

# Convergence and Divergence in the Movie Review: *Bonnie and Clyde*

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... when a text fails to respond to the rules applied to it, it is not always clear whether the text or the reader is at fault.

—Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading*, 211

In general, divergence of readings is more interesting than convergence. . . .

—Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, 51

Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* is arguably the Hollywood movie that generated the widest range of responses from reviewers. The unfavorable reviews in some of the most estimable newspapers and magazines of the day—*Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, *The Saturday Review*, *The New York Times*—were sufficiently damning to prompt the distributor, Warner Brothers-Seven Arts, to pull the film from circulation not long after its release in the fall of 1967.<sup>1</sup> The favorable reviews—most famously Pauline Kael's lengthy defense in *The New Yorker* and, in a reversal of position for *Time*, Stefan Kanfer's story accompanying a Robert Rauschenberg *Bonnie and Clyde* collage cover—were so laudatory in their assessments that the producer, Warren Beatty, reportedly used them in his successful attempt to convince the studio to re-release the film.<sup>2</sup> Its re-release coincided with the day Academy Award nominations were announced, and a film that had been characterized as "incompetently written, acted, directed and produced" (Cook 505) received ten nominations. Perhaps equally important for the studio, a film that had been first viewed in August, opened nation-wide in September, and, according to a Warner Brothers

marketing executive, "was finished by the end of October," went on to become one of the top-grossing films of its time.<sup>3</sup>

*Bonnie and Clyde* did not simply draw a variety of responses from reviewers; on occasion, it drew a variety of responses from the *same* reviewer. *Newsweek* joined *Time* in reversing its original negative judgment. *Time's* change of heart was apparently more institutional than personal. In its initial notice *Time's* anonymous reviewer characterizes it as "a strange and purposeless mingling of fact and claptrap that teeters uneasily on the brink of burlesque" (Aug. 25, 1967, p. 78). A few months later the cover story by Stefan Kanfer, presumably not the author of the first review, calls it the best movie of the year (Dec. 8, 1967, p. 66). *Newsweek's* change of heart is even more remarkable, perhaps unprecedented in the short history of the movie review. In the August 21 issue Joseph Morgenstern in a harsh review finds that the movie "does not know what to make of its own violence" and concludes that it is nothing more than "a squalid shoot-'em for the moron trade" (65). His review the following week begins with a reference to these judgments and continues, "I am sorry to say I consider that review grossly unfair and regrettably inaccurate. I am sorrier to say I wrote it" (82). Having seen the film a second time, Morgenstern now believes not only that it "knows perfectly well what to make of its violence," but that the statement it makes is "cogent," presented in "scene after scene of dazzling artistry" (82). *Life's* reviewer, Richard Schickel, also had occasion to rethink his initial judgment. In an unfavorable review in October of 1967 Schickel concludes that "[w]hat might have been a breakthrough of sorts for the American screen falls back in confusion at the final barriers of self-realization" (142). Reprinting the piece in 1972 in his collection *Second Sight*, Schickel appends a review of his own review, the first sentence of which says simply, "Wrong" (143).

Even when they did not feel compelled to admit to errors of judgment, reviewers kept returning to *Bonnie and Clyde*. Typical are John Simon's two notices in *The New Leader*. The first, which may be the single most abrasive appraisal the film received, characterizes it as "clever trash," "hayseed comedy," "sentimental pop-Freudianism," and "slop," concluding that "the whole thing stinks," its "facile shock effects" an "added dishonesty" (*Film* 67/68, 29-30). The second, three months later, notes the "second-thought" phenomenon generated by the film: "Since it seems to be customary

to have second thoughts on *Bonnie and Clyde*, here are mine." Unlike other reviewers, Simon does not wish to change his position; he does, however, feel compelled to amplify his earlier views, which he feels were stated with "excessive laconism" (30). What follows is a longer and more thoughtful discussion of the film which acknowledges, at least implicitly, that whatever the final verdict the film cannot be dismissed quite so lightly as his first review insinuated.

Of those who could not let go of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the most conspicuous was the man credited with being the preeminent movie reviewer in the country, the *New York Times*' Bosley Crowther. Studies of the film which allude to its bad press inevitably refer to Crowther's three negative reviews. In fact, he managed to damn *Bonnie and Clyde* in seven separate reviews between August 7, the day after it was first shown at the International Film Festival of Montreal, and December 17. Four of these are substantial discussions (the most extended a defense of his original judgment directed to angry letter-writers); in the other three, *Bonnie and Clyde* is inserted, to its disadvantage, into discussions of other films. So extreme and persistent was Crowther's condemnation that other reviewers, some of whom were not enthusiastic about the film, felt obliged to respond. In *The Village Voice* Andrew Sarris, who is troubled by Penn's oscillation between period legend and contemporary psychology and who characterizes it finally as "half-baked pathos," nevertheless questions Crowther's "use [of] the pages of the *New York Times* for a personal vendetta against a director and actor [he] doesn't like" (222). Pauline Kael's vigorous defense is almost certainly directed against the unnamed Crowther, since it answers in detail the objections he raises in his seven attacks.

The extremity of these attacks and defenses had other consequences, some of them practical. Only months after his reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde* Crowther was replaced as the *New York Times* reviewer, and it was speculated that his tenacious attack on the movie had played a large part in his removal, showing him out of touch with his audience. When Kael wrote her defense, on the other hand, she was not connected to a magazine. (Penelope Gilliatt was *The New Yorker*'s film critic, and had given *Bonnie and Clyde* a favorable review.) Kael had written the review for *The New Republic* as a freelancer, but when *The New Republic* decided against running it, she placed it with *The New Yorker*.<sup>4</sup> A few months later the magazine employed her as film critic in part on the strength of the review, which by this point

had attracted a great deal of attention. In her long stint at *The New Yorker* (she retired from the magazine in 1991) she came to occupy the position vacated by Crowther, abruptly silenced as “the most powerful voice in film criticism at that time” (Friedman, 23).

Other engaging ironies and anecdotes are associated with the film’s stormy release, but it is not the social or cultural impact of *Bonnie and Clyde* that I wish to pursue, nor the fashions it inaugurated, nor its influence on subsequent Hollywood films, its place in the “New American Cinema,” its role in initiating the Hollywood Film Renaissance, its links to the French New Wave, or its part in launching the successful Hollywood careers of its writers, producer, editor, cinematographer, and players. What interests me here is an issue that may seem oddly marginal to an admirer of the film. Is it possible to determine why the range of initial critical responses to the film was so extraordinarily wide? Versions of this question have been asked before—what is it about the *film* that produced such disparate responses? Or what is it about its sixties *audience* that produced such disparate responses? The first leads to examination of such issues as Penn’s unusual coupling of comedy and atrocity or the film’s attitude toward its own violence. The second involves scrutiny of such matters as the film’s relationship to the mood of the sixties, the generational gap, the anti-establishment “youth audience.” The questions I want to raise focus neither on the film itself nor its mass audience, but on the expectations, conventions, and strategies of a relatively small circle of professional viewers who first saw it and left a written record of their responses, their published reviews.

Some literary reader-response critics have argued that meaning, significance, value are not properties of the text but of the experience of the text, governed, in turn, by expectations and conventions which *precede* the experience. According to this view, it is what the reader brings to the text, the grid or framework the reader imposes on the text, which yields both its meaning and its value. Jonathan Culler, the theorist most closely identified with this branch of reader-oriented criticism, has argued that “[t]he task of literary theory or poetics . . . is to make explicit the procedures and conventions of reading, to offer a comprehensive theory of the ways in which we go about making sense of various kinds of texts” (*Pursuit of Signs* 125). Culler, that is, has proposed a semiotics of reading, the object of which would not be the work itself but ways in which readers have made sense of it, “making

sense" here replacing the concept of "meaning" as something inherent in the work (*Pursuit of Signs* 50).

How would a semiotics of reading be carried out? How may the procedures and conventions of interpretation and evaluation be made explicit? Culler notes that there exist "numerous records of responses and interpretations that semiotics can use." Since "interpretations are recorded, one can study literary signification by attempting to describe the conventions and semiotic operations responsible for these interpretations" (*Pursuit of Signs* 49). Can such a practice be applied to the interpretation and evaluation of films? Reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde* are recorded. Is it possible to describe the most significant conventions and semiotic operations responsible for the divergence of these reviews? The movie review is clearly one of the least complex forms of description and evaluation. So straightforward are many newspaper reviews that the notion of strategies or conventions may even seem irrelevant. Pierre Macherey has noted that implicit in traditional criticism of a text is the simple judgment "It could or ought to be different" (15); it may be that the movie review is the only form of criticism to treat that judgment explicitly. Yet in the same way that the fairy tale has proven more useful than the literary narrative in some structuralist analysis, perhaps the very simplicity of the movie review elevates it over more sophisticated forms of interpretation for semiotic analysis, and my principal interest here is in the efficacy of this form of analysis. Is it possible? Does it yield significant results?

In reading these reviews in an effort to disclose what conventions are at work in them, I find myself in the same position as the reviewers interpreting the film. What conventions do my *own* interpretations contain? It may be that many of these are so habitual as to be invisible, but in so far as they are conscious I will spell them out. I have looked at several models for examining the manner in which readers make sense of literature and movies, and found that some of these are more helpful for my purpose than others. The pioneering work of Janet Staiger offers an historical materialist model for reception studies. She is interested in "understanding historical processes and the struggle over the meaning of signs," the ways in which "culture and politics interweave and affect each other" (*Interpreting Films*, 15). She is concerned, as I am here, with the way films are understood by actual viewers; however, she is much more interested than I am in the ideological play of such matters as race (in the reception, say, of *Birth of*

a Nation) or sex/gender (as in the reception of the Judy Garland film).<sup>5</sup> Although her focus differs from my own (which is more narrowly on the learned conventions of reading), I have found her criticism in such studies as *Interpreting Films* and *Perverse Spectators* of great value as a general model for examining reception.

David Bordwell's *Making Meaning* is closer to what I am attempting here. Using the principles of cognitive psychology and what he labels "rational-agent social theory," he attempts to set out a fundamental interpretive logic and a rhetoric used in the interpretation of film. His overall view is that film critics use reasoning skills of the kind that "govern everyday sense-making," that they "need not consist of theories in any rigorous sense" (7). He is dubious of Culler's assumption that critics produce interpretations by following rules (6). Bordwell's study catalogs in great detail many of the ordinary sense-making strategies film critics use, and it also illustrates one of the problems of this kind of analysis. "The semiotician courts banality," Culler has written, "because he is committed to studying meanings already known or attested within a culture in the hope of formulating the conventions that members of that culture are following" (99). More importantly, since Bordwell has attempted an "anatomy of the logic of mapping and modeling" employed by academic film critics, his anatomy is less suited for the reviewer, and he notes that his model "is very largely what separates the academic critic from the reviewer and from the ordinary spectator" (202).

The banality of making explicit what is already known would appear to be endemic to any attempt to catalog strategies or conventions of interpretation, and Culler himself, one of the most respected theorists of this branch of audience-response criticism, has not escaped it. In *The Pursuit of Signs* he provides a model (one which I am following here) for such a project, an analysis of conflicting readings of a single text. He notes that Blake's "London" is a useful example since "critics have disagreed about its force and meaning while agreeing on its power" (68). Is it possible to identify the most important convention employed in these critics' interpretations? Yes, and the reader is not surprised to see that it is the principle of *unity*. "The critics I have cited may disagree about what the lines mean, but they are all following the same convention of unity, performing interpretive operations to fill, in their different ways, a structure they have all posited" (72). Culler devotes ten pages of quite engaging analysis to make explicit what is

implicitly known, that interpretative acts assume successful texts must be made to illustrate some sort of coherence. For Culler it is relatively unimportant that readers disagree about the nature of the coherence so long as they invoke the same convention. His critical method, that is, assumes that making explicit the operations that readers use in finding meanings is more important than the specific meanings attributed to texts. In fact, he argues that the danger of focusing on conflicting readings of a single work, as I have done here, is that the analysis may slide from a description of interpretative conventions to an attempt to judge the validity of various interpretations according to one's own reading of the text.

This is certainly a danger in analyzing the initial reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde*, especially in light of the film's subsequent history. One is tempted to ask, for example, why Brosley Crowther was so wrong about the movie, or what enabled Joseph Morgenstern to "correct" his own first erroneous reading. But these are not the questions I wish to raise, which have to do rather with the interpretive conventions of Crowther's and Morgenstern's reviews insofar as these can be uncovered. I agree, then, with Culler's warning about the danger of lapsing into judgments, but his assumption that the conventions of interpretation are more important than the specific content of the interpretation is troubling, especially since the manner in which the convention is *applied* may result in a film's being damned or praised. As we will see, movie reviewers also assume that successful films must display some sort of coherence. It is the secondary operation to determine whether or not *Bonnie and Clyde* is in fact coherent, or, if so, what kind of coherence it illustrates, that leads reviewers to split sharply. Furthermore, as Culler recognizes, the question of coherence is not an isolated issue. Reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde* support the supposition that rules of coherence may themselves be closely related to rules of genre, if we conceive of genre in its broadest possible sense.

It would not be surprising if genre played a large role in shaping the interpretations and evaluations of *Bonnie and Clyde*'s reviewers. Theorists who have attempted to describe conventions of interpretation tend to agree on the most basic strategy, contained in Bordwell's assertion that "[t]he critic cannot treat the text as absolutely unique; it must belong to a larger class." The most common grouping in film interpretation, he concludes, "is associated with the idea of

genre" (146). Although Janet Staiger argues that Hollywood films "have never been pure instances of genre," she nevertheless insists that grouping films by genre, however eclectic, is an essential critical activity (*Perverse Spectators* 62). Culler notes that there are "good reasons to insist on the constitutive force of generic conventions and their links with the most general reading strategies" (*Pursuit of Signs* 59). Peter Rabinowitz, who in *Before Reading* attempts to spell out many of the basic "rules" of reading,<sup>6</sup> makes emphatic the priority of genre: "We can never interpret entirely outside generic structures: 'reading'—even the reading of a first paragraph—is always 'reading as'" (176).

It is useful for my examination of reviewers' strategies that both Culler and Rabinowitz wish to rethink genre in reader-oriented terms—not, in Rabinowitz's words, "as sets of features found in the texts themselves," but "as preformed bundles of operations performed by readers in order to recover the meanings of texts" (177). And looking at genre in terms of shared reader expectations and conventions, as assumptions about what *kind* of work is being read, leads to one further genre-like category which appears to be decisive in accounting for the range of readings of *Bonnie and Clyde*. In *Interpreting Interpreting* Susan Horton concludes that different interpretations of a work, a Dickens novel, for example, may be traced to different concepts of what constitutes "the hermeneutical circle within which interpretation necessarily takes place" (140). The concept may well be genre, the Victorian novel, but it may be something larger. That is, not all categories which influence assumptions about the kind of work being read are traditional genres, yet they may create expectations about the work in a manner similar to generic assumptions. As Rabinowitz puts it, "we find ourselves with the possibility of categories that are not traditionally treated as genres, but that have all the attributes of genres" (184). Chief among these is the popular/serious distinction. This distinction is not normally thought of as generic, yet its influence on conventions of reading appears to be as great as that of more commonly accepted genres in that it helps to determine how other conventions are applied, as Rabinowitz has argued.<sup>7</sup> Of the models I have found for mapping reader strategies, Rabinowitz's codification of the rules of genre, especially the implications of the popular/serious distinction, has proven the most useful in accounting for the range of reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde*.



To state the operative principle in the most general terms, reviewers' assumptions about what kind of movie they are watching dictate their application of other interpretative and evaluative strategies—what other films it is read against, for example, what cues are singled out for discussion, what significance is attributed to these, what forms of coherence or incoherence it is seen as displaying. In regard to the last, to take one perhaps obvious example, Rabinowitz has pointed out that in reading “elite” novels we will attempt to find more complicated and elaborate forms of coherence. “We are, for instance, more apt to look at apparent inconsistencies as examples of irony or undercutting, whereas in popular novels, we are apt to ignore them or treat them as flaws” (188).

Culler's statement on genre in *Structuralist Poetics* has been frequently cited: “A work can only be read in connection with or against other texts, which provide a grid through which it is read and structured by establishing expectations which enable one to pick out salient features and give them a structure” (139). It would appear, in reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde*, that the particular movies, or kinds of movies, that provide the grid by which it is interpreted and structured depend in part on viewers' generic assumptions. In his first review, for example, Bosley Crowther assumed he was watching a comedy, a “farce melodrama” or a “slaphappy . . . charade,” and the body of films which help to provide an interpretive grid is appropriately “Mack Sennett slapstick comedy” (Aug. 7, p. 32). Later Crowther reviews offer slight variations on this generic classification; it is a “crime comedy” (Aug. 11, p. 19), a “slapstick comedy” which might have been passed off as “candidly commercial movie comedy, nothing more,” if it had not inappropriately mixed in violence. Assuming that he is watching slapstick, Crowther interprets the performances of the actors in the context of “the jazz-age cut-ups in ‘Thoroughly Modern Millie’” and the rubes of “The Beverly Hillbillies” (Aug. 14, p. 36). The fact that he viewed the movie at an international film festival did not, surprisingly, lead him to consider the possibility that it had serious intentions. To the contrary, he regarded the event as “the exploitation of a mawkish Hollywood film” (Aug. 11, p. 19), a designation which takes us to the popular/serious distinction. For Crowther, *Bonnie and Clyde* is clearly not a serious film, but an unsuccessful comic variation of the crime movie, and as a failed popular crime movie it may be compared to more successful examples of its genre. The “offbeat realism” of

*Cool Hand Luke* is more effective than the “glossy pseudo-realism of *Bonnie and Clyde*” (Nov. 12, p. 129); “subjective and romantic,” it “does not hold a candle” to *In Cold Blood*, which is “objective and real” (Dec. 15, p. 59).

The movies against which *Bonnie and Clyde* is read in Pauline Kael’s long laudatory review<sup>8</sup> are of a very different kind and are used for different purposes. It is obvious that one of the chief strategies of Kael’s review (and one of the common strategies of reviewers generally) is to read the movie against a wide variety of movies as a way of underscoring salient features. Kael’s list of intertextual movies and plays is extensive, and I will note only the most obvious examples. *Bonnie and Clyde* is like *The Manchurian Candidate* in being perceived as going too far, dividing audiences, and being “jumped on” by critics. It is unlike European films in general in the way in which it makes contact with American audiences. It is compared to “our best movies,” which “have always made entertainment out of the anti-heroism of American life” (147). It is compared briefly to other treatments of the *Bonnie and Clyde* story to its advantage. It is compared at some length to one earlier treatment, *You Only Live Once*, “one of the best American films of the thirties, as *Bonnie and Clyde* is of the sixties,” to show how each expressed certain feelings of its own time (148). It is compared to Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and to *A Man for All Seasons* to suggest that serious works may be historically inaccurate without being attacked (152). Its make-believe robbers are recognizable from Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player* and Godard’s gangster pictures, *Breathless* and *Band of Outsiders* (160). One of its scenes is obviously based on a famous sequence in Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*, and Bonnie seems to owe a great deal to Catherine in *Jules and Jim* (161). The films against which *Bonnie and Clyde* is read proclaim implicitly what the review also states explicitly—that it is an important American film. From the perspective of Culler’s and Rabinowitz’s assumptions, however, it is not that Kael reaches this conclusion *after* comparing her text with other texts; rather her assumption about what kind of text it is dictates both the selection of other texts and the kinds of relations established between them and *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Nowhere in the reviews is the relation between the popular/serious distinction and other interpretive strategies more clearly delineated than in Joseph Morgenstern’s two notices. In the first he characterizes the movie as a “shoot-‘em for the moron trade,” that is,

a popular genre movie intended for an unsophisticated audience. Such generic assumptions do not, predictably, lead him to look for artistic meaning in the film's mixture of "gruesome carnage" and "gleeful offscreen fiddling." It has no coherence, "does not know what to make of its own violence"; "the people in charge were not really in charge" (Aug. 21, p. 65). Its fusion of comedy and carnage is the result of ineptitude, a lack of control on the part of the filmmakers.

A week later Morgenstern changes his mind, labels his first review "inaccurate," and decides that *Bonnie and Clyde* is a serious, coherent movie that "knows perfectly well what to make of its violence, and makes a cogent statement with it." The film displays "scene after scene of dazzling artistry"; "Arthur Penn and his colleagues perform poignant and intricate wonders" (Aug. 28, pp. 82-83). What has changed? Is it possible to uncover the "rules" or expectations of the second review that led to this reversal of judgment? In the second review Morgenstern assumes a principle that ties the use of violence to the popular/serious binary: "Distinctions can and must be made between violent films that pander and violent films that enlighten" (p. 82). In his first viewing, then, he assumes he is watching a violent film pandering to the "moron trade" and makes no effort to find a coherent pattern or theme in its apparent contradictions, treating them as flaws. In his second, assuming that he is watching a serious film (although how he came to that assumption remains obscure in the review),<sup>9</sup> he searches for ways "violence can serve . . . artistic ends" (83). *Bonnie and Clyde* has now entered the realm of art, a word that appears frequently in the second review: "art can certainly reflect life, clarify and improve life; and since most of humanity teeters on the edge of violence every day, there is no earthly reason why art should not turn violence to its own good ends" (83). In the first review the film is read against the "Grand Ole Opry" and "*In Cold Blood* being played as a William Inge comedy" (65). In the second it is in the company of Charlie Chaplin's comedies, with their "large helpings of mayhem," W. C. Field's cruel social satire, *Public Enemy*, and (names foreign to the first review) Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Buñuel (82-83).

Morgenstern's two reviews support the supposition that the popular/serious distinction must *precede* other interpretative strategies, but they also demonstrate that assumptions about what kind of movie one is watching can obviously change at various points (during a viewing, afterwards on reflection, in response to other

viewers' interpretations, during a second viewing). Morgenstern does not make clear at what point (or exactly why) his initial "moron trade" assumptions changed, but Louis Menard in a recent *New Yorker* essay (on *Bonnie and Clyde's* debt to the French New Wave) reports that after his first review Morgenstern took his wife, the actress Piper Laurie, to see the movie and, "feeling the audience's excitement, he was swept away" (175).<sup>10</sup> Is it possible for the audience to change a reviewer's judgment? Is there a reviewer strategy or rule for taking into account the audience's immediate response? If so, it too appears to be subordinate to prior assumptions such as the popular/serious distinction.

Reviewers seldom report on the experience of seeing a film as a member of a larger audience, but the two principals in the *Bonnie and Clyde* controversy, Crowther and Kael, used the responses of other members of the audience as essential components of their analyses, although in opposite ways. Both interpret audience enthusiasm as confirming their prior assumptions. Believing the film to be a popular failure, a "farce melodrama," Crowther reads the audience's reaction as excessive and inappropriate. His first report from the International Film Festival of Montreal notes that *Bonnie and Clyde* "was wildly received with gales of laughter and given a terminal burst of applause," but this is offered as evidence of "how delirious these festival audiences can be," and other "more sober visitors from the United States" were "wagging their heads in dismay and exasperation" that such an "embarrassing" film should represent their country (Aug. 7, p. 32). In a second report from Montreal Crowther feels it necessary to explain why the film that received by far the most enthusiastic reception from audiences should be thought an embarrassment. Although he phrases it tentatively as a set of questions, his suggestion is that the audience reaction was not "a true expression of appreciation for the film" but "a manifestation of opening-night ebullience and a sort of rocking along with a form of camp." Far from indicating any merit in the film, it represented a "possible surrender to the exploitation of a mawkish Hollywood film," irritating the feelings of film purists, and getting "the whole show off on the wrong foot" (Aug. 11, p. 19). In Crowther's interpretation, audience enthusiasm is evidence of the film's absence of serious intent, its inappropriateness (as popular Hollywood entertainment) as a film festival entry.

While Crowther refuses to trust his audience, Kael makes hers

a key player in her evaluation. She begins by arguing that *Bonnie and Clyde* is the most “excitingly American” movie since *The Manchurian Candidate*, and her confirmation is less a formal analysis of the movie as text than an analysis of the audience response: “The audience is alive to it.” And what are they responding to? She offers what appears to be her own response as a general audience response: “Our experience as we watch it has some connection with the way we react to movies in childhood: with how we came to love them and we feel they were ours—not an art that we learned over the years to appreciate, but simply and immediately ours.” This interpretation of audience response, in turn, leads to a discussion of how American movies which are contemporary in feeling like *Bonnie and Clyde* “make a different kind of contact with an American audience from the kind that is made by European films, however contemporary” (147). Kael’s assumptions here are that her response is representative and that she is able to voice what others are experiencing. Her reviewer persona, unlike Crowther’s, is not different in *kind* from other members of the audience, but, perhaps like Wordsworth’s poet, different only in degrees of feeling and expression.

Lest the reader assume that Kael’s audience is entirely hypothetical, however, she uses one of its members, “a woman in my row,” to illustrate her analysis of a specific effect *Bonnie and Clyde* has on its audience, how it “keeps the audience in a kind of eager, nervous imbalance,” how it uses the “put-on” as art (148, 150):

People in the audience at *Bonnie and Clyde* are laughing, demonstrating that they’re not stooges—that they appreciate the joke—when they catch the first bullet right in the face. The movie keeps them off balance to the end. During the first part of the picture, a woman in my row was gleefully assuring her companions, “It’s a comedy. It’s a comedy.” After a while she didn’t say anything. (150)

Here of course Kael does separate herself from other members of the audience. She is able to feel what the woman in her row feels, but unlike the woman she understands how that feeling is produced. She knows how to place *Bonnie and Clyde* in a European and American film tradition. One reviewer convention enacted here is to present oneself as a certain kind of moviegoer.<sup>11</sup> While Crowther presents himself as an elitist who refuses to be duped by cheap Hollywood trash,

Kael shows herself as one of us, no snob, a lover of good Hollywood movies whose sensibility, although deeper, is not different from our own. While Crowther regards the genre *popular Hollywood film* as a problematic category, especially at an international film festival, Kael privileges superior examples of it as a form of contemporary American art, what she calls “mass art” (147), a designation that complicates the popular/serious distinction by implying that being popular does not bar a work from being serious.

The popular/serious distinction which divides Kael and Crowther and helps to configure their readings of particular elements of *Bonnie and Clyde* is one that is seldom present in traditional academic discussions, since the texts chosen are by definition worthy of serious attention. Divisions between art and non-art, serious and popular, however, appear more fluid in the movie theater than in the classroom or the scholarly journal, and *Bonnie and Clyde*, we can now see, exists notoriously on the dividing line, especially since what some read as an “artful” use of violence had conventionally been read as a concession to popular appeal, as in the gangster film. *Bonnie and Clyde* exists on another dividing line as well, since it made its appearance at precisely the time genre films such as the Hitchcock “thriller” were beginning to be taken seriously as art. In his study of the making of Hitchcock’s reputation, Robert Kapsis explores the manner in which an artist’s status may be tied to genre. He notes, “Prior to the 1960s, most American film critics and scholars did not rank Hitchcock’s films as ‘serious art,’ in large measure because in their view significant work could not be achieved in the ‘thriller’ genre” (1). The shift in granting “serious” recognition to popular genres coincides almost exactly with the moment reviewers were trying to make up their minds about *Bonnie and Clyde*. Kapsis writes of Hitchcock that “it was not until after 1965 that [critics] began to take him seriously as an artist” (1).

The place of genre in the making of film reputations has been noted by other critics. Janet Staiger, for example, in an examination of reviews of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, finds that generic expectations constitute one of four principal discourses used by reviewers (the other three being psychoanalysis, authorship, and social issues). Although reviewers pointed to Hollywood generic categories as a partial explanation for *Rear Window*’s achievement, “which genre it is depends on the reviewer” (*Interpreting Films* 89-90). In the case of *Rear Window*, generic disagreements did not lead to divergence in the

reviewers' judgments of the film's success, but they play a crucial role in responses to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. Walter Metz argues that generic expectations were responsible for the decidedly mixed reception the film received. Stephen King fans, who were disappointed in Kubrick's version, "enter[ed] the film fully expecting a generically stable horror film," while academic critics, who applauded it, generally saw it as "a melodrama detailing the disintegration of a middle-class American family" (38).

Questions of genre, both in the broad sense in which I am using it, and in the more traditional sense of Staiger and Metz, recur in other reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde* in connection with an issue often raised by reviewers—the film's distortion of historical fact, which results in its sympathetic treatment of the criminals Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker. Although Crowther's first three reviews concentrate on its incoherent structure, its wild shifts in tone, its "blending of farce with brutal killings [which] is as pointless as it is lacking in taste" (Aug. 14, p. 36), his fourth review, which attempts to answer letters published the week before defending the movie, shifts the defense to historical inaccuracy. The letter-writers, as Crowther summarizes them, had apparently argued that the picture conveys a sense of what he calls "the pathos of youngsters who don't really know what violence is until they are suddenly plunged into it" (Sept. 3, p. 57). Crowther's response is that this would be a "respectable reading" if the film gave "a fair conception of the sort of persons its principal characters were and a creditable exposition of the disorder of the late Depression years." He then quotes from newspaper accounts ("You don't have to take my word for it") as evidence of "the kind of cheating with the bare and ugly truth that Mr. Penn and Mr. Beatty have done" (57). The film is, in short, a "very skillful fabrication" (67), and this is sufficient to disqualify it for serious consideration.

Crowther has here invoked a variation of one of Rabinowitz's rules of signification, which says that "when a newsworthy event is described with enough specificity that the reader could, in fact, look it up in a newspaper, the reader is—in the absence of signals to the contrary—justified in assuming that the event more or less coincides with historical fact" (103). Crowther's rule (which we might call the rule of historical accuracy) is this: when a movie purports to be describing historical persons and events (available in newspaper accounts) but is not true to those accounts, the movie loses its credibility

in other areas as well. That is, it can't be a serious study of the pathos of young people who don't understand violence if it is dishonest in its depiction of these young people, who happened to be historical personages. Several reviewers weighed in on the issue of historical accuracy; all assumed a rule, although not the same rule, and it usually related to the notion of genre. John Simon's rule is that "a work of art has the right to take liberties with history," but not a "piece of non-art" like *Bonnie and Clyde* (31). Rabinowitz's rule on assumptions of historical accuracy contains an exception, "in the absence of signals to the contrary," and Robert Hatch, reviewing the movie in *The Nation*, assumes a similar rule, which also incorporates genre. The charge that the movie is not accurate is "beside the point," since it was not intended to be an accurate account, and it signals this: "Its pale, nostalgic Technicolor and insistence on stilted group snapshots; on occasion, the marionette attitudes of its performers and syncopated pace of its action, make clear that it is dealing with legend, not life" (444). It is not film biography or even a traditional crime movie; the historical *Bonnie and Clyde* were not the people Penn depicts, "but in retrospective fiction they legitimately become so" (446).

Richard Gilman, writing in *The New Republic*, invokes a rule similar to Simon's but comes down on the other side. It is permissible to violate historical fact in certain kinds of works: "Facts are the imagination's pretexts, and the sordid lives of the historical Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow—bank-robbers and murderers—have every right to serve as pretexts for an imaginative work that is interested in something other than historical 'truth'" (27). Because it attempts to transcend its gangster genre, "to fashion a sustaining imaginative attitude" toward its story (27), to create characters who "function as the occasion for cinematic art and not as the instrument of a surrogate biography for ourselves," it need not be truthful to its sources. Its failures are not due "to any infidelity to history, but to an incomplete loyalty to its own arresting propositions" (27). *Bonnie and Clyde* fails because it is unable, finally, to transcend its gangster genre, "the cops and robbers plot of American popular art." In its chase sequences the movie begins to lose its characters "as original creations as it more and more takes on the attributes of the gangster movie as we have always known it." It moves from "drama to melodrama" and ends as "a hybrid, an ambivalence," "an attempt to have both ways something not clearly enough seen in either" (29).



Gilman's implicit rule is that cinematic art is created when a film transcends its popular genre, and Richard Schickel invokes a similar rule. It is, he writes, "an interestingly failed attempt to transform and transcend the customs of the gangster genre" (140). It fails because those who were responsible for it "lacked the will and the nerve to follow their instincts and their intentions," and what could have been "a breakthrough of sorts for the American screen falls back in confusion at the final barriers to self-realization" (142). It betrays its artistic intentions by relying too often on popular appeal. Even its attempt at historic authenticity—its "emphasis on period costume, decor and music"—is "all awfully cute" and "enhances the movie's appeal to those who seek only idle entertainment" (141). The leads Dunaway and Beatty never forget they are movie stars, and "are careful to indicate at all times that they are merely play-acting." Beneath the "funny clothes and makeup and mannerisms are the pretty, reasonably intelligent, reasonably glamorous people we hope you will come to love and admire and reward with your future patronage" (142). Schickel assumes he is watching a Hollywood movie with Hollywood stars, and he interprets its cinematic techniques—the juxtaposition of comedy and violence, for example, that Kael reads as a device for keeping the popular audience constantly off-balance—as *appeals* to a popular audience. If it is finally Hollywood entertainment, then there is no need to account for the mixture of comedy and gore. What could have been a satirical attack on an historical period of American life, he writes, "all too often degenerates into an arch, trivializing attempt to get us to giggle along with the gang" (142), that is, a sop to the mass audience. Schickel's and Gilman's reviews offer evidence that the popular/serious distinction does not necessarily lead to a kind of circular argument (this is a serious film; it must therefore be good). Both acknowledge that *Bonnie and Clyde* has serious pretensions, but both judge it a failure in attempting to rise above its popular genre.

Kael's review appeared only a week after Schickel's and less than two months after *Bonnie and Clyde*'s nation-wide opening, but it serves as a summary, however biased, of the film's mixed reception among reviewers. Kael's review raises a version of my question. I am asking if it is possible, through the application of one brand of reader-oriented theory, to account for the wide range of reviewer responses. The implied question raised in Kael's review is more partisan—why did so many reviewers attack the best American film of the past five

years? Her answer depends on an assumption about viewer' different responses to art and non-art. That is, her answer is another version of the popular/serious distinction. She argues that "*Bonnie and Clyde*, though flawed, is a work of art" (162). The movie brings into the world of "mass art" a sensibility that was once the "private possession of an educated, or 'knowing' group" (147). It has been attacked by reviewers for its historical inaccuracies, for its glorification of crime, for going too far in its violence. Ironically, these charges are themselves submitted as proof that *Bonnie and Clyde* is indeed a work of art. Addressing the charge of historical inaccuracy, she asks, "why didn't movie critics attack, for example, *A Man For All Seasons*—which involves material of much more historical importance—for being historically inaccurate?" Or why attack this movie more than other movies based on the same people, or movie treatments of other outlaws such as Jesse James or Billy the Kid or Dillinger or Capone? "I would suggest that when a movie so clearly conceived as a new version of a legend is attacked as historically inaccurate, it's because it shakes people a little." This appears to be the only way to account "for the use only against a *good* movie of arguments that could be used against almost all movies" (152). Given a steady diet of innocuous movies, viewers "are so unused to the experience of art in movies that they fight against it" (154).

Kael is aware that her argument is based on some "pretty sneaky psychological suppositions" (153), but she also pursues it against the other two charges of the film's supposed glamorization of crime and excessive violence. *Of course* Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway are more beautiful and glamorous than the people they play. "Actors and actresses are *usually* more beautiful than ordinary people. And why not?" This is a convention of all movies, and the charge that "the beauty of movie stars makes the anti-social acts of their characters dangerously attractive is the kind of contrived argument we get from people who are bothered by something and are clutching at straws" (163). Her argument against those who condemned the film for its violence or its mixture of violence and comedy makes similar assumptions, but it also brings in the art/non-art distinction. People *should* feel uncomfortable about the violence, but this is not an argument against the movie itself. Its whole point is to make us feel uncomfortable, "to rub our noses in it." *Bonnie and Clyde* must use violence because "violence is its meaning." More than that, "artists

must be free to use violence.” The violence of *The Dirty Dozen*, “which isn’t a work of art,” is, on the other hand, personally offensive, although “legally defensible” (161-62). People are not upset at the violence of *The Dirty Dozen* or another new brutal movie, *Point Blank*, which takes us back to Kael’s opening premise: “it is generally *only* good movies that provoke attacks . . . when an American movie reaches people, when it makes them react, some of them think there must be something the matter with it” (147).

Kael’s impassioned and impressionistic solution to the mystery of *Bonnie and Clyde*’s reception rests on a rule of aesthetic response: art provokes strong responses, so the very ferocity of the attacks on *Bonnie and Clyde* warrants its status as art. Or, to rephrase Kael’s rule in reader-oriented terms, the discomfort reviewers experienced with violent scenes, for example, should have alerted them to the fact that they were viewing a serious film. Why did that test fail with so many reviewers? Critics such as Rabinowitz would no doubt argue that the serious/popular or art/non-art distinction *preceded* their viewing and led them to their particular interpretations and evaluations. Whether they found its blending of violence and comedy coherent, its historical inaccuracies justified can be traced to prior generic expectations. This supposition also complicates Kael’s review, which gives the impression that her judgment of *Bonnie and Clyde* as art was arrived at after seeing it. Louis Menand reports, however, that at some point (perhaps before seeing the film, certainly before writing the review) she took the two writers Robert Benton and David Newman to lunch, where she learned, among other things, their own take on the combination of violence and comedy, their homage to the young French directors, Bonnie’s debt to Catherine in *Jules and Jim* (176). Kael’s knowledge of the film’s “serious” pedigree, that is, *preceded* the interpretation contained in her influential review, and if Rabinowitz’s rule of genre was operative, her prior assumption that *Bonnie and Clyde* was a serious effort in the tradition of the French New Wave helped to shape her interpretation.

Prior knowledge of the filmmakers involved may, of course, lead to positive or negative expectations. Judith Crist, who had admired the earlier joint effort of Penn and Beatty, *Mickey One*, and characterized them as “one of the most excitingly creative teams in American moviemaking” (68), is predisposed to take their second effort seriously and gives *Bonnie and Clyde* a glowing review. The

genre which helps to dictate her response is the *new Penn-Beatty film*, a category comparable to the *new Hitchcock film* or the *new John Ford film*. Bosley Crowther was also aware he was watching the new Penn-Beatty film. According to Menand, Crowther had been insulted by the film's producer Warren Beatty at a New York night club (175), which perhaps accounts for Andrew Sarris' charge that Crowther was using the *New York Times* for "a personal vendetta" (222). These issues may seem to take us far afield, but we are still in the realm of genre-like expectations (the new Warren Beatty film), in the inclusive way I have been using the term *genre*, and reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde* appear to confirm Rabinowitz's principle that genre expectations, in this broad sense, dictate the application of other conventions or "rules" of interpretation, such as rules of coherence or signification. The principle also offers an explanation for the phenomenon of the revised second judgment: the reviewer's recognition that initial generic assumptions had proven inadequate as a framework for interpretation. In extending Culler's largely academic rules of reading into the domain of Hollywood film reviewing, this study supports his contention that divergent interpretations or evaluations can result from applications of the same convention, here the rule of generic expectations. It may also confirm his claim that this type of study courts banality since—in its argument that reviewers' preconceptions and expectations shaped their reviews—it may seem to do no more than offer an explicit account of what is implicitly known.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Roger Ebert claims that the film received only one "unreservedly ecstatic newspaper review," his own, although that is not quite the case. (See *The Great Movies*, 86.)
- <sup>2</sup> See Lester D. Friedman, *Bonnie and Clyde*, 15. Friedman also notes that re-releasing a picture after it had been withdrawn from circulation was then an unprecedented event (15).
- <sup>3</sup> The marketing executive was Richard Lederer, quoted by Friedman in *Bonnie and Clyde*. Friedman also supplies figures on the film's gross (15).
- <sup>4</sup> See Louis Menand, "Paris, Texas," 176.
- <sup>5</sup> She devotes chapters to both in *Interpreting Films*.
- <sup>6</sup> In Chapters 2-5 of *Before Reading* Rabinowitz separates his rules of

reading into four categories. Rules of notice help us to decide what parts of a narrative should receive special attention. Rules of signification tell us what kind of meaning we can attribute to a particular detail. Rules of configuration allow us to fit details into some preexisting pattern, and rules of coherence help us to tie the text together as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Rabinowitz's discussion of genre in *Before Reading*, as well as his argument about the relation between rules of genre and other reading conventions.

<sup>8</sup> I have attempted to maintain a distinction between reviews and academic film criticism, and I have included only reviews published during the period in which the controversy over *Bonnie and Clyde* raged. Kael's piece, which appeared in the October 21, 1967 *New Yorker*, differs from the other reviews in its length and in its practice of incorporating in a general way other reviewers' responses. I would argue, however, that its genre is the review, although admittedly a somewhat unusual example, and not academic or historical film criticism. Like other reviewers, Kael is attempting to evaluate elements of the film—acting, directing, editing—based on her own response (and, as is the case with reviewers on both sides, on the response of its audience). Kael's review is particularly useful for my purposes here because it sets out so emphatically the principal issues of reviewers' disagreements and advances a provocative evaluative strategy.

<sup>9</sup> He says only that his preoccupation with violence in his daily life caused his first reaction to be "excessive" (Aug. 28, p. 82).

<sup>10</sup> Menand also reports that Morgenstern denied the rumor that Pauline Kael, a good friend who lived two blocks away, was responsible for the reversal, claiming that he had already written the second review before he discussed the movie with Kael.

<sup>11</sup> In *Making Meaning* Bordwell argues that the reviewer creates a role that will warrant his or her opinions. Of the several models he lists, two in particular (with his examples) are recognizable here: "The reviewer may present the image of the vulgar but righteous film fan (Pauline Kael) or the cultural pundit with stringent standards (John Simon). Minimally, the reviewer must play the role of either the well-informed expert or the committed amateur, each of which offers an idealized surrogate for the reader" (35-36).

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