

THE ROAD MOVIE BOOK

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MAD LOVE, MOBILE HOMES, AND DYSFUNCTIONAL DICKS

On the road with Bonnie and Clyde

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Natural Born Killers (1994) boasts a body count – twelve and climbing – linking it to more copycat killings than any other film. Two years after its debut, the film was still making headlines via the lawsuit filed by attorney-turned-Hollywood-player John Grisham against Oliver Stone for product liability in connection with the murder of a cotton-gin worker from Hernando, Mississippi.¹ Grisham's suit is just one component of a larger conservative mobilization against what Presidential candidate Robert Dole has called the “mainstreaming of deviancy” by the Hollywood culture industry. Dole's May, 1995, address to Los Angeles Republicans and Hollywood bigwigs seemed to recognize the interrelated tensions of violence, mass culture, and the crisis of “family values” – and specifically took aim at two postmodern variants on the familiar theme of young, tragic love in “The Story of Bonnie and Clyde.”² On the first leg of a tour whose goal was the congealing of an increasingly fractured Republican constituency, Dole exhorted his audience to retool the culture industry and return to the “Combining-Good-Citizenship-with-Good-Picture-Making” days when the Disney studios daubed their merry little toy-citizens on the noses of B-52's and Warner Bros. beefed up public confidence in the police. “Ours is not a crusade for censorship,” Dole comforted us, “it is a call for good citizenship.”

Good citizenship is certainly lacking in the two films Dole specifically targeted, *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers*. But there is an irony to Dole's attack. Dole endorsed the moral rectitude of *The Lion King* (1994), *Forrest Gump* (1994), and fellow Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger's ultra-violent revision of high-tech patriarchy, *True Lies* (1994), even as he demanded an interdiction of “mindless violence and loveless sex.” Dole's choice of films suggests that violence in defense of the nation and the nuclear family is not only appropriate but good family fun. Indeed, it seems that Dole singled out *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers* for criticism because they posit heterosexual desire as anti-family, crime and

violence as pleasurable, and the road as a fracturing (rather than a consolidation) of nation and community. Nonetheless, a more profound disruption may lie at the heart of the conservative agenda. As we will demonstrate, the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre purposely fragments certain narrative conventions of classic Hollywood cinema but at the same time shares certain assumptions with popular notions of conservatism, namely that love is good and affluence is right. As the candidate correctly surmised, these “nightmares of depravity” erode the cornerstones of American “family values,” particularly apple-pie fantasies concerning the domestic sphere and the social regulation of consumption, reproduction, and patriotism through the home.

Profoundly aware of the cultural dilemmas posed by free-market capitalism, Dole warned the entertainment industry that “those who cultivate moral confusion for profit should understand this: we will name their names and shame them as they deserve to be shamed.” His nostalgia for the studio system and vilification of corporate greed exhibited deep anxieties about the effects of the late-1960s deregulation of Hollywood production. Dole countered these fears by pitting ethics against profit: “There is a difference between the description of evil through art, and the marketing of evil through commerce.” Yet, soon after delivering this speech, Dole played a key role in obtaining legislation deregulating telecommunications, paving the way for even more corporate mergers and monopolies among the entertainment giants. But Dole's seemingly contradictory actions shouldn't surprise us; the conservative cultural agenda which attempts to revivify an older sense of community is tortuously entwined with the rupturing dynamics of an expanding economy. In the final analysis, mobility and its threat to the stability of home and community is the same tension that both plagues the conservative agenda and propels Bonnies and Clydes. After all, the means of alleviating that volatility is the same: cultivate the spectacle, retain the attention of the masses, and, by all means, keep the show on the road.

The conservative mobilization against “deviancy” is primarily concerned with the ways in which property, propriety, and bodies are produced, distributed, and consumed in American culture. The road as both cultural signifier and economic infrastructure is a crucial component of this police action – as is the continuing democratic appeal of upward mobility. The regulation of the movements of people, goods, and values exerts a profound influence upon the ways in which the road functions as, in Lévi-Strauss's term, an “imaginary solution” to the paradoxes of America's stratified democracy.³ These insecurities surrounding mobility, however, do not originate in the context of twentieth-century life; new forms of mobility and their accompanying tensions have long been recognized as central to capitalism's employment of technology and popular desire – what Marx and Engels called the “unconscionable freedom” of free trade (15–16).⁴ The road's old, old age, its inherent suggestiveness, and its evocation of horizon and liberty

seem to guarantee it as an effective symbolic container for American culture's most cherished and most volatile ideals. But the road's seductive speed disguises its reality, particularly in an era in which speed plays a significant role in social control.⁵ The road is the Möbius strip of American capitalism: despite the thrill of acceleration, escape is illusory, and the drive into the sunset takes you right back where you started.

The road's ambivalence is exemplified by a particular subgenre of the road movie, the Bonnie-and-Clyde film. This genre typically features two young people who fall in love, speed away from home in a stolen car, shoot guns, make love, and get caught. While this group of films has been variously named (couple on the run, outlaw couple, bad couple, criminal couple), we feel that the term "Bonnie-and-Clyde film" maintains a deep focus on the referential or real-life Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow and the implicit moralism of Parker's published poem, "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde." In fact, Parker and Barrow's ghosts haunt the genre and its surrounding discourses; these movies always threaten to succumb to the conservative narrative arc of the poem which ends with punishment and death. Despite this implicit threat, Parker and Barrow's flight through the Southwest became a popular myth because it articulated the anxieties, conflicts, and crises of a particular moment in the history of US capitalism, without necessarily displacing antipathy toward crime.⁶ Parker and Barrow's revolt against middle-class values and the modernizing state as well as their canonization in the mass media signaled a new form of mobility that outstripped earlier notions of family, production, and desire without wholly abandoning them. Bonnie-and-Clyde films replay this ambivalence by expressing in narrative form the pressures placed on the domestic sphere in a century of chronic economic crisis, media saturation, and inconstant forms of pleasure and consumption. In fact, these films do more than just express these pressures; they aspire to incite such changes, blurring the line between superstar bandits and copycat crazies.

Films as incontinent as *Gun Crazy* (1949), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and *Natural Born Killers* serve as representational solutions to the dilemmas of popular political and cultural expression by working- and middle-class people who desire liberation but are not willing to abandon their faith in family, upward mobility, and nation. The imaginary solutions generated by the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre are: first, heterosexual desire as potentially spawning a perversely portable domestic sphere; second, cinematic crime and violence as a narrative and stylistic strategy that disrupts the flow of the traditional romance and amplifies its intensity; and, third, the road as a liminal site where the promises of twentieth-century capitalism and the fantasies of prosperity it engenders are temporarily realized.⁷ As we shall see, the Bonnie-and-Clyde film is a highly self-conscious example of the road movie, always seeking a cinematic vocabulary capable of articulating a promise it can never fully keep.

We are particularly interested by the resurgence of the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre in the 1990s and why these films are simultaneously so threatening and popular at this historical, political moment. We will approach this question by examining three defining films of the genre: Joseph Lewis's *Gun Crazy* and its appeal to the Surrealists; Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and its efforts to articulate a revolutionary style that is both popular and historicized; and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* and its desire to break the conventions of the genre while maintaining a troubled kinship with Dole's cultural politics. Exemplifying the genre's "mad love" for money, marriage, mobility, and travel, these movies simultaneously tell a history of film as popular art, industry, and the negotiations of everyday life under twentieth-century capitalism. *Gun Crazy*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Natural Born Killers* cultivate the postwar branch of a road-film family tree: Bonnies and Clydes are the bad children of mobilized homes and the proliferation of sexualized objects compelled by an affluent, mobile, and deeply stratified consumer society.

Long Shots, Fetishes, and the Birth of a Cult Audience

Joseph H. Lewis's B-movie masterpiece *Gun Crazy* (a.k.a. *Deadly Is the Female*) is perhaps most notable for its original cult fans, the Surrealists. For this revolutionary artistic collective, the film's titillating blend of middle-class normalcy and audacious criminality symbolized the sort of revolutionary thrill that they invested in their anti-bourgeois poems, performances, and paintings. Delighted at the sight of this exquisitely "detourned"⁸ vision of bourgeois marriage and "upward mobility," Surrealists Raymond Borde and Eugene Chaumeton described *Gun Crazy* as "one of the rarest [post-Second-World-War] illustrations of *l'amour fou* (in every sense of the term) . . . a sort of *L'Age d'Or* of the American film noir" (quoted in Naremore: 20). The "mad love" of Bart (John Dall) and Laurie (Peggy Cummins), the star-crossed lovers of Lewis's film, struggles to transcend the constraints of its time and place, seeking an intensity that cannot prosper in the desiccated suburbs of the bourgeois landscape. Assembling a filmic vocabulary to express this intensity, *Gun Crazy* elaborates on the paradoxes of desire, love, and liberation in an era of mass media, patriotism, and free-market capitalism. However, this vocabulary was developed within the constraints of the Production Code, which prohibited open displays of sex and criminal violence. As a result, Parker and Barrow's crimes and the popular fantasies of liberation they invoked were incapable of being explicitly represented within those constraints. Hollywood's claustrophobic conventions compelled Lewis to rely upon powerful images of commodity fetishism, particularly fetishism of guns, money, and female sexuality, in order to represent love's potential for madness. These narrative

techniques afford *Gun Crazy* a high degree of irony that radically reworks the symbolic structures of a certain kind of conservative, domestically oriented capitalism while at the same time relying on those structures to fulfill the Production Code's requirement that criminal activity in films be punished.

The doomed romance of Bart and Laurie is the tragedy of mad love trapped within conservative efforts to regulate consumption and reproduction, the building blocks of the domestic sphere. As Bart and Laurie's lifestyle makes clear, efforts to maintain political and economic control through responsible consumer behavior often conflict with the vicissitudes of desire, the accidents of reproduction, and the domestic's penetration by media and market. *Gun Crazy* is of particular historical significance because it transposes the violence and passion of "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde" into the post-Second-World-War dreamscape of spectacular affluence, accelerated consumption, and good housekeeping. If the post-Second-World-War household was compelled to consume on a level previously unimaginable by the American working and middle classes, then Bart and Laurie's mad love represents that compulsion's extremity and perversion – a state of explosive consumption. After the honeymoon trip to Las Vegas leaves them short of cash, Laurie makes it clear to Bart that she will not settle for the quotidian, declaring "I want it all." Yearning for all the comforts of home and family but craving Laurie's transgressive, gun-toting sexuality, Bart capitulates, and they embark on a life of crime. Their love of the road marks the paradoxical effects of a regime of affluence and mobility founded upon discourses of domesticity, accelerated consumption, and heterosexual monogamy. Bart and Laurie's mad love and bad domesticity, then, mediate the demands of the postwar economy.⁹ They're honeymooners who don't want the honeymoon to end.

Bart and Laurie's mad love is perversely determined by their uncanny adoration of one of the first great products of industrial capitalism (the gun) and one of its last (wealth and conspicuous consumption), and finds visual representation in scenes of honest and purposeful fetishization of romance, labor, and heterosexual desire. Just prior to their first robbery, Bart is seen cleaning his prized set of English dueling pistols as Laurie comes out of the shower complaining about the lack of hot water. In response to Laurie's frustrated demand for affluence, Bart volunteers to sell his cherished guns as he vigorously reams one of them out. Meanwhile, Laurie slips into stockings and garters and lights a cigarette. But selling the guns isn't enough for Laurie, who threatens to leave him unless he consents to a life of banditry, the only possible means to ensure them the leisure and excitement they both crave. The scene establishes a crucial dynamic. While Bart and Laurie's mad love for one another deviates only slightly from traditional romance narratives, the diffusion of that mad love into the objects and events that surround them is something altogether different. The scene is as profoundly sexual as it is "perverse": Bart and Laurie make love to

space and objects, not each to other. In this manner, Lewis's film portrays the sacred space of the domestic sphere as a carnival of fetishes.

Fetishism and perversity, however, exact the high cost of unsettling the fantasies of home and stable subjectivities associated with the domestic. Bart's discomfort with the myriad disguises they wear to elude the law and fool their victims portends his and Laurie's ultimate doom. Feeling his identity crumbling under the stress of violence, speed, and homelessness, Bart complains, "Everything's happening so fast. It's all in such high gear that sometimes it just doesn't feel like me." After a series of daring daylight robberies and audacious costumes, Bart and Laurie decide to rob the Albuquerque Armour meat-packing plant.¹⁰ Posing as employees, they steal the payroll and attempt to hide at the home of Bart's sister. Clearly exhausted from the labor of raising four children and unsympathetic to her brother's predicament, Bart's sister reveals his painfully maudlin vision of home. As often happens in Bonnie-and-Clyde films, the return home marks the beginning of the end for Bart and Laurie, the first step toward their final entrapment in the shrouding mists of the hills above town. A strategic disaster, the lovers' unwillingness to escape in separate cars and their return to Cashville is compelled by Bart's inability to accept the domestic as a matrix of contradictions, banality, and back-breaking labor. Moreover, in contrast to Bart's rose-colored view of the domestic, Laurie's fatal mistake stems from her inability to imagine herself without a man, to escape hetero-normative discourse.

Despite this flaw, Laurie's previous life as a highly disciplined performer and her visceral disgust with housework and motherhood allow her to be more comfortable with the shifting identities of the road. Her power, after all, is as much due to her seductive looks and words as it is to her deadly aim. When she is introduced as a stage performer in a traveling carnival, Laurie's insatiable greed, chameleon-like changes of costume, and astonishing skill with a pistol guarantee her a paycheck. Although she fires a blank pistol into his leering grin when Bart first sees her, the threat is real. Laurie's transformation from trick-shooting performer to sharpshooting criminal is realized as she and her lover flee their first bank robbery. Turning around to see if anyone is following them, Laurie shoots the camera an exquisite look of thrilled and lascivious delight, betraying her mad love for objects – her unbridled consumption. Like representative Bonnie-types – Mallory (Juliette Lewis) in *Natural Born Killers*, Thelma (Geena Davis) in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), or Alabama (Patricia Arquette) in *True Romance* – Laurie is dangerous because she desires, and she's not afraid to kill to get what she wants.

If Bart and Laurie's mad love inspires their road trip and Bart's sentimentalization of the domestic brings about its tragic conclusion, the couple's first major crime functions as an anti-narrative spectacle that momentarily defers the inevitable tragedy by introducing an alternative sense of cinematic temporality. What

this stylistic gesture accomplishes is, first, a brief suspension of the narrative's movement toward punishment and death, and, second, a momentary disruption of the film's narrative pace. The thrill of the genre – and its proximity to the action film – is its ability to suspend, at least briefly, the conservative narrative structure which always destroys the bad couple. This deferral is accomplished by way of intense representations of sex, violence, and the flow of action. As if trying to represent the possibility that Bonnies and Clydes might escape the fate of Barrow and Parker, the action sequences are distinguished by their stylistically different use of film stock, lighting, and editing. This break in style is the filmic equivalent of mad love, a warping of time that exceeds conventional narrative. In *Gun Crazy* this discontinuity takes the form of an extended, unedited shot with a hand-held camera that blurs the boundaries between cinematic time and real time, catapulting the audience into the action. This noticeably long sequence, clocking in at over three and a half minutes, works to maintain the crime as an event temporally dissociated from the main flow of the narrative. However, the experience of mad love, like the scene itself, comes to an end. Although the genre fetishizes crime as much as it fetishizes love, it fails, finally, to overcome history, the Production Code, and the fate of Parker and Barrow. While both crime and mad love promise an escape from politics, history, and economy, motion pictures can provide only flights of fancy.



Plate 3.1 Loaded with cash, Bart (John Dall) holds back a gun-crazed Laurie (Peggy Cummins) in *Gun Crazy*.

Style as History, Style as Revolt

If Laurie Starr's flirtatious gaze through the rear window of a getaway car signified the hijacking of heterosexuality in a nascent mass-media society, then the extreme close-up of Bonnie Parker's (Faye Dunaway) open mouth in the first scene of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* signaled the shotgun marriage of cinematic sex and violence, gangster capitalism, and the counter-culture. While *Gun Crazy* languished in B-movie limbo, adored only by the most cultish of cult audiences (Surrealists and film scholars), *Bonnie and Clyde* garnered both castigating notoriety and critical praise for its explosive and bloody evocation of the political and social turmoil of the late 1960s.¹¹

Self-consciously building upon its filmic forerunners, Penn's version of the well-worn story of Bonnie and Clyde nostalgically recalls populist responses to the Great Depression. Featuring detailed sets and costumes that deploy the iconography of the Depression, the 1967 film purposefully attempted to consolidate popular political and cultural fantasy after the immobilization of the New Left. Discussing the scene where Bonnie and Clyde (Warren Beatty) are aided by a community of Okies, Penn noted, "Socially, the people were paralyzed by the Depression, for example, the scene in the camp near the end is nearly stylized in its immobility. . . . At least Bonnie and Clyde were mobile and functioning – sometimes in behalf of foolish things, sometimes self-destructively – but at least they functioned" (15–16). Penn sees this encounter not just as a meeting of bandits and labor but as the convergence of counter-cultural rhetoric of the 1960s and populist political discourses of the 1930s.

The intended effect of this encounter was the unification of class oppression and racial oppression under the signs of a revised and decidedly "Pop" populism that utilized the vocabulary of love, sex, violence, and mobility. Indeed, Penn was particularly proud of the film's potential to galvanize a counter-culture splintered by difference:

It's very interesting that during a screening of *Bonnie and Clyde* one evening, five Negroes present there 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.

(Penn: 19)

Thus, Penn's revision of Parker and Barrow's rampage against banks and lawmen – the pillars supporting state capitalism – represented the disenfranchisement of

the new social movements of the 1960s and suggested alternative patterns of action and political fantasy. Penn's visually stunning film speaks to both the crisis of production and reproduction of capital and to the rise of new American social identities – women, teens, ethnic and racial minorities – whose relations to hegemonic capitalist culture and the male-dominated counter-culture were complex and contradictory.¹²

Though lauded for its politicized sensibilities, the film would draw its harshest criticisms for its morally nebulous “romanticization” of Parker and Barrow. Countering rage and disempowerment with glee and the aestheticization of bloodshed, Penn's mixture of comedy and gore made for an unholy brew of criminality, spectacle, and bad taste. As Bosley Crowther wrote in a famous *New York Times* review, “This blending of farce with brutal killings is as pointless as it is lacking in taste, since it makes no valid commentary on the already travestied truth” (23). In addition, numerous criticisms of the film highlighted its historical inaccuracies, amassing a prodigious list of Penn's deviations from Parker and Barrow's exploits. Among the most egregious of these mistakes was the casting of the charming and beautiful Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway as the shiftless, lumpen lovers, a far cry from the original, rather homely, white-trash duo. Yet it is precisely this deviation, the spectacularization of the “real” young star-crossed killers, that remains the film's most intriguing achievement.

From the moment of its release, *Bonnie and Clyde* spilled over its celluloid edges, becoming much more than just a film. Embraced internationally, the film spawned a litter of related products and media stories that included books about the historical figures, an album-length recording made by the sister of Bonnie Parker, hit singles by Mel Tormé, Brigitte Bardot, and British pop sensation Georgie Fame, and a global fan club sporting berets and doffing gangland-style fedoras. The film's aesthetic sensibility – especially Theodora Van Runkle's Oscar-winning design of Faye Dunaway's draping, unconstricting wardrobe – has even been apocryphally credited with singlehandedly reviving the urban boutique market, altering the postwar face of women's high fashion.¹³ Moreover, the popularity of the film manifested itself during the events of May, 1968, as graffiti scrawled on the wall of the Sorbonne signed by “Bonnot and Clyde”: “Yes to organizing! No to party authority!” (Viénet: 73).

The variety of responses to *Bonnie and Clyde* reveal a paradoxical dynamic of post-1960s capitalism. Both a challenge to and a reflection of the state of capitalism, the tsunami of commodities generated by the movie's success may be attributed to its reformation of taste canons and its creation of a style of revolt that recalled a long history of popular dissent. As Robert Steele noted, “Youngsters imitate Warren Beatty's mannerisms and Faye Dunaway's look. Bonnie is on the covers of *Life* and *Time*, and models aping her are on fashion-magazine covers” (119). Indeed, the film itself thematizes this imitation. C. W.

Moss (Michael J. Pollard) is ultimately responsible for Bonnie and Clyde's deaths; his desire to imitate the young lovers by joining in their crime spree infuriates his father, who arranges the final ambush in what might be considered an attempt to wipe out Bonnie and Clyde's infectious style. Situated on the cusp of the world economic crisis of the 1970s, the gangster styles worn by the film's beautiful American stars heralded the precarious future of the United States' dominance of global capital and suggested an imaginary solution to the impact of that crisis on everyday life.¹⁴ Inasmuch as this economic crisis threatened the ability of American capitalism to reconstitute and expand its domain, *Bonnie and Clyde* made it possible to imagine new styles of consumption, new forms of mobility, and potential reconfigurations of class, racial, and sexual boundaries.

The paradoxically liberatory and conservative nature of the genre becomes obvious in the youthful appropriation and celebration of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Robert Steele's concern about the film's impact on youth and their relations to state, school, and familial authority is vividly realized in a letter to the *New York Times Magazine* dated April 21, 1968. Nancy Fisher of Oklahoma City writes, “A Bonnie and Clyde fever has taken over the minds of teens the world over, especially in my high school” (142). Cast in a school pageant celebrating the coronation of the yearbook king and queen, Fisher worries that she doesn't resemble Faye Dunaway as much as she does the historical Bonnie Parker. But her concern about her appearance pales in comparison to that of the school administrators (one of whom had an uncle who was murdered by Parker and Barrow). Reflecting these anxieties, Fisher asks, “Wouldn't it be awful if there was a rash of teens who thought they were modern-day versions of the real Bonnie and Clyde?” (142). The administration's answer to Fisher's question isn't difficult to imagine, but the solution is worth noting. Fisher writes:

I was told that when we use Bonnie and Clyde for our assembly that we must make it clear that we do not respect or idolize the real Bonnie and Clyde, for they were cold-hearted killers, but we would be imitating the Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway characters, with many lines patterned after their movie's script.

There will be posters of the Beatty and Dunaway Bonnie and Clyde used in the assembly to clearly define that we are portraying their styles and influence.

(142)

Clearly among the brightest and the best in their class, Fisher and her boyfriend seem like nothing so much as a prototypical yuppie couple – stylish, admired, and strangely enamored with the gangster ethos.¹⁵ More significantly, Fisher and her schoolmates were instructed to demarcate style from history and performance from real life.

Fisher's anxieties reveal *Bonnie and Clyde* as both an articulation of counter-cultural desires and a fantastic image of capitalist reformation, united under the aegis of a generational shift in personal consumer style, the attendant shattering of family tradition by the youth market, new forms of class mobility, and a new way of dealing with the tense relationship between domestic heterosexuality and free love. The radicalism of Penn's film lies in its use of history for starting a dialogue between the counter-culture and the traditions of radicalism from which it deviated. However, Penn's radical gesture couldn't have anticipated the cooption by a new generation of young capitalists in love. As Oliver Stone's lawsuit proves, enthusiastic movie-goers have the unwholesome habit of breaking the boundaries between cinema and real life and dismissing history as one more lame explanation for their boring lives.

The populist politics of *Bonnie and Clyde* are destabilized by this uneasy relationship between style politics and historical knowledge. Penn's deployment of migrant-worker types, folk music, political campaign posters, and antiqued automobiles flattens and simulates history in order to lend Bonnie and Clyde's road trip the illusion of escaping politics, economy, and domesticity. The simultaneous familiarity of the film's antique image and its revisionist history of Parker and Barrow are what drew crowds to the theaters. Penn's effort to free Bonnie and Clyde from the prison house of labor, domesticity, and social immobility reflected, and possibly abetted, shifts in the market. As a result, this fantasy of flight spawned an oppositional taste culture for a generation of young, voracious consumers who saw history not as a burden or a responsibility but as a source of lifestyles, fashion tips, and vicarious adventure.

One should not, however, underestimate the potential power of style and its tendency to erode dominant assumptions about politics and history. This potential is seen nowhere better than in the famous death scene, the moment of tragic narrative closure and Penn's most noted artistic gesture. As if gambling on the possibility of escaping Parker and Barrow's legacy and the narratives of social control it has inspired, Penn utilizes slow motion and fast cutting to ignite temporal, stylistic, and narrational dissociation. This rupture is set off by an intensely private exchange of glances between the lovers acknowledging their imminent demise. This charged moment echoes the first scene of the film in which Bonnie and Clyde make eye contact through the window of her mother's stifling house; Bonnie smiles the same excited smile at the possibility of escape. Therefore, the last vision of love imaginatively returns us to the moment of love at first sight, seeming to work against the gradual embourgeoisement that their mad love has suffered at the hand of Clyde's insufferable relatives. Immediately following this intimate glance, their murders are shown through rapid cuts and slow motion, shot with a variety of cameras equipped with different lenses and running at different speeds. This simultaneous acceleration and deceleration

attempts to challenge narrative closure through a moment of paradoxical temporal intensity. Penn slows it down, presenting their demise as a lyrical moment that, as he says, "[makes] their deaths more legendary than real" (17). Penn also speeds it up, decentering the audience's point of view and, significantly, altering the time and speed of filmic violence. Like the real-time bank heist of *Gun Crazy*, Penn's destabilization of narrative temporality creates a filmic vocabulary for representing speed, violent action, and mad love. This disruption of narrative time defines the formal difference of the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre as a whole. Yet despite the discontinuity, the ending is ambiguous: on the one hand the film celebrates the punishment of Bonnie and Clyde; on the other, the way that moment is filmed defers narrative closure by canonizing their deaths.

Superstars, Mass Murder, and Surfing the Mediascape

Seen through the lens of contemporary action-adventure blockbusters, the twenty-four seconds of slow motion, multiple camera angles, and shifting film speeds that recorded Bonnie and Clyde's spectacular deaths seem rather timid and sentimental. This stylistic intensification of violence in recent cinema is epitomized by *Natural Born Killers*, where the discontinuity that characterizes the death scene in *Bonnie and Clyde* dominates Stone's film in its entirety, as if the fragmented quality of the death scene is being obsessively rehearsed. For Penn, this formal disruption invokes legendary time, the timelessness of the ballad or the epic, and allows him to reclaim love and history from the conservative fate of Parker and Barrow. Stone, however, is concerned less with romance and history – concepts too sentimental for him – than with the power of superstars and the possibility of escaping what Guy Debord calls "the society of the spectacle."

Skeptical about the possibility of truth, justice, and the American way in a culture dominated by the media, Stone focuses upon an often neglected aspect of "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde." The poem, it should be remembered, was written by Parker herself and sent to newspapers as a gesture of self-aggrandizement. Like Parker and Barrow, Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory Knox's popularity is inconceivable outside their parasitic relationship with the mass media, specifically the tabloid television show *American Maniacs* and its smarmy Australian host Wayne Gale (Robert Downey, Jr). Gale's own celebrity allows him to engineer a prison interview with Mickey on Super Bowl Sunday, setting the stage for the couple's escape. Reinforcing the diegetic connection of media and violence, Stone also relies on a relentless montage of different film stocks, sampled images from B-movies, and a collage of hackneyed and melodramatic story lines to undercut the film's own sensationalism. These fractured, multiple realities reflect Stone's belief that "the power in this country



Plate 3.2 Buck's (Gene Hackman) shadowy visage threatens to spoil the fun of the lovers' road trip in *Bonnie and Clyde*.

to conceal our own history is becoming more apparent. Everything has been poisoned by TV in our lifetime" ("Making").

Framed in the context of media overload, mad love appears to be emptied of its encrypted conservatism and sentimentality. Indeed, Stone's version of "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde" seems closer to trash television than bad poetry. Reflecting the mediated quality of their revolt, Mickey and Mallory's road trip rarely leaves the sound studio; they travel through a shifting back-projected geography of highways, dirt roads, and newspaper headlines. Lacking depth, motivation, and history, their violence seems all the more awful. Furthermore, *Natural Born Killers*' supersonic montage of pop iconography is complemented by a deluge of inane pop psychology that disables the viewer's ability to determine the cause of Mickey and Mallory's psychosis. In this manner, Stone undercuts the ways in which domestic dysfunction is popularly used to explain away violence. Mickey and Mallory's childhood traumas are as clichéd as they are horrifying. These allusions to incest, abuse, and parental neglect – what Mickey calls "some awful, secret thang" – are undermined by contradictory evidence or blatant parody. Nor does the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre's habitual recourse to love at first sight escape Stone's scrutiny: rather than seeing each other through a bedroom window, Mickey and Mallory meet on the imaginary sound stage of the perverse

family sitcom *I Love Mallory*. Just like Lucy, Mallory wants to get out of the house and into the spotlight. As both the star of her own memories and the victim of family pathology, Mallory gets her big break into showbiz and celebrity after being discovered by Mickey the meat man. By deconstructing the boundaries between television, the family, romance, and mass murder, Stone ensures that Mickey and Mallory will appear both utterly familiar and disturbingly alien – the serial killers next door.

This uncanny blend of star quality and grotesquely detoured "family values" deeply upsets conservative visions of American progress. Rather than being trapped by their abusive families, Mickey and Mallory exploit their traumas, becoming international media darlings. On their way into court, they are surrounded by a cheering throng of adoring fans and paparazzi. As one of their slacker groupies suggests in an *American Maniacs* interview, "I'm not saying I believe in mass murder and that shit . . . but, if I was a mass murderer, I'd be Mickey and Mallory." If Penn's Bonnie and Clyde are at once historical legends and fashion models, they are still good folk in bad circumstances. But by making Mickey and Mallory celebrity superstars rather than working-class legends, Stone foregrounds the ambiguous politics of the genre as a whole. Not one to quote Karl Marx, Mallory-as-starlet tells her adoring fans, "I never had so much fun in my life." Mickey and Mallory are muscle-bound superheroes in their own demented cartoons; they are beyond history, beyond politics, beyond good and evil. We don't love them because they're beautiful, and we don't sympathize with them. We watch them – as we watched O. J. Simpson – simply because they're stars.

Emphasizing the cult of superstardom enables Stone to criticize the negative effects of the mass media on our collective sense of right and wrong. Mickey and Mallory's revolt, romantic as it may seem, is inextricable from contemporary telecommunications. Mickey and Mallory don't travel down freeways and back roads – that's all back-projected – they surf the mediascape. However, in a gesture we consider highly problematic, the media is ultimately rejected at the end of the film in favor of privacy, tourism, and the mobile home. At the center of Stone's critique is Wayne Gale, who, unfortunately, makes the fatal mistake of thinking that Mickey and Mallory must have the media to maintain their mad love. Unlike Clyde, who thanks Bonnie for telling his story in the newspapers and celebrates his stardom by making love with her, Mickey doesn't need to have his story told to get it up. Thus, after aiding and abetting Mickey and Mallory's prison break and realizing his true calling as a natural born killer, Gale is surprised to discover that three's a crowd. Mickey and Mallory reclaim their privacy by killing Gale and leaving his live-feed camera behind to "tell the tale" as its battery pack slowly dies.

Once again, the end of a Bonnie-and-Clyde film problematizes the very conditions of escape. In the case of *Natural Born Killers*, after making their getaway

from the state penitentiary, Mickey and Mallory become eternal tourists. We last see them traveling down the road in a mobile home with two kids in tow and Mallory in labor. Their travels are nestled in a montage of B-movie images; footage of pop killers like O. J. Simpson and the Menendez brothers and “angry women” like Tonya Harding and Lorena Bobbitt; time-lapse shots of blossoming flowers; hydra-headed monsters; and madly multiplying march hares. In effect, Mickey and Mallory simply escape into more of the same. Eschewing safe and happy closure and re-establishing the road as a kind of Möbius strip, the end of *Natural Born Killers* disables the viewer’s ability to determine if Stone is affirming the possibility of escape or demolishing it altogether. The polyvalent quality of this last sequence demonstrates Stone’s troubled liberalism and his obsession with producing a radical critique within the formal and economic constraints of Hollywood. In this sense, Stone is much like Dole and his cronies: they all agree that Hollywood doesn’t make the kinds of films it should. Dole may champion family-friendly blockbusters as a bulwark against a slough of obscene and naughty products, but Stone, no less a champion, defends his own films as unromantic representations of “family values” under attack from evil capitalists like *Wall Street*’s (1987) Gordon Gekko, *JFK*’s (1991) Clay Shaw, and sleaze-peddler Wayne Gale. Capitalism, finally, is not an issue for Dole and Stone, only what it sells.



Plate 3.3 Media superstars Mickey and Mallory (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) in *Natural Born Killers*.

Liberating the Road Movie

The three films we have discussed disrupt concerns that are fundamental to American culture: marriage and family, the proper uses of violence, and dreams of upward mobility. *Gun Crazy*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Natural Born Killers* articulate the potentially explosive contradictions of domesticity, mobility, and desire within their respective historical moments. And while these films maintain critical attitudes toward capitalism and conventional romance, they sustain an ardent belief in true love. This conviction, however, can be rendered only through formal innovations such as stylized violence and time-warping editing procedures that stretch the boundaries of the traditional Hollywood love story and subsequently enkindle the genre’s particular brand of mad love. In order to accomplish this, Lewis employs the commodity fetish and documentary techniques to foster alternative forms of desire and temporality. Penn flattens and aestheticizes history, inspiring a mass culture of resistance and a revolutionary style of love. And Stone builds upon his forerunners by utilizing the fractured narrative forms popularized by MTV in the hope of articulating a critique of American culture itself and, in his words, its relentless destruction of “compassion and love” (“Oliver”: 11). In all three films, the disruption of narrative frees love from outmoded notions of morality and social conduct even though the films ultimately solidify heterosexual monogamy, domestic tranquillity, and the pleasures of travel.

Despite its ambivalence toward “family values,” the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre constantly seeks to escape its own ideological boundaries, challenging canons of taste and good behavior. The allure of such flight is evident in the various and occasionally deadly consumer strategies practiced by the Surrealists, Oklahoma beauty queen Nancy Fisher, and day-tripping copycat killers Sarah Edmondson and Ben Darras. What we have tried to establish is that these kinds of challenges are always related to shifts in the relationship between capitalism and the domestic sphere. In a capitalist culture, these kinds of changes allow for the generation of new markets, taste cultures, and product lines. However, while these shifts may allow for economic growth, they often introduce pernicious dynamics into the family fold. Such hazards are made clear in *Gun Crazy*, where Laurie’s greed and aversion to hard work fatally clashes with Bart’s longing for home. Similarly, the greed of all “good” Americans, while sustaining a vibrant economy, may lead to the erosion of domestic tranquillity. Thus, Grisham, Dole, and other conservatives are right to be concerned. Bonnie-and-Clyde movies articulate exactly what people want to do with capitalism – and, conversely, what capitalism wants to do with them. Like capital, film fans want to be mobile, and the genre’s glamour lies in its promise of flight.

When Bonnies and Clydes take to the road they fulfill the worst and best dreams of capitalism; they imagine new ways of moving, loving, and consuming.

In this sense, the Bonnie-and-Clyde film maps the intersection of capitalism and desire. The genre's perennial success at the box office indicates the persistent appeal of these films as action-packed imaginary solutions to the contradictions inherent to domestic stability and economic growth. The radical possibility promised by the Bonnie-and-Clyde film is that, despite the historical manner in which love has been disciplined and marketed, love still retains its excitement, its air of rebellion, and its potential for madness. The genre's scandalous violence and sexy style lure couples who hope their attraction to one another is not merely convention or the result of slick advertising but something real and pure. If sitting in the dark feels like speeding down the road, the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre epitomizes this experience for the couple in love, making their love feel revolutionary, even if they still have to go to work in the morning. Therefore, Bonnies and Clydes mobilize domesticity. Such mobile homes resist – if only momentarily – privatization and restraint by the demands of both biological and social reproduction. And, in this way, the genre in some sense liberates the road movie, perhaps film itself, by threatening to displace this imaginary mobility and intense desire onto real-life highways.

Notes

- 1 Grisham became embroiled in this controversy in an attempt to seek justice and, it seems, to defend the sanctity of locality and community for the Mississippi town where he once worked after his friend William Savage was murdered on March 7, 1995, by Ben Darras and Sarah Edmondson. Edmondson admitted that she and her boyfriend were fond of consuming great quantities of hallucinogens while repeatedly watching Stone's film. We would, however, contend that the fuss about copy-cat killings is symptomatic of a larger concern: the diffusion of culture industry commodities into local communities and the attendant "liberation" of formerly subservient populations (particularly youth) via the appropriation of alternative styles of commodity consumption. For example, a similar concern has been shown regarding the appropriation of the "gangsta" styles of disenfranchised urban youths by middle-class teenagers in suburban and rural areas. For an overview of the murders allegedly linked to the film see Shnayerson.
- 2 "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde" refers to the poem (written by Bonnie Parker in 1934 and published in numerous newspapers) which established the tragic legend of the pair. We should clarify that when we refer to "Parker and Barrow," we are referring to the historical figures. We reserve the names "Bonnie and Clyde" for discussing the characters in Arthur Penn's 1967 film.
- 3 Fredric Jameson also uses the term "imaginary solution" in *The Political Unconscious* to describe the ways in which the realist novel resolves the deep contradictions of ideology. Moreover, members of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies employ the term to describe the significance of such things as skinhead culture and mugging.
- 4 The first pages of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* are devoted to the profoundly (and ambivalent) revolutionary nature of the bourgeoisie and the opportunities and dilemmas that the bourgeois class poses for socialist development. As Marx and Engels

- demonstrate, despite its willing support of the system of wage slavery, the bourgeoisie was responsible for sundering earlier "all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations" (15). As they put it, "[F]or exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation" (15).
- 5 Paul Virilio argues that speed, not simply a measure of time and space, is inextricable from social and economic development. Amongst his many books, see *Speed and Politics*.
 - 6 Jonathan Crary has identified the year 1927 as marking the birth of "spectacular" capitalism. In that year, the technological perfection of television (and the attendant interlocking of corporate, military, and state control of television) and the advent of synchronized sound film (and the system of distribution it necessitated) marked the birth of the modern American culture industry (Crary: 101–2). While Crary does not discuss it, 1927 also brought about the drafting of the Motion Picture Production Code in response to the widespread public scandals of Hollywood and the perceived threat of dissolute youth made giddy by the economic boom of the 1920s (Cook: 282). Historically, the American culture industry has always had to contend with the practical effects, the "moral crises," and, in particular, the "deviant" appropriations of its liberatory promises. The canonization of Parker and Barrow marks the recognition (in mythic form) of capitalism as an inherently unstable system that profoundly impacts selves, families, and communities. Parker and Barrow embody the systemic crises of American capitalism; they are the prodigal progeny of capitalist reform. As such, they constantly challenge the kinds of moral boundaries established by cultural police such as the MPAA, the Catholic Legion of Decency, and, more recently, Bob Dole.
 - 7 The most notable variations on this theme include: *Persons in Hiding* (1939), *They Live by Night* (1948), *Gun Crazy* (1949), *The Bonnie Parker Story* (1958), *Machine Gun Kelly* (1958), *The Getaway* (1972), *Badlands* (1973), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), *Wild at Heart* (1990), *Kalifornia* (1993), *Gun Crazy* (1992), *True Romance* (1993), *The Getaway* (1994), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994).
- In addition, there are a number of movies which seem to problematize the resolutely heterosexual bias of the genre by placing queer couples behind the wheel. The best-known of these variations, *Thelma and Louise* (1991), tells the tale of two women who go on the road after an inadvertent murder. *The Living End* (1992) features a gay couple infected with the HIV virus. *Josh and S.A.M.* (1993) stars two young boys, one of whom is a robot. *Johnny and Clyde* (1995) adds a twist to the familiar tale by featuring a boy and his dog. While the genre has incorporated the highway high jinks of lesbians, gay couples, children, pets, and even androids, our suspicion is that these queer couples on the lam still mimic heterosexuality by portraying potentially resistant forms of sexuality as somehow "dysfunctional." It seems clear that these films are deeply concerned with the tensions of love, home, and a type of mobility that was formerly available only to white, heterosexual couples. The 1990s rash of Bonnie-and-Clyde movies may be a hysterical response to a crisis within white heterosexuality and "family values." Moreover, it is interesting to speculate on the relative absence of people of color in the genre. Perhaps the notion of a black couple racing through the Southwest in a stolen car still pushes the suspension of disbelief a bit too far.
- 8 The term "détournement" has been translated as "diversion" or "subversion." Greil Marcus defines it as "the theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their

diversion into contexts of one's own devise" (168). Sadie Plant calls it "a turning around and a reclamation of lost meaning: a way of putting the stasis of the spectacle in motion. It is plagiaristic, because its materials are those which already appear within the spectacle" (86). While best known for its application to comic strips, it is a tactic applicable to all forms of popular culture. For a discussion of détournement and its function within cultural struggle as well as its utility as a form of resistant historiography, see Marcus, particularly 398–410.

- 9 The domestic sphere experienced profound and troubling changes after the Second World War. These changes can be traced to the war's achievement of the utopian dreams of labor left unfulfilled by the New Deal. The war enabled a resolution of the dilemmas of increased productivity that caused the world economic crisis of the 1930s. But the invigorated consumerism and economic security of American labor (whose beneficiaries also included certain women and teenagers) was founded on sexism, apartheid, the realization of a global market propelled by the Cold War "military industrial complex," and the reorganization of military and economic power in favor of the United States.
- 10 The magnitude of Bart and Laurie's crime is less apparent today. Before its dismantling, Armour was one of the largest corporations in the world. The first edition of the *Fortune 500* placed it among the top ten largest American industrial companies. See Loomis.
- 11 For an informative summary of the torrent of critical responses to *Bonnie and Clyde*, see Cawelti: 1–6; see also McCarty: 124–5.
- 12 Not known for turning down markets ready to be penetrated, American capitalist culture has often embraced the very identities it oppresses, promising political progress and social reformation through entrance into the market and the workforce. As Tom Frank writes, "When business leaders cast their gaze onto the youth culture bubbling around them, they saw both a reflection of their own struggle against the stifling bureaucratic methods of the past and an affirmation of a new dynamic consumerism that must replace the old" (quoted in Perlstein: 37).
- 13 Of note: according to industry legend, beret production and consumption skyrocketed in 1967 and 1968.
- 14 US dominance of world finance was facilitated through the postwar reconstruction of the economies of Germany, Japan, and other "friendly" nations, marking one of the more significant trends that led to the "crisis" of over-accumulation and the slowing of the American economy in the late 1960s. All dressed up with nowhere to go, surplus capital was rerouted into expanded domestic and overseas markets and centers of production. America's lucrative experience of the Cold War's bipolar power structure thus resulted from tapping unexpected veins of capitalist desire and fetishism – both inside and outside American borders. For an enlightening history of the world economic crisis of the 1970s, see David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* and Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century*.
- 15 Noted for its decadent and often profligate sense of style and consumption, the gangster in American culture codes for both the viciousness of consumer desire and the unruly potential of capitalism itself. The gangster, like the stereotypical yuppie, practices a capitalism without reserve.

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