

**“What do you think you're looking at?”:
Gazes and Pleasures in *Thelma & Louise***
by Caryn Cline

”Thelma & Louise in '92”
--bumper-sticker sighted in Seattle

In the weeks after *Thelma & Louise* (1991) was released, the media made a lot out of some critics' assessment that here was an anti-male movie, the first film in a soon to be long line of films appealing to women viewers of a decidedly feminist ilk.ⁱ

In reality *Thelma & Louise* is carefully designed to appeal to both women and men: it is a story of women who find themselves and discover the power of friendship as they become outlaws in a patriarchal society, yet it also effectively portrays and reinforces the patriarchy *Thelma & Louise* are up against. Both ways of seeing the film work in tandem, because the filmmakers have created the possibility of multiple readings, of a film that speaks to more than one audience at once.

Women who embraced *Thelma & Louise* responded to what feminist film theorists call the female gaze.ⁱⁱ In the film, we witness the developing friendship between two women, strengthened after one of them is assaulted and the other rescues her. While both women are presented as heterosexual, a lesbian subtext, amplified throughout the film, is introduced at the beginning: when Thelma calls Louise at work, a male co-worker answers the phone and asks her when she will run away with him. Louise grabs the phone from him, announcing that Thelma is running away with her. Much is made visually of how different *Thelma & Louise* are initially, as evinced by their different styles of dress: Thelma favoring ruffles and lace, Louise carefully tailored in classy jeans and boots. (Even so, they are both dressed in denim, the differences, even at the beginning, are mitigated.)

The women's lifestyles too are contrasted, especially in the packing montage played over the Martha Reeves song “Wild Night”. Thelma dumps whole drawers into her huge suitcase, while Louise seals her sneakers in a plastic bag before packing them in an overnight case. Thelma's house is a mess. She and Darryl are remodeling their suburban ranch. Louise's second floor apartment is spotless; she rinses out the one dirty glass in her sink. And yet for all their differences, the film tells us, Thelma's and Louise's lives are essentially similar. They both serve: Louise in a restaurant and Thelma at home. When we first see them in parallel scenes, they are both picking up dishes and pouring coffee. Women viewers of their age and circumstances, stay-at-home wives and pink-collar workers, recognize the essential truth of these images.

Many critics have pointed out that *Thelma & Louise* is a genre and gender-twisted road movie. As in any classic American tale of the road (see *Love and Death in the American Novel*ⁱⁱⁱ for the definitive discussion of the transformational power of the

American journey on two buddies), their geographical journey will transform these women. Who they are as they embark is captured in the instamatic photo Louise shoots to commemorate the beginning of their trip.

II.

"We just don't live in that kind of world, Thelma." -Louise

Part of the transformation *Thelma & Louise* undergo manifests itself in their change of clothing. This is especially true of Thelma, who "grows up" on the journey. In the beginning, Thelma has to ask her husband, Darryl, for permission to go with Louise on their weekend get-away. "What is he, your husband or your father" Louise demands. This is a line that Thelma will later use on Darryl. Like a passive-aggressive teenager, Thelma doesn't ask Darryl, or tell him, but rather just goes, leaving Darryl a note as to her whereabouts and "stuff to microwave." As they drive out of town, Thelma mimes in the mirror, holding one of Louise's cigarettes. "I'm Louise," she says as Louise laughs. (She indeed becomes Louise, or rather Louise-like, later in the film.)

In contrast to Thelma's girlishness, Louise is coded as a "tomboy" type from the beginning. She smokes and wears tight jeans and boots. Her hair is done up in a "tidy [. . .] do" as the waitress at the Silver Bullitt remembers. Darryl dislikes her because she puts ideas in Thelma's head; the feeling is mutual. Thelma won't touch the gun Darryl bought for her, except to gingerly put it in her purse before she takes off on the trip with Louise. She must intend for Louise to use it, if needed. Louise, unlike Thelma, knows how to handle a gun and does so when she must: to avenge Thelma's near rape. She shoots Thelma's assailant, Harlan, in response to his bravado invitation to "suck his cock".

After they make their getaway, Louise continues to take care of Thelma. She cleans Thelma's face off with her scarf, spitting on it before she wipes the blood off Thelma's face, in a motherly gesture. It is Thelma's naiveté about men (she later reveals to J. D. that she has "never been with anyone besides Darryl") that gets them both into the mess with Harlan, the rapist. As they sit in the roadhouse bar having their first drink, Harlan hits on Thelma. Louise sees what he's up to immediately and asks Thelma whether she recognizes what he's doing. Thelma's response is that Louise is as bad as Darryl--that is, that she is now the father figure. The dialectic between the two women about how to treat men in a pick-up scene is again one which rings true for many women. (How many times, when having a drink with a girlfriend, have women been approached by men asking, "Are you two alone?") Louise wants Harlan to leave the two of them to talk, and when Thelma says to Louise, "let's dance" Louise jumps up (to dance with Thelma?) while Thelma heads straight for Harlan.

When Louise shoots and kills Harlan, Thelma becomes even more passive. Louise vetoes their going to the police, declaring that "we don't live in that kind of a world, Thelma," a world, that is, where the police would understand the rape/killing as they do. From the beginning of the film, it has been Louise who has been, on one level,

the motivating force for each action. She continues to be in control for the next 1/3 of the film, deciding to flee to Mexico, calling her boyfriend Jimmy to secure money for their expenses, driving the car. But Louise relinquishes control when she allows J. D., at Thelma's urging, to ride with them to Oklahoma City, perhaps because she is so pleased that Thelma asserts herself. This time when Thelma looks in the mirror, it isn't to mimic Louise, but to frame J. D.'s body. (The men, especially J. D., will be their undoing. More about that later.)

Perhaps to counter the lesbian subtext of the film, and to reestablish heterosexual norms, it is not okay for both women to be strong at once, until the very end of the film. First, they must trade off being strong, mirroring a stereotypical heterosexual couple or lesbian butch/fem roles. After Thelma loses their money by leaving J. D. alone in the room with it, allowing him the opportunity to steal, Louise falls apart and Thelma assumes control. Thelma can now take charge because she has become a real woman; having "been laid properly," as Louise says, she begins to smoke and robs a grocery store to make up for their loss to J. D. She is Louise's equal, her sister rather than her daughter. Now she and Louise have both committed crimes; they are both "wanted." (And indeed part of what motivates their journey in the first place is the need to be "wanted," especially, for Louise, by Jimmy.) The fundamental equality of these two characters is underscored in their nighttime drive through the canyon. In this scene director Ridley Scott dissolves between the two faces, merging them in the frame and in viewers' minds, aided by Marianne Faithfull's "The Ballad of Lucy Jordan" on the soundtrack. Like Bibi Anderson and Liv Ullman in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis grow to resemble each other in the film.

As with their differences early in the film, their later affinity is underscored in the way they dress. By the end of the film, both women are wearing blue jeans, sleeveless t-shirts and hats; their faces are sunburned, without make-up, in startling contrast to the instamatic commemorative snapshot.

III.

"Place your hands in plain view. Any failure to obey that command
will be considered an act of aggression against us."
--a police officer in *Thelma & Louise*

How do men see this film? Some critics claimed it was an anti-male film, one that portrayed all the male characters as "pathetic stereotypes of testosterone-crazed behavior."^{iv}

Some of the men are pathetic, or played for comic effect--you can tell them by what they wear. (We should remember that Ridley Scott got his start directing commercials.) The FBI agents wear matching dull business suits and khaki raincoats. Darryl (Thelma's husband) wears short-sleeved shirts and a thick gold bracelet to work, thongs and bermuda shorts at home. These men are sharply contrasted with the deftly-sketched iconic male characters: the understanding, sympathetic detective Hal Slocum

(Harvey Keitel), Louise's sweet, but elusive boyfriend Jimmy (Michael Madsen), and the sexy drifter, J.D. (Brad Pitt). These three not only register in the film as strong characters, they all push the plot forward, contributing in their own way to the women's eventual ensnarement. Hal, with his computer search techniques, is on their trail from the beginning; Jimmy exposes them by showing up in Oklahoma City to rendezvous with Louise, and then spills their plan to the police; and J.D. steals their getaway money.

It seems to me too that, if not offering pleasure, exactly, there is comfort for the male viewer built in to the genre elements of this film. This is a road movie, a nouveau western; the final confrontation takes place in (John) Ford country: the monuments and canyons of the Utah/Arizona border.

But what about the film's principal actors, Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon, *Thelma & Louise*, respectively (why can't anyone keep them straight?)? I first saw the film with my younger brother, and he admitted that he found them both extremely attractive. There is real pleasure for the average heterosexual male viewer in watching these women on screen. Redheaded, lanky, passionate and tough (although Thelma develops her toughness gradually, Louise has it from the beginning), these two are the sensitive tomboy types men love to dominate. Yet they also touch close to home for female spectators: as well as being many men's dream girls, they are fantasy versions of my best friend Eleanor and me, in our senior year, riding the back roads with the radio cranked up, smoking and drinking and on the lookout for men.

Finally, it is important to look at the role machines play in this film, machines which are coded as male in this postmodern landscape: the gun, originally given to Thelma by Darryl, which enables Louise to defend Thelma, and later to commit other crimes. These machines include the detectives' computer network with which Hal begins his surveillance, the wiretapping apparatus hooked up in Thelma's home, the grocery store surveillance camera, on which the police view Thelma's robbery; the oil wells which pound up and down into the earth (reminding us of another form of rape), as Louise's car plunges through them on a side route to escape the gaze of the police, and the crop duster airplane. The crop duster's POV shot and other shots in the film indicate that the camera, too, plays a role as a male/machine in ultimately "framing" (metaphorically "capturing") the two women. There are three such strange, for the most part "unmotivated," shots: the shot which encircles Louise in the phone booth the first time she calls Jimmy, the crop duster's POV (does he radio his sighting of Louise's green Thunderbird?), and the shot which sweeps the car itself on the highway. These "omniscient" shots stand in for and remind us of the surveillance apparatus and capabilities of Hal, the police, and the FBI.

Louise's car itself embodies the dual gaze that permeates the film. One young male student in a classroom told me exactly what the engine specifications were for Louise's Thunderbird[®]: it is an object of desire for at least some male and female spectator--as are the women who drive it. It is also a machine that both exposes the women (it's so noticeably "hot") and ultimately enables them to escape.

On the run, in parodies of their original crime, Thelma and Louise destroy a couple of machines, and by extension the men who run them. They capture the police officer who tries to arrest them, shoot out his radio and lock him in his own trunk (where he is further humiliated by the Rasta bicyclist, the one gratuitous racial stereotype in the film).

Thelma and Louise also blow up the rig belonging to the ubiquitous, misogynistic truck driver with bad taste in mud flaps (the scene itself a special FX extravaganza, and a backhanded homage to *The Wages of Fear*). But in an echo of this pivotal scene, the finale pulls out the big guns (and helicopters) to construct Thelma’s and Louise’s choices.

What to make of the ending? Is it a capitulation to the ultimate male authority or a victory for women? Again, the duality of the film is both inscribed and subverted here. Thelma and Louise are trapped by the laws and machines of patriarchy, driven literally to the brink. They can either surrender with their hands up, or shoot it out with the police and, like Butch and Sundance, die gloriously in a hail of bullets. Instead, they make a choice that takes them over the edge. Their choice, too “keep going” over the cliff of the Grand Canyon is a radical choice, completely outside the purview of their would-be captors.

ⁱ Stars Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon graced the cover of *Time* magazine in a summer, 1991 issue. “Why *Thelma & Louise* Strikes a Nerve”, June 4, 1991, pgs. 52-57.

ⁱⁱ See Marshmont, Margaret and Lorraine Gammon, eds., *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fiedler, Leslie, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Cleveland : World, 1964.

^{iv} *New York Daily News* columnist Richard Johnson, quoted in *Time*, June 4, 1991, p. 52.

^v Student Al Richrod told me that Louise’s “1966 Ford Thunderbird [390ci, 4bbl, 300hp] represented a time when T birds were at their largest. It you got 12 mpg you were lucky, but ‘God’ what power!”