**Killing Dreams:**
**Youth and Nostalgia in *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Public Enemies*[*]**

**Thomas B. BYERS**
**University of Louisville, US**

In U.S. culture in general, and Hollywood film in particular, stories about American outlaws have enduring popularity, from Jessie James to Michael Corleone, from Paul Muni's Scarface to Al Pacino's.  Two of their characteristic *topoi* are the tale of the rebel, usually romantic and almost always doomed, and the cautionary tale about corruption and the depradations of organized crime.  Often these two overlap.  The former expresses a wish, usually understood to be unrealizable, to resist both economic and social oppression.  The latter holds up organized crime as a kind of shadow image or *doppelganger* for the system of capitalism itself as, for instance, in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), particularly as interpreted by Fredric Jameson.[1]  Practically all of the films, of both types, seem to have two things in common: an interest in the accumulation and distribution of wealth, and a sense that modernity somehow spells doom for the body or the soul (or both) of the one who tries to place himself or herself outside the law.  Within and between these two types of stories, however, there are many variants, expressing the specificity of particular cultural conflicts in particular historical moments.

Arthur Penn's 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde*, with Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in the title roles, and Michael Mann's 2009 *Public Enemies*, with Johnny Depp as John Dillinger, both exemplify the popular sub-genre comprising stories of glamorous, young, doomed outlaws.  That the protagonists are doomed, and that the audience knows this in advance, cast such films into a nostalgic mode from the beginning; each element of the characters' lives is viewed retrospectively, and our emotional response to each is conditioned by our knowledge that all roads lead only to their violent deaths.  Thus, for instance, the love stories (particularly Bonnie and Clyde's) are tinged with poignancy from the moment boy meets girl.  The focus of this essay is on the ideological and affective investments of these two films, and particularly on what the nostalgia in each might be said, beyond its specific characters, to be for.  I will argue that *Bonnie and Clyde* expresses a nostalgia for an alternative but foreclosed future—an affective charge that was particularly resonant with the film's primary audience.  *Public Enemies*, on the other hand, manifests nostalgia for a moment when modernity seemed to carry a potential for individual agency, independence, wealth and success outside the system.  Ultimately, I will suggest, this moment is neither a part of the historical past nor of the youth of the individual capitalist.  Rather, it is a fantasy that inheres in the structure of capitalism—a moment always implicit in the structure, but always already foreclosed by it.

---

[*] To cite this article: Thomas B. Byers, "Killing Dreams: Youth and Nostalgia in *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Public Enemies*", in Marimar Azcona and Penny Starfield, eds., "Youth in American Film", *Film Journal*, 2 (2013). URL: http://filmjournal.org/fj2-byers.

[1] See Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 31.

*Bonnie and Clyde* is not only the more successful of these two films aesthetically and economically; it is one of the truly germinal films of the American New Wave of the 1960s and 70s. It successfully captured the spirit of the youth rebellion of the sixties, and played to a certain Oedipally-tinged self-pity of the sixties generation (myself included). The title characters seek a hedonist, anarchic, way of living for the moment, in accord with the pleasure principle, outside the constraints and repressions enforced by a dull and brutal society. Unhappily, however, their lack of restraint produces a disturbing collateral violence. Though it is initially unintentional, this violence (produced, as it were, by the id) only mirrors the violence of the forces of repression (the superego). Just at the point when Bonnie, the less naïve of the two, has come to realize that such a life is unsustainable, they meet their end. They are destroyed by the collusion of two characters who stand, allegorically, for the "establishment" of the sixties, and for the paternal figures against whom the youth of the time were in rebellion: the humorless and ruthless representative of the law, Texas Ranger Frank Hamer (Denver Pyle), and the hypocritical and venal Ivan Moss (Dub Taylor), the abusive father of Bonnie and Clyde's simple friend and accomplice, C. W. (Michael J. Pollard).

Though the story takes place in the thirties, it is, like all historical fictions, as much about the time of its production as about its ostensible temporal setting (in his contemporaneous review of the film Roger Ebert confirms this view: "this is a film aimed squarely and unforgivingly at the time we are living in").[2] Perhaps the most revealing single moment in this regard is one in which C. W.'s father, after putting on a fake show of southern hospitality for Bonnie and Clyde, berates C. W. for his tattoo, and for being overly influenced by the outlaw couple, whom he denigrates as "nothin' but a couple of kids." Far more than referring to anything specific from the thirties, the scene is reminiscent of typical father-son confrontations in the sixties about sons' long hair, and it makes the point that Bonnie and Clyde and C. W. are points of identification for their audience specifically in terms of generational conflict.

The thirties and sixties had in common a feeling for the suffering of the people at the hands of a greedy and destructive system. Though Bonnie and Clyde are out for themselves and, like the hippies of the sixties, more interested in doing their own thing than in political change for the masses, they are shown to be sympathetic with the poor and oppressed. They also serve as mythic, sacrificial figures in the minds of the people, as represented, for instance, by one poor farmer who is present in a bank that the gang robs, and whom Clyde allows to keep his money. Interviewed by the media after the robbery, this man says that "they treated me right, and I'm gon' bring me some flowers to their funeral."

Like the hippies, Bonnie and Clyde seek an escape from the constraints of class and, in Bonnie's case, of gender; like the Beats, they seek freedom by hitting the road. Clyde gets Bonnie to come with him partly by predicting her boring, small-town working-class feminine future if she does not do so, a future then represented by a homely waitress who serves them in the diner where they are sitting. Bonnie quickly emerges as a strong, gun-slinging woman who is in charge of her own desire; as such, she is sharply contrasted to Clyde's

---

[2] Roger Ebert, "*Bonnie and Clyde*," *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 25, 1967, http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19670925/REVIEWS/709250301/1023, accessed January 29, 2011.

sister-in-law Blanche (Estelle Parsons), the hysterical, prudish, venal, passive-aggressive preacher's daughter with middle-class aspirations.

The film's sense of doomed youth has particular resonance in the context of the Vietnam War. Much has been made of the Oedipal resonances of sixties generational conflict. What people tend to forget about the Oedipus story, however, is that in the Greek myth the father consciously wills the death of the son before the son kills the father. To the degree that the sons of the sixties were in rebellion against their fathers, the rebellion was born at least in part of the feeling that the fathers wanted to send us to die in Vietnam. Actually, the more consciously resonant myth for my generation in this regard was not Laius and Oedipus, but Abraham and Isaac, as in the Leonard Cohen song "Story of Isaac."[3] The song's lyric begins with Isaac's reminiscence of his father explaining, "I've had a vision / And you know I'm strong and holy / I must do what I've been told,"[4] and taking the innocent boy up the mountain for sacrifice. In stanza three, however, the voice turns to direct, imperative address to a contemporary auditor: "You who build these altars now / To sacrifice these children / You must not do it anymore."[5] This formulation of the generational conflict, intensified a few lines later when the "you" are described as "stand[ing] above them now / Your hatchets blunt and bloody,"[6] may seem melodramatic forty years after the fact, but it was very much part of the complex of emotions felt by a generation of men facing the threat of being drafted to fight in a war that we saw as at best a mistake and at worst a sin on our nation's part. The slaughter of Bonnie and Clyde, which at the time was revolutionary in terms of the graphic display of violence on screen, tapped precisely this sense of generational paranoia.

Beyond standing for the youth of the sixties, Bonnie and Clyde have a further level of allegorical meaning—one that logically contradicts their position as outsiders, but to which their audience also responded emotionally. This meaning begins in their paradoxical combination of innocence and violence, as evinced in the tag line used to market the film: "They're young; they're in love; and they kill people." It is crucial to the audience's identification with them that they never mean anyone any harm; indeed in an early robbery of a grocery store—where they are stealing food, not money—Clyde cannot comprehend why one of the men in the store attacks him with a meat cleaver: "Why'd he try to kill me? I didn't want to hurt him. Try to get somepin' to eat around cheer, some sombitch come up on you with a meat cleaver. I ain't against him," he says. But in their mixture of cheerful good-heartedness, incomprehension of the economic implications of their thievery, and shocking spilling of blood, Bonnie and Clyde become a figure for the United States itself, particularly in the eyes of a young audience who were raised to believe in the innocent promise and good intentions of their country, but were then confronted with the violence of Vietnam. Clyde's astonishment that he could be seen as the enemy, and his troubled conscience when he kills his first victim, resonate with the pain of a generation facing up to

---

[3] Leonard Cohen, "Story of Isaac," perf. Judy Collins, *Who Knows Where the Time Goes?,* Elektra EKS 74033-LP, 1968, record.

[4] Leonard Cohen, "Story of Isaac," LyricsFreak, accessed January 29, 2011, http://www.lyricsfreak.com/l/leonard+cohen/story+of+isaac_20082852.html

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

historical realities that seemed—and were—irreconcilable with the country that was the myth of our childhood, that youthful underdog of nations.

The film's violence generated a great deal of controversy. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*, the most established of establishment critics at the time, described *Bonnie and Clyde* as "reddened with blotches of violence of the most grisly sort."

> Arthur Penn, the aggressive director, has evidently gone out of his way to splash the comedy holdups with smears of vivid blood as astonished people are machine-gunned. And he has staged the terminal scene of the ambuscading and killing of Barrow and Bonnie by a posse of policemen with as much noise and gore as is in the climax of "The St. Valentine's Day Massacre" [sic].
> This blending of farce with brutal killings is as pointless as it is lacking in taste, since it makes no valid commentary upon the already travestied truth.[7]

In a long essay in *The New Yorker* that appears to have been written in more or less direct response to Crowther,[8] Pauline Kael responds that "Tasteful suggestions of violence would at this point be a more grotesque form of comedy than *Bonnie and Clyde* attempts. *Bonnie and Clyde* needs violence; violence is its meaning"[9]. In general those who defended it argued that *Bonnie and Clyde* was not glorifying violence but trying to depict its actual, material effect on frail human flesh; the implicit claim was that this kind of representation ultimately worked against violence by portraying its cost. Thus, for instance, Roger Ebert's review suggests "When people are shot in *Bonnie and Clyde,* they are literally blown to bits. Perhaps that seems shocking. But perhaps at this time, it is useful to be reminded that bullets really do tear skin and bone, and that they don't make nice round little holes like the Swiss cheese effect in Fearless Fosdick."[10] Part of the context of this debate was the broadcast of graphic footage of Vietnam on the nightly news, a representational innovation that had much to do with turning large numbers of Americans against the war. Those who objected to graphic imagery on grounds of taste were seen as bowdlerizing the harsh reality of violence and hence as serving pro-war interests.

The film's generational import was very much manifest in the critical debate about it. As B. J. Leggett indicates in "Convergence and Divergence in the Movie Review: *Bonnie and Clyde*," Crowther was at the time generally "credited with being the preeminent movie reviewer in the country"; however, "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." Kael, on the other hand, was offered a regular job at *The New Yorker* "in part on the strength of [her *Bonnie and Clyde*] … review.… [and eventually] came to occupy the position vacated by Crowther" as the nation's most powerful film critic.[11] Alan Vanneman, in an article that viciously and personally attacks Kael in *Bright Lights Film*

---

[7] Bosley Crowther, "*Bonnie and Clyde*," *New York Times*, August 14, 1967, http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF173CE361BC4C52DFB266838C679EDE, accessed January 29, 2011. Roger Corman's *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* was released June 30, 1967.

[8] B. J. Leggett, "Convergence and Divergence in the Movie Review," *Film Criticism* 30.2 (2005/2006): 3.

[9] Pauline Kael, "Bonnie and Clyde," *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 69. Originally published in *The New Yorker*, October 21, 1967, 147-71.

[10] Ebert, "*Bonnie and Clyde*."

[11] Leggett, 3, 4.

*Journal*, nonetheless claims that "her *New Yorker* review of *Bonnie and Clyde* made her the hottest public intellectual in America," and that she "provided much of the intellectual content of the youth explosion now known as 'the Sixties'" and "became a hero to the sixties generation."[12]  Her defense of *Bonnie and Clyde* was the first step in this becoming.

When Clyde hears Bonnie's poem about him, he tells her, "You know what you did there?  You told my story."  There is a way in which Arthur Penn told the story of the sixties generation, not in a narrative sense so much as an affective one.  In that context, the film's nostalgia, produced not only by the characters' doom but also by the retro mode of the mise-en-scène, the tender love story, and the beautiful pastoral sequence of the picnic with Bonnie's mother and family, is ultimately not so much for a past that is gone or never was as for a future that will never be.  Bonnie and Clyde are on a dead-end road, and one from which they cannot turn back into a "normal" life together.  For the sixties audience, their tale jives emotionally with the sense that the free, loving, anti-materialistic, pleasure-principled, alternative future of the counter-culture is likely to remain only a fantasy of youth.  It is the sense, finally, expressive of a certain melancholy strain in the sixties generation's structure of feeling, that the American hope of a better future has become a thing of the past.

*Public Enemies* has many similarities to *Bonnie and Clyde*, not only in its overall lineaments of plot, as a young outlaw who has become a popular culture hero is tracked and shot down by a grimly determined lawman, but even in such details as the outlaw's betrayal by an older friend, or a scene in which a poor bank customer is allowed to keep his money.  Nonetheless, the stories read very differently.  Depp's Dillinger is not an innocent youth done in by his elders, for two important reasons.  First, he is not innocent: he is not seen as lacking self-awareness or as doing harm only accidentally or in self-defense, and as a result he does not draw the audience into a particularly strong emotional attachment.  A telling detail is that Dillinger's desire for the good will of the public is portrayed more as self-consciously pragmatic—"I hide out among them" —than as identificatory or self-vindicating or born of a desire to be liked.  Second, his nemesis is not another father figure, but rather a man of his own age who is much more like a double.  Clearly the stakes here are not generational.

Ultimately Dillinger's battle with the law is a battle between two ways of life and work: he is a brash and ingenious improviser, while his adversary, G-man Melvin Purvis (Christian Bale) is a relentless, systematic technocrat.  The tale turns out to be about how, in the end, the system will triumph over the individual prodigy.  It is actually a blend of the two types of outlaw films I mentioned at the beginning: it has a young rebel protagonist (romantic at least in appearance), but his story becomes an allegory about capitalism—specifically about two different styles of capitalist activity and models of economic success: the entrepreneurial and the corporate.  The nostalgic celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit under capitalism is understandable.  It is celebrated because it seems to carve out a hopeful space for the possibility of individualism and agency and personal feelings within a system in which subjects are in general much more controlled than controlling, and their

---

[12] Alan Vanneman, "The Pearls of Pauline (Kael, That Is): The Little Film Critic Who Could—Sort Of," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 46 (November 2004), http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/46/kael.php, accessed January 29 2011.

feelings are irrelevant in the great scheme of things.  It is significant in this regard that we commonly speak of the entrepreneurial spirit, but never of the corporate spirit; indeed, the opposition entrepreneur/corporation is the opposition between spirit and soullessness.

The celebration of entrepreneurship is commonly nostalgic because from an early point it is clear that the corporate model of a hierarchic, impersonal system will triumph over the entrepreneur. Indeed on a large scale it is really a structural inevitability; moreover, it is in some sense the entrepreneur's desire.  The classic aspiration of the entrepreneur is to create a successful product, and the success of the product is its mass production which, under capitalism, is inextricable from the corporate model.   In film narratives the entrepreneurial spirit is defeated when the entrepreneur "sells out" his dream, or when someone else sells him out (as happens both to the Barrows and to Dillinger).  Yet it is precisely the nature of that dream to want to sell, and often the dream can be realized only when someone offers to "buy out" the entrepreneur.  Hence even though the story of entrepreneurship is often a story of youth (consider *The Social Network*, David Fincher, 2010), it is also pretty much always a nostalgic one.  In *Public Enemies* one is looking back from the beginning because one knows the historical outcome; in other stories from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) to *The Social Network* the look back is built into the text, as the celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit takes place as a flashback from a future in which the energy and excitement and *camaraderie* of a band of brothers have all collapsed.

It is probably politically to the credit of *Public Enemies*, though perhaps aesthetically and financially to its detriment, that it gives us no particular reason to see Dillinger as better than Purvis, and hence no reason to develop a strong identification with or sympathy for the former.  The film does offer a certain sadness at the notion that there is no escape from the system, and a sense of loss at the thought that the individual with panache is doomed at the hands of the state and, significantly, of organized (and technologized) crime.  This kind of more highly-developed modernist crime is represented by the film's version of Frank Nitti (Bill Camp), a man who can never, as he says himself, get warm.)  But Bale's Purvis, though grim and joyless, is actually in some ways more honorable than Dillinger, and the latter is not given the whitewash job so common to the outlaw myth.

Dillinger's one outstanding positive attribute is his unremitting loyalty.  He takes care of his friends and his girl (Billie Frechette, played by Marion Cotillard), and he keeps his commitments to his fellow robbers.   He is like a member of the professional managerial class as described some years ago by Fred Pfeil: a man (unlike Bale) with no deference for hierarchy or bureaucracy, but with lateral respect for others of the same skill set.[13]  But the film does not particularly glorify him even in this regard.  While one can read into his story the trumping of individual agency and initiative by system, the pattern is not particularly poignant in this case, because his motives are at least as venal and his methods arguably as violent as those of the system.  Indeed it is highly debatable whether there is any political or ethical sense in which entrepreneurs have been historically superior to corporations; rather, as suggested above, the success of the former is in general realized in the founding of the latter.  Both are integral parts of the system.

---

[13] Fred Pfeil, "'Makin' Flippy-Floppy': Postmodernism and the Baby-Boom PMC," *Another Tale to Tell: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture* (London: Verso-New Left, 1990), 105.

In this light perhaps Mann deserves some credit for not whitewashing a ruthless killer, but the effect is also to leave *Public Enemies* without the mythic dimension of a tale of resistance.  Arguably the greatest energy and intensity in the film are in its visual attention, practically to the point of fetishization, on various details of modernist technology: the gleaming surfaces of automobiles, all of which appear just to have rolled out of the showroom; the details of a submachine gun broken down for cleaning; the dazzling spurts from such guns fired in the dark; the telephones and the planetarium-like switchboard through which the FBI monitors Dillinger's associates calls; the rows of sewing machines manned by convicts in the Indiana State Penitentiary; and of course that greatest of modernist icons, the steam locomotive, approaching the audience almost head on, in the manner of the Lumière Brothers.

One may be given to wonder why the visual surfaces have more resonance than the plot and characters—but then one remembers that this is a Michael Mann film, and that Mann is not a master story-teller so much as a master of surfaces, from the pastels of Miami and of Don Johnson's suits in the old *Miami Vice* TV show, through the details of eighteenth-century military uniforms and equipment (and the beautiful, shining hair of Madeleine Stowe and Daniel Day-Lewis) in *The Last of the Mohicans*, up to *Public Enemies*.[14]  Mann is at times the movies' equivalent, in some sense, of hyper-realist painting, where the reproduction of reflective surfaces is at once beautifully detailed and of an intensity far exceeding that of mundane perception.

But why this fetishizing of, and nostalgia for, modernist technology from a director who is an avatar of postmodern Hollywood?  Ultimately the visuals are themselves a sign of the film's nostalgia, and ultimately they gloss more precisely what that nostalgia is for.  It is for that moment when modernity seemed to proffer hope: specifically the hope of freedom and individual agency.  It is for that imaginary moment when the train would carry us all speeding into the future, rather than carrying the Jews to Birkenau—when modernity's new order and wondrous technology would liberate the individual rather than subjecting him or her to the system.[15]  The newness and shine of the technology are like the youthful good looks of Johnny Depp and Christian Bale: they are the sign of that moment when modernity itself was young and held the futurist promise.

That this moment is an ideological fantasy is implicit in the notion that Dillinger is, from the outset, the outlaw only temporarily free from prison.  As for the prison itself, where the film begins, it is surely an emblem of Foucault's carceral society.  At the same time, it too is part of the film's system of visual images of modernity; indeed the watchtower

---

[14] In the second paragraph of a pre-release story on *Public Enemies* in *The New York Times*, Mark Harris commends "its meticulous visual sheen" as one of the elements that marks it as "a Michael Mann movie."  See Mark Harris, "Dillinger Captured by Dogged Filmmaker!"  *New York Times*, June 25, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/28/movies/28harr.html.  Accessed January 29, 2011.

[15] For more on this, see Leo Marx, "The Idea of 'Technology' and Postmodern Pessimism," in Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), especially "The West's dominant belief system, in fact, turned on the idea of technical innovation as a primary agent of progress. Nothing in that Enlightenment world-picture prepared its adherents for the shocking series of twentieth-century disasters linked with—and often seemingly caused by—the new technologies" (240).

prominently featured in the opening sequences looks as though it could have come straight out of Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs of *Basic Forms of Industrial Buildings*.[16]

Finally, I would suggest, the film's celebration of modernity is, at least to some degree, a celebration of cinema itself.  In their widely used textbook, *Film Art, An Introduction*, David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson point out that the technology that makes moving pictures move, that makes possible 24 frame per second exposure and projection, is basically the same technology as that of the sewing machine and the machine gun (both of which modernist icons are visually featured in the film).[17]  Moreover, the period of Dillinger is the period of the emergence of the talkies, and of the movies' dominance of the field of mass media entertainment.  After all, what was the last thing John Dillinger himself did before he died?  He didn't rob a bank; he saw a movie.  In this context, *Public Enemies*' story of the destruction of the entrepreneurial little guy by the ruthless organization men of Hoover's FBI and Frank Nitti's syndicate becomes legible as a basic Hollywood story; Dillinger versus Purvis is the filmmaker artist versus the corporate suits.  If *Bonnie and Clyde* played to the self-pity of the counterculture, perhaps *Public Enemies* plays subliminally to that of Tinseltown.

Whether or not one wishes to push the allegory this far, certain similarities between *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Public Enemies* at this point seem clear: in both, as in other texts like them, youth is viewed retrospectively, from a perspective that is implicitly beyond it temporally (older, or at least historically later) and above it epistemologically (wiser).  Youth's semiotic and affective function in both films is to enable nostalgia, to express the longing for something lost.  In *Bonnie and Clyde*, as I have suggested above, that something lost is not a better past but an alternative future, the sixties dream of a counter culture.  In *Public Enemies*, what is lost is an earlier moment, when modernity was just coming into its own and capitalism as a system carried the possibility of heroic individualism and self-fulfillment through ingenuity and panache.  If *Bonnie and Clyde* longs for a future that was not to be, *Public Enemies*, despite its less romanticized view of its outlaw hero, may finally be the more naïve of the two films: it longs for a past that never was.

---

[16] Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Basic Forms of Industrial Buildings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005).
[17] David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 20.