Guiding Questions

1. This movie takes place during the Depression, but it was made in 1967. How do you see its engagement with these two very different historical moments? What events and sentiments of the 1960s seem relevant to thinking about the film? Are any of them related to events and sentiments of the 1930s? When we watch it now, how does our own cultural moment affect our reaction to it? Do you respond to it primarily as an historical artifact or do some of its interests seem resonant today?

2. Bonnie and Clyde surprised viewers with its graphic depictions of violence and frank engagement with sexual topics, offending some people and delighting others. What do these innovations contribute to the impact of the film? What’s the point of Clyde’s impotence? What about the timing and setting of his overcoming it? (What makes that possible? Do you think the movie represents this change as permanent?) What is Bonnie’s attitude toward sex (both before and after the consummation)? Does the violence in the movie seem excessive? Gratuitous? Aestheticized? If you consider it functional, try to articulate what its function is. Do you see anything like development in the depictions of violence? Is the final scene of violence different?

3. How successful a couple are Bonnie and Clyde? To what extent, and when and how, do they seem to function as a unit (and when and how separately)? What binds them as a couple? Are their motives the same? Are they compatible? In what ways does the movie depict their participation in larger circles of relationship: family, community, nation? When the Gang sets up house in the middle of the movie, are they successful as a domestic unit? What do you think of Clyde’s relationship with Buck? Buck’s with Blanche? Bonnie and Clyde’s with CW? Why do Bonnie and Blanche hate each other so much (and is that antipathy relieved in any way or at any point?). What’s the effect of the (Bonnie) family reunion scene, including how it’s shot (the lighting, the audio track)? How is it different from Clyde’s reunion with Buck and/or CW’s reunion with his father?

4. At what point in the movie do you get the sense that Bonnie and Clyde are doomed? Do they know it then? (When does Bonnie know? What about Clyde?) What’s your response to this mood of foreboding? (is it stifling? Poignant? Moralizing? Classical?)

5. What do you think about the use of music in the film? When is the theme song (Flatt and Scruggs, “Foggy Mountain Breakdown”) played and why? At one point, the banjo music is dramatically altered; how and why? Why is Bonnie so fascinated (and Clyde not) in the movie theater, when the musical Golddiggers of 1933 is playing?

6. Bonnie recites two poems in the course of the movie; these are abridged versions of poems written by the historical Bonnie Parker (you can find fuller versions here: https://allpoetry.com/Bonnie-Parker). They may not be great literature but they are certainly interesting. Why do you think they are included in the movie? Why is Bonnie’s
recitation of “The Ballad of Suicide Sal” cut off? When she reads “The Story of Bonnie and Clyde” (alternatively titled “The Trail’s End”) the text is delivered in three sections: first she is reading to Clyde in the car, then we fade to a clipping of the printed poem, which Hamer is reading, then fade again to the sun-lit field, where Bonnie finishes reading to Clyde, and her copy of the paper blows away. Do the sections, and/or the technique, seem significant? What about the paper blowing away?

7. The publication of Bonnie’s poetry is only one example of the Barrow Gang’s interest in publicity and presentation. For one thing, as the movie progresses they are dressed in nicer and nicer clothes when they’re in public (nicer and nicer cars too). Most strikingly they take several photos that are explicitly staged for public consumption. This is based in historical fact, but clearly the movie finds it important. There are also several interview-style scenes depicting something like audience reaction to the outlaws. The Gang seem to want people to read and talk about them, but they also point out at several points that the newspapers lie. What do you make of this interest in reception and the media?

8. What is this movie’s attitude toward crime? How about its attitude toward law enforcement? Why does Clyde chastise Hamer for not “protecting the rights of poor folks?” Why is he so surprised when the butcher in the grocery store comes after him with a cleaver? (“I ain’t against him!”) Are you rooting for Bonnie and Clyde, and if so is there a moment at which you are inclined to withdraw your endorsement? (If you’ve watched Breaking Bad, does the issue of identification with the criminal seem similar here, or are there ways in which it feels different?)

9. Why does CW’s father hate his tattoo so much? What do you make of the movie’s depiction of this character? Is he a villain or a concerned father? Does CW betray Bonnie and Clyde?

10. The night before their deaths, post consummation, Clyde proposes to Bonnie (“to make an honest woman of [her]”), and she asks what he would do if they could start over, with a clean slate. What do you think about his answer, and about her response to it?