

**THELMA AND LOUISE<sup>1</sup>:  
GENDER CONFLICT AND GENRE DEBATE INTERWOVEN IN A FILM.**

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(Resumen)

*Thelma y Louise* fue estrenada en los Estados Unidos en mayo de 1991. En España se estrenó en noviembre de ese mismo año. Desde ese momento, mientras los espectadores por lo general han aplaudido este *boom* sorpresa del verano, los críticos han probado a aplicar sus mejores manuales de psicología popular a la rica ambigüedad del film, y casi nadie se ha declarado neutral. La película ha logrado tocar el fondo de las profundidades del conflicto genérico-sexual de nuestra cultura, como lo evidencia el curioso parecido entre algunas preguntas suscitadas en los medios de comunicación y las que acostumbran a surgir en los debates internacionales sobre género, lenguaje, y legalidad.

Entrelazado con el tema genérico-sexual del film, se encuentra el debate sobre el género cinematográfico. ¿Extiende esta película las fronteras de la película de carreteras o la de buenas camaradas al incorporar a las mujeres como principales protagonistas, o representa tan solo un amago, un simple giro que no añade nada sustancial a ninguno de los dos géneros? ¿Coinciden o se contradicen las intenciones de la guionista Callie Khoure--una productora de vídeos de rock que debuta aquí como guionista--con la dirección de Ridley Scott, o acaso la película aparece como limitada y desorientada tanto en su visión ideológica como en su estética?

En lo que sigue, no trataré de contestar a todas las preguntas suscitadas por *Thelma y Louise*. Solamente pretendo hacer algunos comentarios sobre los puntos de controversia que la película ha levantado, ya que ha sido en la discusión mantenida en los medios de comunicación tras su estreno--el fascinante y apasionado discurso público que generó--más que en los méritos o los sentidos de la película en sí, donde se pueden encontrar sus repercusiones más importantes.

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The first comment I heard about *Thelma and Louise* (May 1991) celebrated that feminism received Hollywood treatment. Nevertheless, analyzing the continuing controversy over this mildly revisionist Hollywood genre item, I can say that this has less to do with the film's modest artistic achievements than with its success in

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1. *Thelma & Louise*, a Pathe Entertainment presentation of a Percy Main production. Produced by Ridley Scott, Mimi Polk. Directed by Ridley Scott. Screenplay by Callie Khouri. May, 2 1991 (in the Cannes Film Festival, noncompeting). 128 Min. Main characters: *Louise*, Susan Sarandon; *Thelma*, Geena Davis; *Hal*, Harvey Keitel; *Jimmy*, Michael Madsen; Darryl, Christopher McDonald; *J.D.*, Brad Pitt.

stimulating widespread public debate over the relationships between men and women. Questions based on these open but often subtle power relationships are raised, answered, discarded, reposed, and answered again both by the film and its many commentators. Is it *Thelma and Louise* a male nightmare of emasculating fleeing women? Is it a parable of female bonding? Is it women breaking their chains and liberating themselves? It's all of the above and none of the above.

*Thelma and Louise* is also a good example of the fact that films do not exist in a void. They are part of the whole polysystem that makes up a society. If the evidence lies in the issue the film raises—rape and its related aspects—it also lies in the critical and public response to the film. Richard Schikel, in his article "Cover Stories: Gender Bender," published just the next month after its first release (May 1991), divides the reactions into two camps: those who consider the film as a betrayal of feminism, and those who consider the film as a feminist manifesto. For the first group, the film is a "paean to transformative violence." For them, using an explicit fascist theme, Ridley Scott's film not only justifies the excesses of its protagonists as exercises in raising awareness, but it is also degrading to men, and in this sense, the film glorifies "male-bashing" and betrays the feminist agenda by presenting bad role models.

For those who see the film as a defense of the feminist ideology, the film tells us the downright truth of women's suffering in a male world, and it may even serve as a "butt-kicking feminist manifesto" (Bill Cosford's comment on the film in *Miami Herald*, cited by Schikel, 52) because it succeeds in appropriating a male genre for women, thus reworking American mythology. Whichever way we turn, we are dealing with manipulative questions.

Many of the comments made in the summer and autumn that followed its release can be placed under one of the above headings. So, it is easy to see that most of the success of the film is due to the public debate it raised. This debate, however, is also in the film itself through binary choices that are present all along the film. *Thelma and Louise* are themselves good examples.

Louise is the one who interprets Thelma's willingness to experiment as a failure that can only be corrected by becoming an outlaw. Thelma is all infantile impulse. At the beginning of the film, it seems that Louise is the teacher and Thelma is her student. Thelma is almost pathologically "bimbo." The day after she is brutally assaulted and nearly raped, she invites a stranger into her room, she leaves the fat envelope of getaway money lying on the bed table, she brings everything she owns for a two day outgoing, and she insists on buying the cute little liquor sample, despite the fact that the two women are desperate for money and the clerk has advised her that these bottles are much more expensive than pints or quarts.

The armed robbery Thelma pulls may give the two women ready cash, but it also takes away any options they might have with the police. Thelma does not understand her friend's words—"There is no such thing as justifiable robbery"—about decisions and consequences: all that concerns her is whether she is having fun.

Elayne Rapping, in her contribution to the Critical Symposium on *Thelma and Louise* held in Minneapolis in 1991, considered that the film was a gender-bending genre film—a female driven outlaw movie in the tradition of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. Nevertheless, unlike Butch and Sundance, Thelma and Louise are not two individual protagonists but two female stereotypes, suggesting that women's options as malcontents in a male world are quickly exhausted. Women either pay dearly for their open-mindedness toward men or reject men totally. And, in her effort to present female stereotypes, and at the same time to make the film commercial, Kari Khouri, the screenwriter, seems to sacrifice Thelma's character for convenience. Some of Thelma's mistakes suggest a desperate device to keep the plot going: How will the police know that the women are headed for Mexico? Thelma has told it to the cowboy. How will they lose their money? Thelma has left it on the bed table. Who will waste any options they might have to come back home? Thelma does through the armed robbery. Whose fault is it for the attempted rape and its consequences? It is Thelma's fault. Thus Thelma becomes poor Thelma.

Louise, we have been said, also suffers from some terrible incident done to her years before in Texas, but we never know what it was. Was she raped? Molested as a child? Married to a wife-beater? Everything that happens in the movie is a consequence of that earlier experience. There is a perfect moment, near the end, when Louise ought to share her secret, but she will only say, "I'm not going to talk about it." Without such sharing of themselves, the final goodbye to the past, the kiss that Louise gives Thelma before the plunge into oblivion, means little. If we are to believe that the women's experiences have led them to a deeper, richer comradeship and understanding than any they shared with men, then why not show that connection here, a bond of abuse now transcended? The opportunity to go deeper into the sexual tensions and contradictions that are just below the surface of American life is thrown away.

From this point of view, Khouri tells us nothing new about women. It is the same old story artfully disguised to look like something new. *Thelma and Louise* simply brings to center stage ideas that have long been taken for granted in less respectable (because of class and gender elitism) media form, in classrooms, and in private conversations. It depicts the deep sentiments and beliefs of a growing number of people who do not normally get heard against certain longstanding assumptions of classic Hollywood genres. These assumptions such as men's right to have more power, more freedom, more life and more fun have always reinforced the actual gender inequalities upon which this society depends for many things. The film tries to make public how very fragile and contested many of these old assumptions have become. But the result is somewhat different. The way Hollywood sets the terms of the debate (an unclarified answer to rape and its related aspects, a vague defense of female freedom, and an indefinite justification of the inadequacy of law) leaves open space for speculation. As an example, in male buddy outlaw films, neither the autonomy of the heroes nor the appropriateness of their actions is ever questioned as it is in this film.

*Thelma and Louise* is also very aware of the spectators, and thus, instead of providing a single meaning, it allows the imaginary to be appropriated by everyone in a different way. Hollywood thus produces another film under the disguise of a liberal forum for debate, and the viewers blindly accept the invitation. A look at some of these reactions to the film could be interesting.

For some members of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, *Thelma and Louise* explores, in a very general way, firstly, the need for each sex to be sufficiently separate before it can find out more about its distinctiveness; and secondly, the currently uncommunicative and often perilous ways in which the sexes grope toward and past each other in order to connect and become more human and fulfilled. Nevertheless this mainly implicit theme is mostly off-stage. For Khoren Arisian, Co-Minister of this society the film portrays women as outsiders in a predominantly male culture, helped by resonances and overtones. Becoming outlaws can be seen as a logical, if extreme, extension of that moral and political minority status—a status that, in Arisian's opinion, must soon be radically altered in favor of inclusiveness in American society, if it wants to be a recognizably moral community. The film gives body, therefore, to the sexual tensions and contradictions underlying Western society. From this point of view the film is a testimony of progressiveness, a celebration of women's independence (Arisian 9).

In the same line, *Thelma and Louise* has been considered a film which empowers women. In Merle Hoffman's opinion (2), *Thelma and Louise* is a morality play. He thinks that the characters are informed and driven by a sense of personalized justice rather than lawfully bound definitions of "right and wrong." For him, the main characters' reactions evoke immediate response: You rape my friend—I kill you. You mess with my freedom—I leave you. And, finally: you try to kill me, I kill myself because death is superior to your laws around me. Virtually a classical Greek view of tragic determinism is setting in. In this sense, what Hoffman tells us is that the film is not really about women taking "law" into their own hands, as some critics have pointed out, but about redefining and actualizing justice. And that is why both characters, their adventures and their ends have become both metaphors and lightning rods for different people for different reasons.

An example of the state of the society and the difficulties of capturing it into a scene may be our last view of *Thelma and Louise* in the film. We see them suspended in flight, speeding off the cliffs of the Grand Canyon together in a green convertible car, holding hands, stopped in time and space. This last scene seems to proclaim a survival fantasy full of symbols and symbolic meaning, and the one in which many critics base their comments. In Hoffman's opinion (3), "it is the two outlaw women giving the ultimate "fuck you" to patriarchy." That is, it is the triumph of the oppressed over the oppressor, the triumph of gender justice and Amazonian immortality.

The film has also been criticized as an example of the movie management of rape. If we search out the "law" that pursued and ultimately destroyed *Thelma and*

Louise for their "crimes" against patriarchy, it is often either nowhere to be found or it is considered under the general heading of "crimes against women." Let me give some objective data. A study by the Justice Department of USA published in 1989 (*WIN News* 3) found that, in USA, while violent crime against men dropped about 20 percent from 1973 to 1987, violence against women stayed constant with about 2.5 million women a year becoming victims of robbery, assault or rape. Recent studies, such as a study of the National Crime Survey conducted between 1978 and 1982, and The National Women Abuse Prevention Project in 1989, indicate that rape occurs every six minutes in USA, although FBI statistics show that only one of 10 rapes is ever reported. Then, as some analysts point out, if the names of all the women who are victims of all the crimes against their sex, from rape to battery, to murder, to abuse, to incest, to inadequate health care, and to economic deprivation were recorded, the list would be far longer than the Vietnam War Memorial.

Besides, although it was attempted rape that provoked the male killing in the film, in real life it is extremely rare, given the statistics (*WIN News*), that women ever fight back at all. But instances of rage are coming to the surface and *Thelma and Louise* can be seen as an example. We see the two women in a consistently defensive attitude—an attitude that requires that most energies must be used for personal survival instead of using them in pro-active political strategies that can benefit their sex as is made evident in the film: finally believing in themselves totally, Thelma and Louise have discovered their own power. They will never be harassed again; better to revolt against oppression than to accept or compromise with it anymore. "Go for it," says Thelma to Louise, who then floored the accelerator of the car, leaving behind a world that should be changed. The last we see of them is a scene where they are smiling. *Their odyssey* is over, but it is an odyssey that points to the future. They did not flee in vain for the defenders of the feminist cause. From this point of view, it is their rejection of patriarchy that makes the film controversial, interwoven with the topics of violence, defiance, anger or rage to name but a few. These are typical features of the road movie characters of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the genre was in full bloom.

"Highway 69 Revisited" is precisely the title of the article by Ty Burr in *Entertainment Weekly*. For him, Thelma and Louise are not just cinematic soul sisters. They are daughters of *Easy Rider's* hippie road warriors, and the two films make ideal travel companion pieces. In the chart provided by Burr, comparing how movie critics rated some recent video release and top rentals in their theatrical runs, *Thelma and Louise* gets the highest score as *Easy Rider* (1969) did in the early 1970s.

Nevertheless, the heroines of *Thelma and Louise* happen to look quite innocent compared with the stoned, messianic drug dealer of *Easy Rider* (1969), or when compared with Bonnie Parker, who got a sexual thrill out of the way Clyde Barrow announced: "We rob banks" in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Furthermore, compared with the wandering sex offenders of Bertrand Blier's *Going Places* (1974), their feelings about the opposite sex are positively friendly, as we shall see later.

The men in the movie are not important, they are only figures in a landscape, essentially powerless, once the plot has been set up after the attempted rape. They are shown as basically clumsy and cruel. These women become thoroughly independent in a way that is commonplace for male movie heroes, but still a novelty where heroines are concerned. If we consider several other recent films that involve women who pose some kind of threat, the misdeeds and motives that lead them to any kind of reaction are much darker than in *Thelma and Louise*. For example, in *La Femme Nikita* a French drug addict gets drawn into the secret service as an assassin, and in *Mortal Thoughts*, we see an excursion into Cynthia Kellog's memory through a police interrogation on her husband's murder after a joyless life. And, in terms of antipathy toward men, *Thelma and Louise* cannot be compared with the Madonna of *Truth or Dare*. Nevertheless *Thelma and Louise* are allowed to play with all the toys men play with but women are not supposed to (a vintage car, a smoking gun, the open road and great sex), and they have all the typical buddy film qualities: They are devoted to each other, they are in flight from the law; and they possess qualities that allow viewers to identify with their freedom and the bond they establish with each other as "outlaws." In this sense, they take control of their lives.

Again we have a subject of controversy. We see features that could be virtually routine in a comparable movie about men, but not in a women film. Depending on the point of view taken, the film can be seen as an example of "male punishing" or "women against men," or as a reaction to a society that has allowed men to dominate and practice violence against women for so long. If I agree with the last opinion, I could say that we are in front of a new type of film. *Thelma and Louise* may be the latest addition to the American "buddy-outlaw" film tradition, but showing a new tendency. Even though the film can be considered a road-film, it is different from the masculine road movie which has never tried to depict exemplary behaviour. It offered transcendence, not instruction as we see in Ridley Scott's film.

Let me mention at this stage some of the questions raised by Susan Hanson, Assistant Professor of French and a member of the Women's Studies Faculty at Drake University:

Is the film opening a path for a "female-buddy" outlaw tradition? Or is it a kind of "snuff film" in disguise, a film in which the woman's own pleasure seems to take her life away, leaving her suspended in a timeless space. Does the film want us to consider that the price of freedom may be death? Or does it tell us that, should we travel too far from shore, we may risk dropping off? Is this freedom? Or is this a warning posed by the old question: "What price freedom?" (1)

A question can be raised at this stage: Why are feminist issues and themes increasingly attracting Hollywood studio treatment? Is it an indicator of the influence of feminism? Are mainstream film-makers showing commitment to feminism? Or is it

due to predominantly commercial interests? The answer is not a simple one. Both Geena Davis (Thelma) (Jerome 96) and Susan Sarandon (Louise) (Carr 11) complained about the shortage of good, powerful roles for women in film, and men's practical monopoly is not even threatened. In this sense, the film can be considered as an example of both a powerful feminist in-road into popular culture and an entertaining one. The film can also have the ability to change women's lives, somewhat like the novel *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French ten years ago, at least for its duration (128 minutes), but it might also be considered as another Hollywood creation whose ultimate value lies in its box office profitability.

It would be interesting, however, to offer a quick view of Hollywood's treatment of women. Hollywood's most successful movies about "femmes fatales" have always bolstered traditional femininity and male power--*Alien* (1979), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Presumed Innocent* (1990), and *Terminator 2* (1991) in which Linda Hamilton brings heavy firepower to the role of an embattled mother who joins forces with the cyborg. Women can shoot a gun for the government and blow away anyone who threatens their men or their kids, but any "heroine" who packs a pistol against systematic male violence is going to be punished. These are the cases of Dr. Eve Simmons in *Eve of Destruction* (1991) and of the protagonists of *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Both films contain powerful images of women who dare to feel anger against male violence and domination and take their destinies, as well as their guns, in hand.

The power of personality could be the main theme from this point of view. Nevertheless, in a male culture, this seems to have a price for the other gender. "Only angels have wings" is the revealing title of Kathleen Murphy's comment on the film (26). And again the last scenes appear to be the key. As Murphy points out, when Louise stops driving and walks out to look into the great dark, we do not see through the green Thunderbird's rearview mirror snapshots of lust and loss, but a landscape of desire, an open space. When driven to the edge of the world, pushed back by an army of state police cars, targeted by innumerable guns, the two women gaze again into the abyss--the mirror of wilderness: "Isn't it beautiful?" "Something else, all right," they said to each other.

As Thelma and Louise choose--rather than accept--their fate, they kiss, clasp hands, and head into even higher country. This fact suggests new comments by feminist activists. For them the film celebrates a "holy marriage" of females, transcending gender and even common humanity. Murphy sees Thelma and Louise and the Thunderbird hit out for mythic territory, as tragic and magnificent as Captain Ahab's odyssey when he finally plunges his harpoon into the White Whale. In *Thelma and Louise*, just before this passionate projection comes to an end, the Polaroid of two smiling girls on vacation that Louise shot many miles ago blows away in the wind "as insubstantial as a snake's outgrown skin," in Murphy's own words (29).

A wide range of opinions is available. Let me mention some comments by other critics who seem to defend a more "traditional" view in a male culture. An

example could be Asa Baber's opinion in *Playboy*. For him the film is an example of "guerrilla feminism":

As men, we are accustomed to being considered expendable in both war and peace. But the standard feminist celebration of male expendability is relatively new to us, and very difficult to handle, especially when, like all good guerrillas, its perpetrators deny their motivations. (45)

Baber thinks that the film is appealing at times, but it is also prejudiced and sexist at its core. Nevertheless, he thinks that the film faithfully represents our era, a time when feminists can be in the glory of their increasingly harsh sexism toward men, and even win Oscar nominations for it!!

In the same line, Richard Blake compares the film with the classic movie of cowboys and gangsters. Thelma and Louise reject society's moral norms and become a self-justifying law unto themselves. They accept vengeance as a way of life, especially if they can humiliate their adversaries in the process. In short, they have become parodies of men. For Richard Johnson the film justifies armed robbery, manslaughter and chronic drunken driving as exercises in raising awareness. He thinks the film "is degrading to men, with pathetic stereotypes of testosterone-crazed behavior" (20).

Critical attacks are, as I have shown, of different slants. The American editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, James Bowman, thinks that it is time now in Hollywood for the romantic version of the Tough Woman myth as in *The Magnificent Seven* or *Easy Rider* in the sixties. (He means by "The Myth" Hollywood's continual retelling of what it assumes is a paradigmatic tale of our times). Ridley Scott's film is, in Bowman's opinion, the *Easy Rider* of the nineties. Typically in these latest retellings of The Myth, women deal with male sexual abuse by killing the men.

John Leo writes about toxic feminism on the big screen. He considers the film a "quite small-hearted, extremely toxic film, about as morally and intellectually screwed up as a Hollywood movie can get" (20). Margaret Carlson asks: "Is this what Feminism is all about?" And she goes on: "By playing out a male fantasy, *Thelma and Louise* shows Hollywood is still a man's world" (57).

Comments on the film were common in USA in the summer of 1991. I have tried to show the controversy raised by the film more than just assume a particular point of view. It is time to come to an end with a more personal point of view. Let me start by saying that *Thelma and Louise* may not even represent a trend in movie making. Controversy is not a big seller for Hollywood. Furthermore Arnold Schwarzenegger, Kevin Costner or Al Pacino do not need to be worried about films with female stars. Susan Sarandon or Geena Davis, for example, are neither shadowing their ubiquitous faces off magazine covers for long, nor taking their places as reigning kings of films. Undermined white male liberalism is not in danger from gun-toting waitresses and housewives. Still, the controversy surrounding this movie is symptomatic. Especially, as Elayne Rapping pointed out, because it is *not* an explicitly feminist



movie. It simply takes for granted certain things first expressed by feminists, which now, apparently, are part of an oppositional way of thinking shared by a majority of women and lots of men.

As I have shown, the reactions of the mainstream press to the film have ranged from discussions of whether or not it portrays the existence of a feminism turned "toxic," to the sounding of alarms over the film's catalytic possibilities for general female revolt. It has been praised extravagantly for redressing grievances in the battle of the sexes, and it has been denounced as just another strident feminist polemic that reduces all its male characters to cartoon monsters. Is it an example of reverse sexism? Whose rules are *Thelma and Louise* playing by? Without any doubt, it is one of those films that demonstrates how culture is always a site of conflict, in which various social groups struggle to control its meaning and use.

In conclusion, I would say that there is always a "Movie of the Moment" which sometimes proves a lasting achievement. *Thelma and Louise*, Ridley Scott's film based on the screenplay by Callie Khouri, a former pop-music video producer, was the film of the summer of 1991 in the USA. The film has been described as a combination of road movie, (female) buddy picture, and crime-spree film, as if these were three separate genres, whereas, because of the customary overlapping, they are more like one and a half. It has also been considered as a feminist film, and a new achievement in defense of women's rights by suggesting the inadequacy of the law.

I could continue talking about different reactions and comments in the USA, but more time and space would be needed. This brief outline may serve as an example of how cinema and society are connected. The debate raised by the film is, for the most part, focused on interwoven, unresolved questions about gender and genre. Most women find it cathartic and affirming. Most men respond differently. Their reactions fall somewhere on a scale from mild discomfort to hysterical outrage.

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