

Arthur Penn

Nearly fifty years after it first appeared on cinema screens, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Arthur Penn's elegy to the infamous outlaw couple, maintains an iconic place in American film history. Popular accounts of the late 1960s and early 1970s 'Hollywood Renaissance' often suggest that this film helped usher in a new era of cutting-edge auteur cinema. On the back of *Bonnie and Clyde's* success, so the story goes, studio executives desperate to tap the youth market handed over unprecedented creative control to directors such as Mike Nichols, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman. Experimenting with innovative formal techniques and explicit thematic content, these directors have since come to symbolise Hollywood's last golden age – a final flash of inspiration before *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) set the industry on a conservative path once more.¹ Within this celebratory narrative (which, as several film historians have observed, greatly oversimplifies post-World War II American film production²), Penn is both prophet and proponent of a countercultural sensibility sweeping the movies in the late 1960s.

To view Arthur Penn as simply a director of the Hollywood Renaissance is nevertheless to elide the continuities present across his back catalogue, and its relationship to broader filmmaking trends. Long before any notion of a 'Renaissance' had emerged, the critic Robin Wood observed that 'there is nothing in *Bonnie and Clyde*, stylistically, technically, thematically, which was not already implicit' in Penn's first feature, 1958's *The Left Handed Gun*.³ Changing norms regarding censorship and the impact of sixties political and social movements

might have brought certain concerns further to the surface, but the director's films speak more to the tensions and contradictions pervading cinema in the post-war years than any radical break circa 1967. What then makes a 'Penn' film? Penn's collaborations with screenwriters Robert Benton and David Newman (*Bonnie and Clyde*) and William Gibson (*The Miracle Worker*), actor/producer Warren Beatty (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Mickey One*) and editor Dede Allen (six films, from *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Missouri Breaks*) have been discussed in some detail.⁴ Nevertheless, as Wood notes, 'Penn's films reveal a strikingly consistent personality'.⁵ Combining social comment and a reflection on the pervasiveness of national myths, they intersected and engaged with a period of transformation in Hollywood, and in post-World War II America more generally.

Penn's directorial debut *The Left Handed Gun* introduces a man by the name of William Bonney, known in popular legend as Billy the Kid (played here by Paul Newman), staggering through the New Mexico prairies. This was not the first time that Penn and Newman collaborated on a project. As did a number of New Hollywood directors (William Friedkin, for instance), Penn began his career in television. Penn directed Newman in 1956's *The Battler*, which told the story of a boxer's physical and mental decline. *The Left Handed Gun* would similarly follow the rise and demise of a hero. Incorporating generic elements associated with the melodrama and the juvenile delinquency film, it endeavours both to offer a psychological explanation for Billy's violent awakening, and, as Robert Kolker notes, to scrutinise 'the myth of the hero itself'.⁶

Allusions to Freud litter *The Left Handed Gun*, a film in which Billy's actions are influenced by failed relationships with paternal surrogates. Billy's short-lived tutelage under Mr. Tunstall (Colin Keith Johnston) begins the film's exploration of father-son conflicts. Tunstall espouses the virtues of unarmed diplomacy and reads Billy excerpts from the Bible. Sweeping long shots of the prairies provide visual accompaniment, heightening the sense that this is a moment of possibility in Billy's life. Billy is conceived here as an unwilling outlaw; had he just enjoyed the right paternal guidance, the film implies, he would never have turned out the way he did. If family relationships give *The Left Handed Gun* a powerful narrative thrust, so too does the emphasis on Wild West mythology. Tunstall's death at the hands of four townsfolk sets Billy on a vengeful path. A particularly striking moment of formal inventiveness occurs as he plots to kill his old mentor's murderers. Standing by the window of his hotel room, Billy etches out his plans on the pane. This action instigates a dissolve so slow that the protagonist can be seen for several seconds both in the hotel room and down in the street below where he is about to execute two of the culprits. Billy temporarily becomes witness to, and agent in, these slayings, as if he is having an out-of-body experience. Figuratively speaking he is, for now 'William Bonney' – that is, the youth still visible in the hotel room – can do little more than look on as his alter ego, Billy the Kid, is born in a hail of bullets on Main Street. Throughout, Billy is nourished by his own mythic status. Whether posing for a photograph, or being informed of his notoriety in the East, Billy's moments of lionisation inevitably precede acts of violence. Billy murders a man just after his picture is taken; he shoots his way out of jail after reading newspaper reports of his exploits. He is

finally betrayed when Moultrie (Hurd Hatfield) announces that Billy is 'not like the books'. The 'death' of the legend leads to the literal death of the man.

Billy is clearly a precursor to the protagonists of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Like Billy, Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty) is energised by hearing tales of his own renown. Impotent for much of the film, Clyde has his virility restored after hearing Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) read her poem about 'Bonnie and Clyde'. 'You made me somebody they're gonna remember' gushes Clyde, before the relationship is consummated. If the sun is at last shining on the outlaws' sexual relationship, such an achievement has come at the expense of their criminal career, for, as the film's remainder attests, death is now imminent. Their accomplice's father Ivan Moss (Dub Taylor) is unimpressed by Bonnie and Clyde's infamy ('shoot, they ain't nothing but a couple of kids'), who sees to it that the police are informed of the outlaws' whereabouts.

Ivan's sneering treatment of Bonnie and Clyde mirrors that of another Penn protagonist, David Braxton (John McLiam) in 1976's *The Missouri Breaks*. This, the last of Penn's three revisionist westerns, presents Braxton as a heartless cynic, interested only in financial gain. Near the beginning of the film, he presides over a mock trial in which a man is charged with a catalogue of outlaw offences that are so predictable as to be cliché. Braxton asks if the defendant has any last words. 'We would prefer that it be something colourful, life on the frontier being what it is', he adds. The defendant obligingly reels off a list of killing, robbing, whoring and gambling escapades and demands that he be forever remembered as 'The Lonesome Kid'. Those present greet this declaration with much hilarity.

There is little space for mythology in this film; it is, rather, about the corruption lurking behind the Wild West's romantic exterior.

Penn's films celebrate mythic figures in whom he can invest a countercultural sensibility. In *Little Big Man* (1970), audiences are encouraged to feel well disposed toward Wild Bill Hickok and lament his death, while laughing at the deconstruction of General George Custer's 'heroic' image. Hickok has a rebel status favourable to 1970s counterculture values; Custer is on the side of the establishment – a stand-in for US generals sending young men to their deaths in Vietnam. But such myths must at last be revealed for what they are, imaginative constructions, and eventually killed off. In the 1975 neo-noir *Night Moves* private detective Harry Moseby (Gene Hackman) is mockingly compared to his hard-boiled cinematic precursors. 'Come on, take a swing at me, Harry, the way Sam Spade would', says the man with whom Moseby's wife is having an affair. As the film unravels it becomes clear that Moseby is no Sam Spade. At the film's end he helplessly gazes through the glass bottom of a boat as the man he thought was his friend, but who turns out to have been a criminal, drowns beneath him. Moseby's 'impotence' becomes here a metaphor for the impotence of the mythic American hero.

Directing thirteen features over thirty-one years (*The Left Handed Gun* to 1989's *Penn and Teller Get Killed*), Penn was not prolific. Four years elapsed between his first film and 1962's *The Miracle Worker*. Between 1958 and 1962, however, Penn did successfully direct stage shows such as *Two for the Seesaw*, *Toys in the Attic*, and *The Miracle Worker*. A dramatic rendition of the relationship between

Helen Keller, a deaf and blind girl, and her teacher, Annie Sullivan, the film adaptation of *The Miracle Worker* was Penn's first critical and commercial success in Hollywood (*The Left Handed Gun* had received unfavourable reviews in the US, but was much admired by French critic-directors Francoise Truffaut and Jean Luc Godard). If *The Left Handed Gun* took a scalpel to Wild West mythology, *The Miracle Worker* does something similar to the image of a 'civilised South'. At a time when national attention was being drawn to prejudice and inequality in the Deep South (and civil rights activism in this part of the country), *The Miracle Worker* provides an apt appraisal of the contradictions that lay at the heart of a well-to-do southern family. Here this condemnation is not related to racism.⁷ *The Miracle Worker* is, however, an attempt to disrupt the image of serene family life. While courtesy is preached at the Keller family dinner table, Helen (Patty Duke) is treated little better than an animal. She is allowed to eat with her hands and run around in rags, as if civilising her would be a futile endeavour. Only Sullivan (Anne Bancroft), the Irish woman from Boston, treats Helen with the respect she deserves. Considered ill-mannered by Captain Keller (Victor Jory), Sullivan nevertheless proves the most sympathetic to Helen's plight. She rescues the young girl from complete dehumanisation, teaching her the ability to communicate and to think for herself.

If calm comes at last for the Keller family, the southern town portrayed in *The Chase* (1966), is not so fortunate. *The Chase* was released one year after another commercial failure for Penn: *Mickey One*. The latter's Kafkaesque plot about a hunted man unsure what he has done wrong, combined with obscure visual motifs and unconventional form, make *Mickey One* the most difficult of Penn

films to understand and, indeed, enjoy. Many critics saw it as a failed attempt at imitating the French New Wave. *The Chase*, on the other hand, was a star-studded studio production. Bubber Reeves (Robert Redford) escapes from prison and finds himself wanted for a murder he did not commit. While Bubber hides in the shadows, the town of Tarle awaits his expected arrival by descending into chaos. Combining elements familiar to oil-town melodramas of the 1950s like *Written on the Wind* and *Giant* – strained relationships between wealthy fathers and sons, tensions between urban and agrarian lifestyles – as well as themes that would become increasingly familiar in late 1960s and 1970s cinema such as the sexual revolution and vigilantism, *The Chase* incorporates a range of social, psychological and countercultural concerns.

Watching the brutal beating of Sheriff Calder (Marlon Brando) at the hands of three townsfolk, it is clear that *Bonnie and Clyde* was not the first instance of Penn 'overturn[ing] decades of polite bloodless movie violence in American cinema'.⁸ By this stage in *The Chase*, the town is moving toward self-destruction. Paranoia and gossiping pervade the town, as does casual racism—Lester (Joel Fluellen) is nearly killed, for instance, for daring to visit a white woman's house after dark. The film likewise narrates the split between a repressed older generation and a sexually liberated trio of youngsters, Bubber, his wife Anna Reeves (Jane Fonda) and her lover Jake Rogers (James Fox), and shows greed permeating the town's business affairs. With Calder battered to a pulp, the last semblances of law and order seem to have evaporated. The apocalyptic concluding section of the film sees Bubber safely apprehended by Calder. Yet, in a reference to the assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald (just as, in his next film

Penn would quote the Kennedy assassination during Clyde's death throes), Bubber is shot in the stomach outside the police station. The intolerance existing in this town cannot, it seems, be contained by anything as old fashioned as the law. Bubber and Jake end the film dead, and Anna winds up a desolate shell of a woman. The final scene of her leaving the Rogers mansion acts as her symbolic rejection of everything the town represents. Like Moseby at the end of *Night Moves*, or the complicated zoom/pan that provides a sense of stasis at the end of *Alice's Restaurant*, a feeling of helplessness concludes *The Chase*. Perhaps this sensibility serves as an apt metaphor for a filmmaker whose films always trod a contradictory path between emotional excitement and pessimism. Film, in the hands of Arthur Penn, was a window through which to experience and empathise with social and political transformation (from the 1950s onward), but one which ends up offering a view of America, as *The Left Handed Gun* put it (quoting the Bible), 'through a glass darkly'.

¹ See, for example, Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, London, Bloomsbury, 1998.

² Steve Neale, "'The Last Good Time We Ever Had?'" Revising the Hollywood Renaissance', in Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond (eds) *Contemporary American Cinema*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2006, pp. 90–108; Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*, London, Wallflower, 2005.

³ Robin Wood, *Arthur Penn*, London, Studio Vista, 1967, p. 72.

⁴ Mark Harris, *Scenes from a Revolution: The Birth of the New Hollywood*, Edinburgh, Canongate, 2009; Nat Segalhoff, *Arthur Penn: American Director*, Kentucky, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, pp. 84–98.

⁵ Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁶ Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*, third edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 20.

⁷ Indeed, if Penn can be said to have tackled a number of political issues throughout his career, there is little sustained treatment of racial conflicts in his films. There is a very brief scene in *Bonnie and Clyde* in which a black man shoots some holes into his master's house, which has just been repossessed by the bank. *Little Big Man's* portrayal of atrocities against Native Americans could be seen as

a metaphor for US activities in Vietnam. But the only film where any detailed attention is paid to racism is his 1966 feature *The Chase*.

⁸ Stephen Prince, "The Haemorrhaging of American Cinema: *Bonnie and Clyde's* Legacy of Cinematic Violence", in Lester D. Friedman (ed.) *Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 139.

Biography

Arthur Penn was born in 1922. After a successful 1950s career in television – where he directed for prestige drama series such as *Philco Playhouse* and *Playhouse 90* – he made his first feature film, *The Left Handed Gun*, in 1958. Penn died in 2010.

Filmography

The Left Handed Gun (1958)
The Miracle Worker (1962)
Mickey One (1965)
The Chase (1966)
Bonnie and Clyde (1967)
Alice's Restaurant (1969)
Little Big Man (1970)
Visions of Eight (Excerpt, 'The Highest', 1973)
Night Moves (1975)
The Missouri Breaks (1976)
Four Friends (1981)
Target (1985)
Dead of Winter (1987)
Penn and Teller Get Killed (1989).

Further Reading

Cawelti, John (ed.), *Focus on Bonnie and Clyde*. London: Prentice Hall, 1973.

King, Geoff, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.