

Running On Empty
By
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Bonnie and Clyde, True Romance, The Getaway, Badlands, Gun Crazy; these are just a handful of titles from a sub-genre packed with so many iconic couples. There are countless more, most of varying quality. It's a fairly simple formula to emulate with fairly simple checkboxes; a good looking couple, a car, a gun, and the road.

This is Lovers on the Run.

So how does a new movie stand out in an already crowded sub-genre? With only a handful of ingredients to tick off there can't be much fresh ground left to cultivate, so does that mean it's dead? There's only two outcomes in this type of movie; either the couple escapes the law and makes it to Mexico or the couple go out together in a brutal hail of gunfire. These seem to be the only destinations for outlaw lovers. Mexico or the morgue.

So how do you shake it up?

You shift the stakes.

No longer should the audience be asking "*is our couple gonna make it out alive?*".

Instead we should be asking "*Is our couple going to make it out alive **and stay together?***"

The lovers-on-the-run story isn't really Action — it's Romance. At their best, these films are about relationships, not robberies. Audiences might not relate to car chases and shootouts, but they recognize the tension of a first date, a roadside argument, or the awkward silence of regret. Those are the true stakes. And this subgenre is perfect territory to explore them.

This kind of premise provides incredibly fertile ground for filmmakers to examine their own experiences and do so in an entertaining way. Everyone, on either half of any relationship, has had an argument in a car or said the wrong thing or felt as if falling out of love, so why aren't these the major obstacles for these kinds of films? These real life antagonists that threaten the security of our relationships; these are what add depth and texture and stakes to the story.

An outlier in this field is *Bonnie and Clyde*. Not only is the titular duo fighting the law, they're also fighting impotence. It's a genius addition to the story. It's not just the police closing in — it's the strain between lovers, the quiet humiliation that drives him toward violence. If anything Clyde relishes the chase and the shootouts. It provides an alternative outlet for him to prove himself as a man. What his dick can't do, his gun can.

This is what makes the film stick out in such a populated category. *Crazy Larry Dirty Mary*, as fun as it is, is pure superficial shlock.

Genre is incredibly versatile and malleable. It offers routes to examine every aspect of life in interesting and inventive ways. We watch films to remove ourselves from real life as well as to understand more *about* real life. Half the job of genre is offering incentive and a reason to be watched and the second half is to deliver the message the story's trying to tell.

Recently I've wrapped principal photography on my second feature film *Hell's No Place for a Pretty Face*. In it we follow two pornstars driving cross country robbing porn theaters. That logline is the genre heavy hook to bring in an audience.

Despite it falling snugly into this sub-genre of lovers on the run, the root is in Romance with generous amounts of sun drenched Noir. The story, very archetypal Americana setting aside, is majorly influenced by French filmmaking. We looked to filmmakers like Jean Pierre Melville, drawing from him his simplicity in storytelling. We also looked to Chris Marker for his innovative editing and use of still photography. Not to mention Alain Corneau who brought Jim Thompson's *Hell of a Woman* to Paris with *Serie Noire* (1979). And despite it being a well drawn source of inspiration for countless directors, especially indie directors, definitely a lot was pulled from French New Wave.

But there's a reason for it. The directors of that particular movement knew the limits of their equipment but they also knew the limitlessness of genre. Instead of stuffy stale *Cinema de Qualite*, they let their stories breathe fresh air and run free regardless of imperfections. They said "use the sun as your light, it's free!"

A quick aside; this is a specific sub-genre that works well within the confines of a "French Film Aesthetic" only because it's one that's been tossed back and forth between the US and France for decades.

For us Americans it stemmed from the actual Bonnie and Clyde story; from it we got films like *You Only Live Once*, *They Live by Night*, and *Gun Crazy*. B-movies to the eyes of American audiences but bright beacons of inspiration for directors like Jean Luc Godard and co.

They responded (especially to *Gun Crazy*) with films like *Breathless*, a film so influential that the ball was tossed back to America and we simply had to swing back and reclaim this very American premise. In 1967 Arthur Penn hit back with *Bonnie and Clyde*; less inspired by gangster films like *Scarface*(1932) and more bucking off the new trends set by *Breathless* and *Jules and Jim*.

And back and forth this game of genre tennis went.

For our production we used the French New Wave as a major influence only because it fit our story. Our two characters are completely and utterly free; and that's where the problems stem from. They're *too* free; without restraints or rules or a destination, they have to create their own problems. When they're both the protagonist of their own story, they find convenient antagonists in each other.

The meat of the story is the tension between the two lovers; Nora Bangs and Dylan Campbell. It starts carefree and *liaise faire*, with lofty goals of robbing enough money to go to Lyon France, then headbutts into something ugly and bitter.

I do believe in writing what you know. I know West Texas (where it's set, unnamed but unmistakable), I know small towns and their movie theaters, and I know tough relationships.

Maybe at the time of writing the script and even through the shooting, my own relationship was at the boiling point. Maybe I used the film as catharsis to say everything I couldn't or wouldn't say. Maybe I used it to do things I could never do in real life.

My own relationship wouldn't be interesting on screen, but transcribe our tempers and personalities onto a fictional couple then give them guns and it could be something cinematic.

This isn't to say that my relationship is as rough and cruel as it is in the film; but it did provide a blank slate for me to exorcise all our ugliness and hurl it in front of a camera.

Despite all that, I can't discount the romance. There's plenty of it in the film. That's where it's rooted in fact. I believe we shot a romance, not in spite of but *because* of the ugliness added. The ugly gives contrast to the love; and the wider the contrast the more beautiful the love.

My relationship isn't unique, far from it. This reflects most couples' journeys doesn't it? It starts electric and romantic and as time goes on the quirks you fell for become irritations and detractions. The question isn't one of "*will we get out of this alive?*" The question is "*will we get through this together?*". That's what this film is supposed to reflect.

I'm not an author, I treat scripts like mechanical blue prints and not works of literature; but I do adhere to what writer Oakley Hall once prefaced in his novel Warlock (1958); "the pursuit of fiction isn't fact but truth". I believe genre cinema has the same duty.