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HOLLYWOOD INVESTS IN OLIVIA AND CHLOE

Thelma and Louise, MGM/Pathé 1991, directed by Ridley Scott.

In 1928 Virginia Woolf wrote of her narrator reading:

> "Chloe liked Olivia," I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature ... almost without exception [women] are shown in their relation to men ... Suppose ... that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers.
>
> (Woolf, 78-79)

Thelma and Louise is a text which does reverse this paradigm to represent men only in their relation to women and takes the friendship of two women as its central premise. Thelma and Louise plan a weekend together fishing in the mountains, an escape from the confinements of their lives and, by implication, from patriarchy. Their journey begins with anticipation and excitement as they load their gear into Louise's sparkling T-Bird. There is laughing and singing, joking and sunshine and a sense of exhilaration and collaboration in their escape. In the evening, at Thelma's insistence, they stop at a nightclub where the girls just want to have fun. Thelma dances with a local Casanova, about whom the waitress warns the two women. When Thelma starts feeling sick he takes her outside for fresh air and, after she rejects his sexual advances, starts to rape her on a car bonnet. Louise appears on the scene with a gun aimed at the man, telling him to "Let her go." The pistol, which Thelma has gingerly included in her luggage, was bought for her by her husband because she was so often left alone at night. She preferred not to touch it, let alone learn to use it. The man allows Thelma to go but will not move, and the two women retreat. When he abuses them, saying he should have raped her anyway, Louise shoots him.

This scene establishes the central problem with which the narrative must deal: what should Thelma and Louise do now? The rape scene is dark, quick, aggressive and shown to be unjust. The aggressor's death seems like poetic justice; the killing is a spontaneous reaction, entirely justifiable in the heat of the moment. Although this justice is later questioned in the film, the guilt of the rapist is not.

Thelma wants to go straight to the police but Louise points out that she was seen drinking and dancing with the man all night. She had been warned about him by the waitress, and had accepted his attentions fully cognisant of the situation: she would be judged as having asked for it. Besides, they were the only witnesses to the crime; they would never be believed. Louise's logic both articulates the inadequacies of the legal system in relation to women and, at the same time, accepts it. On this premise, the rest of the film charts the women's attempted negotiation of the country, the law, and the men with whom they come into contact.

Thelma and Louise can be read in several ways and has provoked a broad range of responses. As a conservative work, it keeps in place the status quo by filming the journey as a Hollywood "buddy" or "road" movie, replete with car chases at high speed, robberies, picking up sexual partners for casual sex, vast armies of police cars and helicopters, against epic scenery in Death Valley and the Grand Canyon. This female inversion of the genre means the women take upon themselves the worst elements of patriarchy — violence, exploitation, intimidation, the phallic power of the gun.

The film could also be read as an imaginary scenario about the effects feminism will have on American society. In this reading it remains conservative, deflecting and dispersing the motivating force of the women's oppression into an adventurous journey that is, in the end, a futile resistance against patriarchy.

As an attempt to inject feminism into mainstream popular cinema, however, *Thelma and Louise* could be regarded as subversive. Its strengths include the portrayal of female friendship, the freedom the women find and enjoy away from their oppressed lives, Thelma's sexual awakening with J.D., and their power to make choices about their lives. It is limited by its ending, in which Thelma and Louise are shown ambiguously flying into the air in the (now battered) T-Bird over the edge of the Grand Canyon, having decided to die rather than submit to the authorities. The ending contains a moment of optimism, in the freedom of flying and their choice to do this, but overall it must be pessimistic in the implication of death. It

is reminiscent of century-old fiction like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, in which Edna Pontellier's awakened freedom cannot be contained within the existing social system: her only way out is through an inevitable, although textually absent, death.

One interesting aspect of the film is its relation between gender and the gaze as seen in its alignment of audience and camera. While we follow the antics of these rebellious heroines, they are also conscious of their own presence as females "to be looked at." Thelma tries out numerous poses at the start of the journey, pretending to smoke, looking at herself in the side-view mirror while the camera films from the position of the mirror. Louise takes a polaroid snapshot of them on the threshold of their journey, which becomes the still used in advertisements for the film. When Thelma commits armed robbery she is recorded on a hidden video, which is replayed in her home to her husband and the horde of police waiting there. Mirrors constantly reflect multiple images in the motel rooms and the car. There is a great deal of narcissism in the heroines' antics, as well as the sense that they are always being watched, not only through the devices just mentioned, but in their tracking by the police, and also by the audience, who are invited to watch what happens when two females try to operate outside the law.

Watching is the operative word here. The feminist film theorist, Mary-Ann Doane, regards narcissism as a basic organisational structure for female spectatorship. This is particularly the case in what she terms the paranoid scenario —

> an instance of the disturbance of the division between subject and object ... and one which bears a particular relation to the specular ... As paranoid *texts*, the films become the occasion for a sustained investigation of the woman's investment in structures of looking and her relation to her "own" image.
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> (Jacobs, 59-60)

If *Thelma and Louise* can be read in these terms, then the organisation of both male and female spectatorship is specifically directed at watching these two female characters rather than identifying with them. As part of this process, there is some disturbance of the division between subject and object. For example, women are now also the subjects of this traditionally male-dominated "road" movie, rather than solely objects along the way.

Thelma's and Louise's access to car mirrors enables them to observe people and places without actually looking directly at them. This device is especially effective when Thelma watches J.D.'s swagger; but mirrors, like cameras, are also mediators of a gaze.

The women's visual transformation during the film could also indicate a negotiation of specular structures, altering the way in which the characters will be appraised. Thelma begins the story in a denim and lace off-the-shoulder dress, with long curly hair, and ends it in jeans and cut-off denim shirt, hair back in a plait, though still beguilingly over her eyes. Louise's smart but prim style, hair up in a bun, becomes more casual in jeans and singlet with her hair down. There is a curious scene in which Louise, alone in the car, looks over to a house where two sad old women sit at the window looking out at her. Louise appears uncomfortable under their gaze, but when she looks in the mirror to apply lipstick she suddenly changes her mind and throws the lipstick away. Both are seen to discard their respective social styles, like the lipstick and the jewelry Louise swaps for a hat. But in favour of what? Is it a more "masculine" kind of dressing? Or perhaps a country style, to reflect their changed circumstances and environment? Maybe this more casual mode of dress invites vicarious identification by female spectators in what is finally signalled as a fantasy or even a warning.

The alternative to identifying with Thelma and Louise, is to invest our sympathies with the "good cop." He is a fatherly figure who almost succeeds in persuading Louise to give themselves up, and is eager to "protect" them from other, less sensitive, members of the police force. He even runs after their car in the last scene, still trying to save them. This character is instrumental in offering one of the possible endings to the plot. He could have saved them, turned the last half of the film into a court room drama and either got them off the hook, found a compromise (like pleading insanity), or established a precedent case in which there is hope of transforming the legal system. Alternatively, Thelma and Louise could have reached Mexico, their driving goal, and survived outside the boundaries of American law.

The actual ending does have heroic proportions in one sense: in being captured before they come crashing down to their deaths, they are made eternal, flying off into the sunset and off the screen. They are seen to die for their cause in true hero fashion. But then, one of the criticisms of Dale Spender's anthology, *Heroines*, is that it neglects any critique of the very idea of heroisms. I guess this would be too much to ask of

Hollywood, though, and perhaps we are meant to be grateful for even a gratuitous exposure of feminism in mainstream cinema, even if it is an outdated feminism in which women are still victims with no way out alive.

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