen, I felt like some of my own innocence was lost, and I could never see the world quite the same again.

The Imagery of the Film

Although the film was nominated for ten Academy Awards (all five of the principal actors were nominated in the Best and Supporting Actor and Actress categories), it only received two Oscars by a still pretty conservative Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Estelle Parsons won the Supporting Actress Award for Blanche, and the film won the award for Best Cinematography. What chief cinematographer Bernard Guffey achieved with Bonnie and Clyde simply could not be ignored. The classic neo-realist films from Europe, and “art” films in general, had all been in black and white. Even though filming in color had become much cheaper and far more widely used in the 1950s and 1960s, black and white was generally reserved for “serious” dramatic films. Guffey was able to combine the harsh physical realism pioneered by the Europeans with the spectacle of color so central to Hollywood’s sense of high style. Despite the neo-realist ambitions of director Arthur Penn, Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty are made glamorous in the Hollywood tradition, with intense close-ups of their highly attractive features, not to mention Dunaway’s model-like ability to make “old fashions” look hip and stylish.

In the initial planning for Bonnie and Clyde, in fact, Warren Beatty and his scriptwriters had seriously considered having the French “New Wave” director, Jean-Luc Godard, direct the film. Godard was initially interested, but his whimsical, artistic temperament, appropriate for a French auteur, finally caused too many complications, and Beatty ultimately decided that Arthur Penn, who fully understood the neo-realist style, but could work more cooperatively with Beatty and the crew, would be a more practical choice.

The neo-realist look of the film did not come easy. Bernard Guffey was a traditional Hollywood cameraman, and director Arthur Penn had to pull him kicking and screaming into making a film that would use natural light for interiors and catch the changing light of the outdoors. There was also the challenge of the final scene, which took over sixty different shots to achieve. Guffey was not used to being bullied by a young director and a young producer/star who acted more like artists than studio employees, but the balance that he finally achieved between the strengths of Hollywood’s more traditional approaches to lighting and shooting and the neo-realist ambitions of Penn and Beatty made the look of the film unique and influential.