

Celebrity, Cinema, History: Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Highwaymen*

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Abstract

This paper applies generative anthropology's aesthetic theory to a comparison of the treatment of the celebrity, or centrality, of the Texan criminals Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow in contemporary news accounts, in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and in John Lee Hancock's *The Highwaymen* (2019). In particular, it asks how resentment and love are activated by the two films, how violence and sexuality contribute to such effects, and how the films might be situated on a theoretical continuum between high and popular aesthetic experience. It concludes with a consideration of how the two films deploy historical information, how their narratives compare with biographical and other sources, and what role such deployments might play in aesthetic experience in our era.

Keywords

Generative Anthropology, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Highwaymen*, history, violence, cinema, desire, resentment, film theory, Eric Gans, celebrity

1. Death Scenes

Let us begin at the end, the end of the brief lives of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow.



They are celebrities, in an era of crime celebrity. Some seize celebrity and some have it thrust upon them, one might say, but in the case of these fairly small-scale Texan robbers it would seem their attainment of the centre follows a stuttering trajectory from aspiration through happenstance to deliberate cultivation. In flight from one of their several armed confrontations with the law they leave behind some rolls of undeveloped film. Home photos, gangster poses, are soon spangled across the pages of America's newspapers.^[1]



Doubtless drawn to their own images in the same mimetic surge, they now actively court attention in various ways, including the submission to those papers of Parker's doggerel ballads, celebrating their exploits and fatalistically predicting their demise.

Some day they'll go down together
They'll bury them side by side
To few it'll be grief
To the law a relief
But it's death for Bonnie and Clyde^[2]

Then they do die, together, by gunfire on a rural road in Louisiana, May 23, 1934. Reports and images join the others on the front pages:



Nothing so becomes the celebrity of their lives like their leaving of them. The spectacular excess of the violence, the hundreds of bullets and photographs of what those bullets have done are booster rockets, propelling the criminal pair out of the sublunary realm of mere news and notoriety and into the crystal sphere of fame. The car with their bodies still inside is towed, as if in state, back to town and a frenzied scene of public fascination.



Thousands attend their funerals.^[3] They are promptly memorialized in various genres, including several Hollywood movies.^[4] Participants, friends and relations all give their accounts in print. A sign is erected where they died, which is repeatedly pilfered by souvenir-hunters. The riddled car tours like a carnival attraction.

Even so, they might have begun to fall back to earth had they not died again in 1967, in slow motion, in a balletic "dance of death" at the end of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*. This most eminent of cinematic deaths propels them on upward into permanent orbit, where they remain.



While the famous film opens with a rapid montage of black and white period photos, some

fabricated with the two stars, Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, but some apparently authentic and unrelated to Parker and Barrow, when the two bodies finally come to rest at its close there is but one brief, wordless scene. The posse members, hitherto invisible, emerge slowly from hiding places in the greenery and wordlessly surround the now unshown corpses, whose point of view the camera eerily assumes.



For a few moments, and with an enigmatic range of expressions on their faces, we see them look down at what they have done. We in turn gaze out at them, out at the periphery of the scene, at those who have forever defined its center with the focus of their violence. Our position is in that centre, with the famous dead, images of whose final moments of arabesque agony burn still in our memories. The movie, shockingly, silently, ends. A sequence of cinematic genius, built on the apparently inexorable geometry of desire and fame, resentment and death.

But ... this is not their true death, some say. They die again, differently, in 2019, reaching for their guns, in another hail of bullets from a now openly acknowledged source: the lawmen protagonists of *The Highwaymen*, directed by John Lee Hancock.



Here, however, after never having been seen close up or in daylight throughout the preceding two hours of the film, death makes Bonnie and Clyde clearly visible.



And visible they remain, in death, for most of the rest of the film. In one of many contrasts with *Bonnie and Clyde*, there is a definite aftermath. We are shown that towing of the death car into town, mobbed with crazed relic-seekers, who try to cut off locks of their hair, to seize upon anything portable, in an explicit and unseemly frenzy of sacral-celebrity desire. What was understated to powerfully involving effect in 1967 is made explicit in 2019, and tawdry—something done by others. Something the film does not endorse.



Now it is the public, the audience, the creators and consumers of celebrity, who emerge and predominate. Although the dead couple remain on screen, the camera does not pay them much further attention—we get but glimpses now, of a fairly ordinary-looking young man and woman. Their wounds are visible, but not spectacular, and indeed they make rather decorous corpses, mouths and eyes closed, as if asleep—1934 news photos of them show something quite different, gaping, glazed—*The Highwaymen* allows nothing so horrifying or pitiable.^[5] But nor is there any slowed time, any aestheticization for them. No glamorous star power, no Beatty or Dunaway. However, in another pointed contrast to the 1967 film,

their black and white real-life snapshots are the *last* images to be seen as the credits roll. They have become their photographs. We know them.

The lawmen who killed them, though, are forgotten; they watch the spectacle grimly, unnoticed (except by us), from the periphery.



Indeed, there are two scenes now. Structurally this might even be said to resemble the “pregnant moment,” as Eric Gans calls it,[\[6\]](#) near the beginning of *Hamlet*, where a second scene (occupied by the resentful Prince) contests the monopoly of centrality claimed by the erstwhile public scene (occupied by the King and Queen).



In *The Highwaymen* it is the public scene of popular celebrity that is resented, and the lawmen are now the marginalized, the victimized even. They do not quite toss their badges down into the dust, a la *High Noon*, in eloquent contempt for the unworthy public they have risked their lives to protect ...



... but they are certainly of this lineage.

The object of scorn is somewhat different, though. Not the mere cowardice and lack of civic responsibility that Gary Cooper’s gesture rebukes. But something more, something multi-faceted, and extensive. Celebrity, yes. And with it a collapsed moral center, a traditional moral order. Liberated mimetic desire itself—depicted therefore in its most sheep-like forms. The cheap excitement of violence. Perhaps indeed the aestheticization of it. The sentimentality of robin-hood stories, the self-indulgent pleasures of unjustified resentment? But *The Highwaymen* is probably not subtle enough a movie to be suggesting all this. It is hard to miss one clear target, though: *Bonnie and Clyde*, directed by Arthur Penn. 1967. The sixties.

When will we stop arguing over the sixties? Perhaps when the last boomer dies. Or at least then it may become a matter of debate primarily for professional historians.

At any rate, these three sets of images, these endings, deaths, clearly define and then contest centrality, a specific but apparently still consequential center, even in 2019. What is at stake? And what is the special modality of still and then moving images in such cultural operations?

2. Kiss, Kiss ...

There is almost no kissing in *The Highwaymen*. A decorous goodbye peck by lawman and wife. A black and white still of the outlaw couple during the final credits:



And there was not really too much in *Bonnie and Clyde*, either. Bonnie tries to shower Clyde with kisses as they drive away from their first mutual crime scene, but he rebuffs her. Later, he turns out to be impotent. Still later, they apparently do have sex, but no kissing is shown, and Bonnie, who was nude in the opening sequence of the movie, a sequence saturated with sexual longings, is now shown fully dressed, their intimacy signalled by the mere re-buttoning of Clyde's only partly-open shirt.



It takes some imagination, and some bluntly explanatory dialogue, to enable us to see the scene as post-coital at all. Furthermore, it was widely deplored, including by Pauline Kael,[\[7\]](#) whose otherwise laudatory account of the film helped save it from oblivion and the hostility of its own studio, Warner Brothers.



This absence of kissing, though, is curious, because free, or if one prefers, illicit love was central to the public legend: young, reasonably good-looking, unmarried (or in Bonnie's case, to someone else), running free (or wild), and "undoubtedly" (as one historian helpfully notes), "[sleeping] together."[\[8\]](#)



Without sex, indeed, they were just small-scale hoodlums, with plenty of competition for the limelight ("Pretty Boy" Floyd, The Dillinger Gang, et al). Outlaw kissing, indeed, is arguably why there are movies about them at all.

Besides, as Kael's title reminds us, kissing is one of the things people do a lot in movies. What happened to it?

Eric Gans has recently written on the powers of the cinematic scene and its greater efficiency in turning us from resentment to love.[\[9\]](#) He did not mean, of course, just love in the narrowly sexual or romantic sense. But surely that is an important aspect of screen power. We might even wonder whether cinema does love—sex, romance—better than any other art-form. Lyric poetry might rival it, and doubtless helped produce it. But only the articulate can love in lyric poetry. One of the emancipations of cinema, this truly democratizing form, is that it creates a world of great love and great lovers from which the

ineloquent are not excluded, can participate, can star. One need only a body, a face, lips. Really, the less said the better.



Penn and his screenwriters, however, seem almost hostile to sex, as an ironic, even satirical displacement of sexual desire onto the phallic imagery of guns predominates.



At least one hopes it is ironic, rather than some sort of earnest demonstration of a psychological truth they thought their audiences needed to have explained. Either way, sexual love is not here mainly an emotion to be felt, so much as a problem to be deferred.

Still, their one reluctantly conceded cinematic consummation surely makes possible one of a great film's greatest and most justly celebrated moments, that masterpiece of editing that gives us Clyde's and Bonnie's eyes meeting in recognition and farewell in the instant before the guns begin to fire.



Perhaps it is a wisdom, even a mercy that *The Highwaymen* refuses kissing entirely. That such things, intimacies, kisses, couplings, actually take place amongst the morally vile or their paunchy pursuers is no excuse for showing them on screen! Perhaps the movie endorses atavistic standards of decency and restraint in this area (as it does in most others) as part of its moral brief.



But one might suspect there is something else, or more, involved.

There is a haunting moment in *The Highwaymen*—and, by comparison with *Bonnie and Clyde* there are few enough—in which a figure (Clyde Barrow presumably) plays his saxophone at dusk, beside a car parked by the side of a quiet rural road.



In a seamless transition, next morning, two policemen arrive, offering help to motorists whose car they assume is broken down. And are summarily murdered. [\[10\]](#)



The killer is an artistic free spirit. Or vice-versa. One might call the scene *The Highwaymen's* rebuke of the sentiment the earlier film expressed or inspired, memorably phrased, for example, by film critic Robin Wood, in 1969. Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* are...

... representatives of a spontaneous-intuitive aliveness that society even at its best can contain with difficulty or not at all: an aliveness that expresses itself in the overthrowing of restrictions, in asocial, amoral freedom and irresponsibility. We all respond to it, or if we don't, we might as well be dead.[\[11\]](#)

The saxophone is found amongst the arsenal of automatic weapons and ammunition in the back seat of the car in which Parker and Barrow die, one of many details the more recent film insists on, pointing to their absence from the 1967 version. Penn's Clyde is no artist—that role is played by the slightly more intelligent and aspiringly poetic Bonnie. But Bonnie is a terrible poet, touchingly bad. Part of the appeal of Penn's protagonists, beyond that spontaneous aliveness, is that they are rubes. We can see through them, feel superior and thus affectionate to them through our recognition of their naivety, the hopelessness of their project. Beautiful rubes. They attract us but are protected by their naivety from our resentment of that attraction. We pity them. *We love them*, and like the generation of any other love, even if we cannot fully endorse Wood's hyperboles, this is not nothing. *The Highwaymen*, however, having none of it, argues fiercely back, insistently contextualizing such aspirations in the mediated world of human desires. Bonnie and Clyde aren't about aliveness—they're about death. However, if the later film may on the one hand remind us, portentously enough, of the darkness lurking in the selfishness of self-expression, on the other it also points, even if unintentionally but by the same inexorable logic, to its and our own violence, the genuinely tragic twin of that pity, directed towards the centrality that such freedom so provokingly generates around itself.

3. ... Bang, Bang

For generative anthropology, the sign defers violence, and the aesthetic moment in the originary scene defers the literal appropriation that would provoke such violence via an oscillation between the contemplation of that sign and imagined appropriation of its referent. But this interval of deferral also feeds back into itself, also intensifies the new human experience of desire, proportionate to its length and, presumably, to the plurality and strength of the perceived desires of the others present upon each iteration of the scene. How else, then, to begin to account for the undeniably potent aesthetics of represented violence, or even the real violence committed with some degree of awareness of its formal character, its species of beauty?



Each deferral, that is, strengthens the charge of violent desire, sweetens the release when the temporarily proscribed act is imagined, or indeed, performed. Prohibition rewards transgression, one might say, and one can easily trace the process whereby the ante is steadily upped, barrier after socially sanctified barrier falls, and one of representation's most striking paradoxes emerges, as the ever more effective deferral of the endemic and individual brings on ever more extreme outbursts of collective, general, and above all

represented, indeed, aestheticized violence.[\[12\]](#)

If cinema, as Gans argues,[\[13\]](#) more efficiently allays resentments, how do we understand the role of one of its most prominent features, the seemingly endless gunfire, the tumbling human bodies, the blood and wounds?



It's a large question, beyond the scope of the present article. But the two movies under consideration do at least provide some specifics to ponder.

Penn's *Bonnie & Clyde* is well known to have inaugurated a new era of cinematic violence. There is a direct line from the slow-motion killing in its final moments to the similarly memorialized but far more extensive bloodshed in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* two years later, after which floodgates of gore swing open.



Penn's protagonists almost literally stumble into this new territory—the precedent-setting image of the panicked Clyde shooting an unarmed pursuer through the back window of his getaway car—the gun fired and bullet striking to devastating effect in the same frame ...



... occurs at the end of a sequence of comic bumbling—a *locus classicus* for the trope of the well-meaning criminal protagonist whose fundamentally innocent plans for wrongdoing collapse into a moral disaster which does punish him, but disproportionately, and which we can never feel is entirely his own fault. At the same time, it reaches back to a famous image from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*.



And Penn, too, is rightly lauded for his capacity to convey pain,[\[14\]](#) at least the pain of the Barrow gang members, and it is with equal fairness noted that there is no cruelty in the violence of this film,[\[15\]](#) no premeditation, with the possible exception of the final ambush. Violence, very much including violence to others, is something that just happens to the Barrows.



The combination, of comedy and catastrophe, cinephilic reference, shocking explicitness, a humanized if selective sensitivity to violence, and the absence of intentionality, must of course be understood in its full irony, a crucial element of this subtle as well as potent work of art. Penn and his writers locate the protagonists' degradation and destruction in their always already hopeless longings for transcendence. And irony, as Gans acutely notes, is

“always gifted with prestige.”[\[16\]](#) Still, this is, here at least, what we might designate a high art prestige, the prestige of elegant deferral, of a knowing superiority to common or obviously mediated desire. Irony of this sort will not, need we say, temper most of the screen violence that comes in the wake of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Nor will it placate the hotly ethical resentments of a movie like *The Highwaymen*, a work as devoid of irony as it is of kissing.

There is a moment, in the latter film, when the lawman protagonist Frank Hamer has decoded a crime scene in which two motorcycle policemen have died, implausibly establishing from tracks in the dust that Parker must have turned one of the still living victims over so he can see he is about to be shot in the face, by her. “They aren’t human anymore” is his bitter comment.



Part, then, of the hard-to-deny satisfactions of the final violence in the more recent movie is a carefully prepared feeling of justified resentment, indeed, that which popular parlance more simply calls “justice.” *The Highwaymen* locates the criminals’ destruction in their own efficient, intentional, and wanton cruelty, especially that of Bonnie Parker.



And, of course, in the moral uprightness and indeed courage of their destroyers. In this final scene it is, again in pointed contrast to 1967, the eyes of the two criminals and those of Hamer that meet, after he has offered them the chance to surrender and in the instant before they themselves precipitate the gunfire that kills them.



But there are other factors in the generation of this pleasure.

Among these, I think, are what could perhaps be called its “realism,” but might more accurately be described as the impression of force, the terrific energies that modern cinematic techniques make available: kinetic, vivid, impossibly but only too probably enhanced. If the screen offers up what Gans calls a “full-fledged duplication of the ontological otherness of the scene of representation,”[\[17\]](#) the cinematic scene of violence allows us to imagine a similarly plausible intensity at the moment of origin, recreating the scale of the stakes of human survival. It returns us ever and again to the ferocity of originary resentment and the threat hovering over all desire. Full-fledged indeed. If anything makes us sit still in movie houses, this does.



Even so, the violent conclusion of *The Highwaymen* is a spectacle curiously distanced from

immediate or what we might call thematized resentment. It's a non-human ballet this time, an almost impersonal experience of shattering glass, jerking not dancing bodies, punctured steel, noise. Its clarity is the clarity of a powerful moment of memory, of impossibly exact recall. And yet the shooting, like that in the earlier film, which Kael described as both endless and not a moment too long,[\[18\]](#) is plausibly brief, unextended through the manipulations of cinematic time. By the post-1967 standards of screen violence, it is remarkably restrained.



And when the gunfire is over, the restraint continues. In another matching shot, again from the perspective of the dead, from within the car, we see Hamer's hand rest briefly on the shoulder of the youngest member of his posse, a former acquaintance of the couple, visibly shocked at what he has done and seen. But Hamer is not looking at what has been done. We too experience a turning away rather than a rapt gaze—the center is empty again. We are offered human feeling, and an understated professionalism—in sharp contrast, of course, to the self-aggrandizing lawmen who make shameless appearances in the earlier film. Hamer and his men refuse to take money from the breathless reporters who are willing to pay high for an interview, and this, and the admiration we may feel for them, is not nothing. Overall, there is an absence of triumph, and indeed a quiet melancholy pervades much of the rest of the picture.



By comparison with the final feeling of *Bonnie and Clyde*, it is as if nothing particularly significant has happened. A small, regrettably necessary correction of a civil problem, in the context of broad economic depression, debased popular amusements and a general failure of human flourishing, all of which can surely be expected to continue.

4. Cinema & The Pop to High Continuum

High art, Gans argues, “looks back to the renunciation of appetite implicit in the sign” while popular art “looks forward to the appetitive satisfaction in the communal feast.”[\[19\]](#) In an art of violence the latter, we might add, looks ahead to the pleasurable discharge of resentment in the imagined destruction or defeat of the human obstacles to possession of the center or, to put the same idea slightly differently, to the forcible eviction of those who have usurped that center.

Aesthetic distinctions of any kind, I have elsewhere argued,[\[20\]](#) are to be located in the experience of those who consume art,[\[21\]](#) and generic identifications should be thought of as forming a kind of continuum. Aesthetic experiences of any artwork also vary from individual to individual and from time to time, so it is only imprecisely useful to identify an artwork by genre, as almost by statistical likelihood of it being experienced in a given way.

That said, cinema, as Gans's recent writings point out, needs to appeal broadly and has often succeeded in doing so—there is very little purely high-art film, no “avant garde.”[\[22\]](#) And yet the high art experience, I believe, has not disappeared, and not disappeared even from mainstream cinema. Part of understanding how an aesthetics of violence works in cinema is to recognise the appeal to a range of different experiences in a given movie, although doubtless this range is wider in some than in others.

There are implications, Gans has persuasively suggested, in the ethical relationship towards human community implicit in the high art and popular art responses—the high art deferral implicitly values the safety of the community, while the gratifications of imagined appropriation enjoy that safety by ignoring it—a point that seems to me particularly salient when represented violence and the gratification of resentment are considered. The tendency and capacity of high and pop experiences to *shift*, even in the experience of an individual consumer, let alone in larger groups, led me to formulate the concept of “ethical moods.” Like the more sharply focussed experiences of sign and object, broader impulses towards appropriation, desire and resentment on the one hand, and deferral and contemplation on the other, can be understood to *oscillate*. Ethical moods are such broader oscillations.

Some works of art undoubtedly facilitate or encourage a narrower range of such moods than others. But a focus on the genre of artworks has often led us to assess them for their consistency, the coherence of their appeal, even as we gladly welcome what we identify as new or “hybrid” forms. But this may still be quite an artificial way of judging the effect of such works, which are experienced so multifariously. Or at least, it might seem so to an anthropologically inflected criticism like that fostered by GA. A successful film—not to mention a masterpiece like *Bonnie and Clyde*—is successful to the extent that it hosts or provokes or makes possible a richer range of experiences, experiences which balance themselves not only in a given individual viewer, but in many, over time and across space. Indeed, it is arguably in their anticipation of the variability of such human experiences that great artworks and great movies achieve their higher successes. *Bonnie and Clyde* is masterful in such anticipations, in so frequently being just far enough ahead of expectations as to create a rhythm of unfolding scenes that seem somehow to become inevitable revelations, not for one ideal viewer, but for a very broad range of viewers of different sophistications, different experiences of desire, and in different ethical moods.

These same qualities, though, in a different form of paradox, also make *Bonnie and Clyde* a very inconsistent film, formally, aesthetically, and ethically. Indeed, it has moments weaker on most counts than any in the workmanlike “B” movie that rivals it in 2019. One such is the sequence beginning with the capture of Frank Hamer, when Clyde shoots the gun from his hand as in a child's cowboy cartoon book. Hamer's subsequent humiliation by Bonnie and Clyde is not only egregiously unhistorical—the filmmakers were successfully sued by the formidable Ranger's descendants[\[23\]](#)—but the crudest sort of flattery of resentment,

unworthy of so much of the rest of the film.



Tellingly, the scene ends in a flaccid sequence in which Clyde throws Hamer into a river, flails about there with him, then sets him afloat in a skiff to drift away. This offers those open to it one sort of ethical mood, shall we say. Of a different nature but ultimately appealing to similar passions is the spectacularly chic, sixties' wardrobe worn by the stars, which provoked a fashion fad but were rightly enough deplored by critics with an allegiance to plausibility.[\[24\]](#)

Contrast these flaws to the deeply and subtly realized early sequence set at a deserted farm where Bonnie and Clyde have taken refuge. They are interrupted in their target practice by the expropriated former owner and his black field hand, who watch and then, with an understated mix of uneasiness and eagerness, participate at Clyde's invitation in shooting out the windows of their own house.



Here viewers are given an opening into an ethical mood of much greater subtlety, awakened to an ache of deep resentment, but without an obvious scapegoat figure to pummel, only the distant sense, well beyond the bankers whose notices are posted on the deserted buildings, of inexorable but ultimately impersonal forces: a glimpse into the abyss, an intimation of the inadequacy of human motivations and interventions, an abyss whose most potent affective correlative is, indeed, irony.

Such scenes, for better and worse, are as we say not much to be found in *The Highwaymen*, and its achievement is undoubtedly smaller. Still, in a kind of unacknowledged partnership-cum-rivalry with its predecessor, it too is able to generate both high and popular experiences, deferrals and imagined gratifications, moods of ethical self-congratulation and of more sober reflection on the central problem, and terror, of human desire, resentment and violence.

5. Cinema and History

The relationship of various kinds of text to history has not yet been a topic scholars using GA have discussed very extensively, despite the rich historical account that GA itself has offered us. How does our new way of thinking help us parse the action of love and resentment upon the project of representing not merely the fictional and imaginative, those direct heirs to the virtual creations of the ostensive in the communal present, but the necessarily imperfect but not wholly unsubstantiated or unverifiable record of fact and event in the past? To what extent is history writing a re-envisioning of the originary scene?

This seems a particularly interesting issue in the case of cinema, for reasons perhaps

related to the special power or, we might say, the special persuasiveness of the form to which Gans testifies. If “in the cinema there is no imaginary reality that cannot be realized,”^[25] in such a medium there is perhaps also nothing desirable—or resented, or feared—that cannot be made realistic, or real. We might conclude here by sketching a few preliminary lines of inquiry. Around the lives and deaths of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow there can certainly be an ethical debate—about how to judge what happened, how to frame it, what larger narrative it belongs to—but there is also still and always a more narrowly historical one, about what exactly or indeed did happen. Facts are selected, of course, in the construction of any narrative. But as the newspapers and movies aver, and everyone else must agree, something did happen in Bienville Parish, Louisiana in May 1934, and the two people in question did end up dead. But did Frank Hamer, as he later claimed, step from the bushes and say, “stick em up”?^[26] Or not.^[27] It cannot have been both. *The Highwaymen* gives us the former, *Bonnie and Clyde*, of course, the latter. Both accounts, as realized on screen, feed resentments, albeit of different kinds. But the various written sources—testimonies of participants, observers, confidantes of participants and observers, after-the-fact analysts—are not in agreement.

“Historical accuracy hardly matters anyway,” Kael airily remarks in her influential defence, and speaks of “a new version of a legend.”^[28] But this is surely inadequate, even if it worked well enough at the time. Witness, these many years later, *The Highwaymen*, still making the objections that the more famous film left itself open to. Factual accuracy does clearly matter, at least now, to some, and in certain contexts, and that which can be understood as fact does retain a particular persuasiveness—many movie-goers seem to crave it, even if the fare they mainly consume constantly and demonstrably warps the available record to conform to the shape of their own anticipated resentments and desires, or those the filmmakers aspire to have them feel. A small but steady trickle of critique can be heard, though, plaintive but persistent, a resistance to being thus accommodated or placated. And of course, the production of counter-narratives, correctives, revisions, also acknowledges what we might call this meta-desire for the truth, this resistance to legend. Perhaps only for a fraction of the audience, in a fraction of their ethical moods or viewing hours, but it is discernable all the same.

Bonnie and Clyde is “a vision of the past, rather than an actual past,” claims another fairly typical defender, and with representations of “an archetypal rather than a documentary past . . . because they are mythically distant from us, we are partially released from the need to make moral judgments on their actions.”^[29] “We”? “Partially”? Better perhaps to say some are released, or release themselves, at some times. But clearly for other viewers, and/or at other times, to accept legends which are consciously understood as such and yet which generate at least some of their power from the authenticity of supposed but actually manipulated historical fact, is a species of bad faith. The authentic is that which is *not* subject to the gravitational pull of our desires and resentments, or at least that does not detectably seem to be trying to affect them. Its authenticity is precisely why “we” are

interested in history at all. Where there is no appeal to the authenticity of history—for example, in openly synthetic legends such as those offered by the stream of superhero movies currently flowing from Hollywood—the problem and the resistance do not arise. Perhaps, though, the power of the legend as revised by *Bonnie and Clyde* is evidenced not just in the desires it mobilizes but in the uneasiness and even resistance it awakens.^[30] A thousand other cinematic adjustments, adaptations, distortions of history raise less than a murmur. We face here, it seems, a quite complicated question of reception, of aesthetic experience.

We might note the way both films, and many others, make use of actual historical detail that they could easily, or to better effect, have left out or otherwise fabricated. *The Highwaymen*, for all that we might doubt its version of Parker, makes almost a fetish out of its historicity in many other respects, down to filming the ambush at the actual location it occurred, a detail that required pouring tons of earth onto a stretch of road that had been paved over since 1934.^[31] Needless to say such details as the make and colour of the car, the weapons in the posse's hands (the tommy guns of *Bonnie and Clyde* are judged inadmissible), and the clothes worn by all concerned are attended to with fierce scrupulosity. But so also are attempts to provide period psychological and linguistic authenticity: the comment about the outlaws no longer being human, from which sensibilities now rightly enough recoil, is also drawn from the record, although it was not Hamer who made the remark.^[32]

Penn and his screenwriters, however, also cleave quite closely to historical fact in a number of ways, many or even most of them likely undetectable by most of their audience—at least until otherwise tutored. Why did they bother? The invented treatment of Hamer was indeed infamous, but Barrow and his gang did actually kidnap several lawmen and humiliate them. Very little in the film is entirely without some historical analogue or similarity, and this procedure helps create some of that unevenness, even eccentricity, we noted above. Legends can surely be constructed more easily and more satisfactorily with the more ductile stuff of mere invention—the producers of the superheroes could readily demonstrate how. But then odd truths, that could not (could they?) be invented, do add a certain texture.

And then the existence of an ever better-informed viewership might also be proposed as a factor here. A viewership more educated, more inculcated, for all the doubts and revisions, in the principles of factuality established by the Enlightenment; viewers equipped, one might even point out, with Wikipedia and other engines of verification, however imperfect. Such an audience might need more than a patina of factuality to be retained, and parts of it, at times, when it mattered, might need considerably more. And such a viewership might not finally be swayed by the familiar defence that what is in principle true can in fact be false, that the plausible impossibility, even, is superior to the implausible actuality. It may not always have been thus, but perhaps now it is. The makers of *The Highwaymen* certainly seem to have believed so.

Or might we go further and suggest that there is now a viewership that, being the product of a market culture of some duration at least in parts of the world, is more hip to the tricks of manipulated desire and resentment, more wary of the techniques of seduction, more self-aware as to its own responses? At least, somewhat more, in each category? Such a notion runs counter to many a bleak assessment of a general dumbing-down, of blind consumerist gullibility and lust, of irresistibly artful hucksters and vast machines of coercion leading us into a post-truth and fake-news future. Still, perhaps the possibility that we, some of us, some of the time, have learned something from a couple of centuries' experience of such appeals to our passions, should not be flatly rejected, and a counterargument might begin with a careful look at the things past ages had been willing to believe, the narratives and legends *they* bought into. One thing is quite sure: there was at least some resistance to the legend-facts of 1967 even in that year,[\[33\]](#) it has continued, and fills the 2019 film, even providing it with much of its *raison d'être* (or the market appeal that would provide the same). The emergence of mimetic theory and GA, one might add, are perhaps not the only signs of human history arriving at a certain threshold of demystification.

But let us acknowledge the devil in details and finish by glancing at a couple of the key bones of contention, trying to see where our GA-inflected mode of reading such issues might begin to assist us.

How many people did Barrow and Parker actually kill, and were all these killings forced upon them by their imperative to escape, to remain free? The number of dead is reasonably well established,[\[34\]](#) but the motivations and exigencies are still very much matters for debate. The 1967 film gives us one answer, that of 2019, again and emphatically, another. But there is no historical consensus, and the killing of the motorcycle patrolmen referred to above appears to be clouded in a particularly classic haze of contradictory evidence. *Bonnie and Clyde* avoids the incident entirely, clearly preferring to have its protagonists battle great numbers of attacking police, outnumbered, miraculously escaping—a narrative for which there is in fact some support in other recorded incidents, but which also of course moves desire in a specific and clearly discernible way. How can the few ambushed by the many not be in the right, not be the heroes? But *The Highwaymen's* staging of the killing of these policemen, the deaths at least which verifiably occurred near Grapevine, Texas, on April 1, 1934, adopts the version provided by a widely discredited eyewitness account,[\[35\]](#) and then struggles implausibly, as we noted, to reconstruct it without explicit recourse to that tainted source—Hamer as a Texan Sherlock Holmes. Clearly, it was too good not to use, and an attentive viewer will surely at this point begin to lose some faith in the veracity of the whole operation, for all its re-surfaced roads and period fedoras. If the final ambush, in its extremity, its veritable overkill, must be justified or even made heroic, then Parker and Barrow, and especially the otherwise perhaps pitiable Parker, must indeed be made less than human, or close to it. The truth ...? ... might be that Hamer himself did believe in the story of her merciless killing of one of the policemen—he refers to it in his account[\[36\]](#)—even if the event, at least as such, never occurred. But neither film seems

able to work up this sort of truth to a sufficiently desirable effect, although the later film might have been the better for trying.

And what, indeed, about Bonnie Parker? Here the debate is especially sharp, and maybe consequential. The 2019 film, as noted, features a particularly ferocious, indeed sadistic moll, her inhumanity not only verbally asserted but, as reviewers have been quick to note in an age much less tolerant of such rhetoric, reinforced by an almost complete absence of screen time: she is glimpsed only in shadowy or blurred images, or at the moment of her death, defiantly trying to kill again.^[37] The 1967 Bonnie is taught to shoot—it's part of her release from the stultification of her life, a release for which the film for a time suggests almost any price is worth paying—and she demonstrates an immediate knack for it. Over the rest of the film she blasts away with the others, although she is never shown, as Clyde, his brother Buck and sidekick C.W. are, actually killing specific persons. *Bonnie and Clyde* of course references the famous home photos, the brandished weaponry, cigar between the teeth.



But these photos were arguably jokes,^[38] role-playing, as we note above, self-dramatization, like Bonnie's poetry. The written accounts of the time do not provide much support for the image they playfully project. It is fairly certain that she did not smoke cigars—very unladylike—and pointedly wanted it known, after the pictures were published, that she didn't. She might have been lying, but it seems unlikely. The most detailed biographies suggest otherwise, and furthermore make it more than possible that the actual historical woman never deliberately shot a gun at another human being.^[39] Faye Dunaway opened fire in 1967 for female and sexual emancipation (albeit one cannily tinged in irony, doomed by the forces of repression). The Bonnie of *The Highwaymen* seems a reflection of—probably not a retort to—the resultant era of Warrior Princesses, the Amazons and female assassins and avengers of the screen, righteously proclaiming at every turn woman's equal capacity for violence and scorning or destroying any doubters. But in 1934, many had qualms about her death—Hamer expresses them himself^[40]—and the dominant narrative, beyond the lurid tales of the popular press, was of a lovesick woman helplessly pulled into the dark circle of her male partner's life of crime, but who was not really of his ilk—ultimately a victim. This view of her actually got her out of jail once, in 1932,^[41] and is common in family and other accounts.^[42] What if, every cultural bias acknowledged and duly deplored, this old-fashioned version is still more accurate than the gunslinging proto-feminist heroine we want now? She was, after all, like those biases, a creation of her own time. The drive to plough under all such women, such behaviour, such archetypes, to laugh or sneer them first out of existence and then out of the record, for all its successes, still does encounter some friction, it seems, even if in their various ways both films under discussion do their bit to advance the cause. Will a third, with another version of Parker, yet come?^[43] Might the filmmakers of the future even work under some obligation to try to

produce such a one? Might a history freed as completely as possible from legend be a public good, even in the realm of “fictional recreations” or films “based upon actual events”?

Because GA focuses on desires and resentments and the finally mediated nature of all culture, it may find itself tempted to ignore the issue of accuracy of representation, to sweep away the kinds of questions we have been raising in this final section. But looking at this instance perhaps reminds us that we need a way to integrate the mediated character of desire and human culture with the undeniable and perhaps still-growing power of empiricism since the Enlightenment. “The formal quality or coherence of the image is precisely what demonstrates its unpossessability by the spectator,” notes Gans, “its formal otherness.” But he also speaks in this context of “likeness”[\[44\]](#) and perhaps we may add this quality to those which, finally, resist desire and create deferral. The shapings of desire make the image consumable, and a longing for factual realism is, in resistance, a longing for that formal otherness, even for the autonomy of the other *tout court*. Such an impulse is surely a feature of that “critique of desire” Gans notes is central to the realist project.[\[45\]](#)

Is the authenticity of historical fact the needed guarantee of inviolability and thus ultimately of “communal solidarity”?[\[46\]](#) The emergence of this particular critique, like the emergence of the distinction between high and popular art itself, must of course be historically situated and is a matter of shifting proportions and emphases. “The passage from myth to fiction of any type is already a decisive victory for resentment,” Gans notes as part of his history of the development of earlier cultural forms.[\[47\]](#) But so then, too, may be the further passage from fiction to documentary, a resentment of the manipulation of desire practised by a regime of art that has begun to seem outmoded and oppressive.

There is, of course, elite resentment as well as the broader more popular kind, the resentment of the tyranny of the popular that drives the project of the high artist. “High art . . . attempt[s] to sever all links between esthetic experience and consumption,” notes Gans in his discussion of the post-romantic period and nineteenth-century realism, “to expel entertainment from art.” [\[48\]](#) No doubt this line of thought might bring us to some rather surprising places if applied to our own context. It is surely counterintuitive, even paradoxical, to align a modestly popular “B” movie with high art and the banishment of entertainment—the producers at Netflix would certainly recoil with horror at the idea. Still, the notion that some aspects of such movies, for some viewers in some moods, constitute a principled attempt at deferring the putatively (or perhaps it is merely *formerly*) “transgressive” desires of popular art perhaps deserves further consideration. If such an attempt is “reactionary,” as liberal reviewers are quick to claim,[\[49\]](#) must this in the end be accepted as one of the characteristics of high art? As it must indeed be for any attempt to brake desire or disarm resentment, to resist, among other things, the melodrama of transformative political action.[\[50\]](#) Saying this by no means negates the value of such melodrama, its contribution to social progress and the ongoing task of accommodating the new desires and resentments generated by the previous or latest round of such accommodations. But high art perennially does put the project into a particular perspective.

We may have come, then, to a tentative location for the questions raised by these films, along the virtual space of the High to Pop continuum GA has helped us define. Which is where, for the moment, we must leave them. Does the hunger for verification drive a kind of deferral? Does it foster, or is it in itself an impulse to delay or even refuse the more immediate gratifications of desire and resentment? And thus what we might call a kind of high art phase of the aesthetic experience? One might indeed resist the conclusion on a number of grounds—a kind of dumb literalism seems a low impulse, mindlessly obstructing the grand projects of legend or, in the case of *Bonnie and Clyde*, a lofty liberal critique of “the system” and the promotion of a (fundamentally elitist) “counterculture” of the Western middle-class young, that most recent of the many instantiations of the high-minded Romantic rejection of the public center. Indeed the 1967 film seems almost prophylactically to be insulating itself from such an obtuse assault with the prestigiously ironic manner through which it delivers its own brutally explicit but hazy version of history. Still, the requirement for factual veracity almost inevitably does place obstacles in the path of desire, these or most other desires. Dare we suggest this is because historical reality is too complicated, too complex in its causalities and outcomes to conform to the geometries of center and periphery through which human beings understand themselves? The originary scene is, among its other features, a radical simplification, a reduction, under the imperative pressures of desire and fear, of an immense blur of phenomena into a single meaningful relation.^[51] Culture—making sense of the human—ever after works to such ends. One way to speak of paradox is as a complication of what desire wants to be simple, and high art embraces paradox more openly than does popular art. Perhaps the melancholy we observed at the end of *The Highwaymen*, for all that movie’s crudities and limitations, and its own resentful cooking of the case against Bonnie Parker, pays some tribute to paradox. The film labours mightily to recreate specifics of place and time, costume and behaviour, and as a result provides a notably diverse look and feeling for the Depression era, bleak certainly, but that seem less calculated than those of *Bonnie and Clyde*, which tended to produce the picturesque in the service of its more broadly, or shall we say more socio-economically, resentful agenda.^[52] One result of the 2019 film’s technique is thus indeed to allow its viewers to see the two criminals and their career more as a symptom of the pathologies of the world they lived in than as a potential or even failed attempt at transcendence thereof. As we also noted above, the conclusion of *The Highwaymen* has none of the moral shock in which *Bonnie and Clyde* left so much of its audience, because nothing about the outcome is really all that shocking. That’s what’s melancholy.

At any rate, it seems that a desire for the otherness of history is not going away, any more than the high art experience is. The terms of the struggle to be new, to flee, that is, the contamination of others’ desires—so central an ambition of market life—are continually being reformulated. One cannot help but suspect, though, that recourse to the domain of factuality will remain “a critique of desire,” a source of high art austerity, and a crucial form of cultural self-discipline deep into the future.

Notes

[1] The images reproduced in this essay are from several sources. Many, such as these black and white snapshots of the two criminal protagonists are widely available in the public domain and were obtained from such sites as Wikipedia. The colour images from *Bonnie and Clyde* (Warner Brothers – Seven Arts, 1967) and *The Highwaymen* (Netflix 2019) are screenshot stills from these two films.

[2] <https://allpoetry.com/The-Trail's-End>

[3] These details are illustrated with period photography in a documentary aired on PBS in 2016: *Bonnie and Clyde*, dir. John Maggio, American Experience Films.

[4] The best of these is probably *You Only Live Once* (1937), directed by Fritz Lang. For an appreciative description, see Pauline Kael, *Kiss Kiss, Bang, Bang* (Little, Brown 1968): 49-51. Others followed after 1967, including the documentary referred to in the previous note.

[5] I spare the reader these; they can be found in the illustrations of Jeff Guinn's *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde* (Simon and Schuster, 2009), or *I'm Frank Hamer: The Life of a Texas Peace Officer*, by H. Gordon Frost and John H. Jenkins (The Pemberton Press, 1968).

[6] *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford 1993): 156.

[7] "Bonnie and Clyde" in *Kiss Kiss, Bang, Bang*: 54.

[8] Guinn, 174.

[9] "GA and Cinema," <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw615/>

[10] The event upon which this scene is based is described in Guinn, 291-94. One policeman was killed. The other wounded and taken hostage.

[11] *Arthur Penn: New Edition*, with Richard Lippe (Wayne State University Press 1969, 2014): 57.

[12] I hope not to tire the patience of readers kind enough to have noted before, if they have not always embraced it, my reference to Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (Viking 2011) for sources of the research demonstrating the decline of endemic violence. Local and temporal variations conceded, the lowered rate of violence remains, to me at least, a crucial and perhaps crucially underappreciated factor for any broad assessment of human history, and especially recent human history.

[13] "GA and Cinema," <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw615/>

[14] Robin Wood, *Arthur Penn: New Edition*: 64.

[15] Kael puts it, "no sadism," 52.

[16] *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment and other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford 1997): 64.

[17] "GA and Cinema" <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw615/>

[18] 62.

[19] *Originary Thinking*, 171.

[20] "Reflections on the Popular/High Art Continuum", *Anthropoetics* 20.1 (Fall 2014) <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2001/2001dennis/>

[21] As has frequently been noted, there really is no agreed upon verb—here we uneasily combine experience and consumption, the latter a kind of experience, no doubt. But consume at least has the virtue of reminding us of the alimentary roots of the originary scene. We at least "imaginatively" or "virtually consume" ever after.

[22] "The Screenic Age" in *Mimetic Theory and Film*, ed. Bubbio and Fleming (Bloomsbury Academic 2019): 111.

[23] Various critics objected to the conversion of the smooth-shaven Hamer, perhaps the most celebrated of Texas Rangers or even of American lawmen, into a mustachioed stereotypical villain.

[24] Albert Johnson: "Bonnie's persistent 1967 look is disturbing and it is a flaw that Penn should not have allowed," 33. And even more caustically, Peter Collier, writing in 1968: "Bonnie and Clyde were an advertiser's dream the minute they were reborn," 31. Both are to be found in *Focus on Bonnie and Clyde*, ed. John G. Cawelti (Prentice-Hall, 1973).

[25] "The Screenic Age," 110.

[26] Hamer's own account is quoted at length in *I'm Frank Hamer*, the crucial claim appearing on page 232. Here, too, it is asserted that the outlaws were reaching for their guns. One may note the 1968 publication date—the book is an early salvo in the battle the 1967 film provoked.

[27] Guinn, 338-341. Guinn's reliance on an amateur re-enactment (424-425) does not inspire complete confidence.

[28] Her argument extends to noting how many other films are blatantly inaccurate, without facing the criticism levelled at *Bonnie and Clyde*, 50. Johnson also claims the film is “about the legend” or about legend-making, 34.

[29] John G. Cawelti in *Focus on Bonnie and Clyde*, 55, 58.

[30] “How do you make a good movie in this country without being jumped on?” asks Kael at the start of her review, 47.

[31] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Highwaymen_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Highwaymen_(film))

[32] “County sheriff Smoot Schmid . . . declared that Clyde was no longer a man but an animal.” Guinn, 287.

[33] Even or especially in 1967 the film’s “foes found it both immoral in its romanticism of violence and inaccurate in its depiction of history.” Lester D. Friedman, *Bonnie and Clyde* (BFI Publishing, 2000): 22.

[34] Various sources provide a plausible body count, including Guinn.

[35] See Guinn, 284. The man who seems to have actually done the killing in the manner described, Henry Methvin, later acknowledged that Parker had no part in it. Among various sources reporting this, see Brian Anderson, “Reality less romantic than outlaw legend,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 19, 2003 (*Wayback Machine*, February 25, 2008).

[36] “I hated to shoot a woman . . . but I remembered how she kicked the body of the highway patrolman at Grapevine, and fired a bullet into his body as he lay on the ground.” *I’m Frank Hamer*, 233.

[37] See for example the *New York Times* review by A. O. Scott, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/movies/the-highwaymen-review.html>

[38] Kael, among others, makes the point, 52.

[39] Guinn meticulously details each encounter in which weapons are fired, and the closest we come is that Parker may once have let off “a few wild shots” at a moment of confusion, at Barrow’s command, hit no one, and later claimed to have been trying to miss, 184.

[40] *I’m Frank Hamer*, 233.

[41] Guinn, 115.

[42] See Guinn, 110. Guinn also plausibly suggests that it may have been Parker’s own view of her situation, or one she at any rate entertained. In what seems an autobiographically

infused poem, "The Story of Suicide Sal," her innocent heroine is "lured" into a life of crime by her lover, where she languishes until her violent death. 109-110.

[43] Or perhaps, more likely, we will have a different version and understanding of Clyde Barrow, who was reputedly raped and tortured in prison, a sustained brutalization that led him to ambush and kill his tormentor, his first and life-altering murder. Neither film comes close to dealing with this event or its effect on his character, despite the significance most biographical accounts give it. See Guinn, 75-77. But the incident, like so much else, is of course "disputed." David E. Ruth, Review of "Bonnie and Clyde" American Experience Films 2016 (*The Journal of American History* June 2017): 288.

[44] *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (University of California Press, 1985): 169, 168.

[45] *Originary Thinking*, 179.

[46] *The End of Culture*, 169.

[47] *The End of Culture*, 230.

[48] *Originary Thinking*, 182.

[49] A. O. Scott: "To call *The Highwaymen* revisionist—or even reactionary—would be an understatement. This retelling of the Bonnie and Clyde story is not content to posit that those two Depression-era outlaws got what they deserved when they died in a hail of bullets on a Louisiana back road. It has a sackful of bones to pick with the modern world as a whole." <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/movies/the-highwaymen-review.html>.

[50] I discuss generic issues of melodrama and tragedy in "Contemporary Tragic Representation and Response: An Originary Exploration" (*Anthropoetics* 18.1 Fall 2012) <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1801/1801Dennis/#b17>).

[51] Gans frequently illustrates this point by using the distinction formulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, between the *en-soi* and the human *pour-soi*. See <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw615/>, for example.

[52] The indispensable Kael again: "His squatters-jungle scene is too 'eloquent,' like a poster making an appeal," 53. Others make the point as well.