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“Chick Flicks” as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in *Thelma & Louise*

Brenda Cooper

Through an explication of the female gazes underlying the narrative structure of the 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*, this study suggests explanations for the movie's wide appeal among women spectators. The film's female gazes undercut and appropriate the dominant male gazes typical of mainstream Hollywood cinema by using mockery as a narrative device to illustrate the sexism inherent in the male gaze, and it is precisely this appropriation of patriarchal construction that offers pleasure to women spectators. Three narrative devices structuring the film's mockery are explicated: stereotypes of lecherous and testosterone-crazed men; depicting men as spectacles for women's attention; and the celebration of women's friendships. The result of the devices of mockery is a strong female gaze that challenges, resists and defies patriarchy, and opens the film's text to a feminist reading.

When *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991) hit cinemas in the summer of 1991, it was met simultaneously with harsh criticism as well as enthusiastic acclaim by women spectators. In the years since its release, *Thelma & Louise* has generated such acclaim and controversy that *Premiere* magazine called it one of 10 movies that have “defined our decade” (“10 movies,” 1997, p. 63). The story of two women forced into a series of crimes and victimized by a series of men along the way, *Thelma & Louise* was denounced by some women critics for the “lunatic” portrayal of its female protagonists. Sheila Benson's scathing review in the *Los Angeles Times* described the movie as nothing more than “bloody, sadistic or explosive revenge for the evils men do,” and asked her readers: “Are we so starved for ‘strong’ women's roles that this revenge, and the pell-mell, lunatic flight that follows, fits anyone's definition of strength, or even more peculiarly, of neo-feminism?” (1991, p. 1). Gossip columnist Liz Smith warned viewers not to “send any impressionable young women to see ‘Thelma and Louise’ ” (cited in Shapiro, 1991, p. 63). And Margaret Carlson of *Time* argued that the movie represented a betrayal of the values of feminism, and said the underlying message of *Thelma & Louise* is that for women, “little ground has been won. For these two women, feminism

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never happened. . . . They become free but only wildly, self-destructively so" (1991, p. 57). Carlson conceded, however, that in spite of the film's flaws, "*Thelma & Louise* is a movie with legs. . . . [N]ext time a woman passes an 18-wheeler and points her finger like a pistol at the tires, the driver might just put his tongue back in his mouth where it belongs" (p. 57).

For many female critics, the film's depiction of sexism and the marginalization women experience in their everyday lives represented an affirmation of women's strength and a justification of their anger. Kathi Maio of *Ms.*, for example, applauded the film for its "powerful images of women who dare to feel anger against male violence and domination" (1991, p. 84); and *Glamour's* Charla Krupp cheered *Thelma & Louise* as a "cathartic revenge fantasy" for women (1991, p. 142). Indeed, the movie's "revenge plot" seems to be the aspect that women critics found most appealing. "Men are always behaving so badly in real life that you should never underestimate a woman's satisfaction in seeing them get their just desserts on screen," wrote Anne Billson in her *New Statesman & Society* review (1991, p. 33). "Men have no idea how annoying they can be," she continued, fantasizing about her own revenge against harassing workmen (p. 33). "Putting men in their place" also was appreciated, said Rita Kempley of the *Washington Post*, because this kind of movie plot offers a woman's point-of-view rare in mainstream Hollywood: "This liberating adventure has a woman's perspective. . . . Bumper-sticker sassy and welcome as a rest stop, this is one sweet ride, worth hitching if you don't mind getting your hair blown" (1991, p. B6). *Newsweek's* Laura Shapiro agreed: "Among women moviegoers, 'Thelma & Louise' has tapped a passion that hasn't had a decent outlet since the '70s, when the women's movement was in flower" (1991, p. 63).

Feminist film scholar Patricia Mellencamp was not surprised that *Thelma & Louise* "struck a social chord," explaining that depicting women "[e]scaping the trap of 'happily ever after' and all that 'once upon a time'" frees women spectators from the "expectations and limitations" of the fairy tales women are "taught to make of our lives" (1995, p. 8). Thus, watching *Thelma and Louise* "leave femininity, rely on friendship, and achieve fearlessness" is empowering for women spectators (Mellencamp, p. 117). Other film scholars concurred, such as Jane Ussher, who wrote that *Thelma & Louise* appealed to women because it represented an "explicit subversion of traditional representations of a narrow feminine role" in Hollywood films (1997, p. 125). Karen Hollinger attributed the film's

appeal for women to its "expression of women's anger and frustration" in regards to "contemporary U.S. society and its treatment of its female members" (1998, pp. 122; 125). And Lisa Hogeland argued that the film's appeal for women resides in its similarity to the consciousness-raising narratives evident in women's novels during the 1970s, which strived to "name the unnameable" and contained the "political burden of speaking the realities of women's lives" (1998, p. 159), particularly in terms of women's resentment over the inequities inherent in a patriarchal society.

But it wasn't just women critics and feminist scholars who found the film's themes and the plight of Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) relevant to their lived experiences. Taking a stand against harassment and intimidation is an idea that apparently resonates with many women throughout American society. Consider the four women walking down a Chicago street the summer of the film's release who responded to the "cat calls" of harassing men by aiming imaginary guns at the men's heads and shouting: "Thelma and Louise hit Chicago" (Shapiro, 1991, p. 63). In a similar incident that summer, two women reacted to several men spewing out lewd suggestions and threats by yelling, "Where are Thelma and Louise when you need them?" (Goodman, 1991, p. 8A). Indeed, being "thelmad and louised" became a pop culture phrase for violent action after the film's release (Mellencamp, 1995, p. 8). Texan Cathy Bell identified so strongly with the movie ("It was like seeing my life played out before my eyes," she said) that she was motivated to divorce her "redneck control freak" husband (cited in Schickel, 1991, p. 52). Clearly, the box-office hit was empowering for many women, and Susan Sarandon, who played Louise, understood these kinds of reactions from women, explaining that *Thelma & Louise* represented "a little bit of every woman's rage and rebellion" (cited in Dwyer, 1993, p. 39).

Aside from some dissenting voices, *Thelma & Louise* was an overwhelming hit among women spectators and critics, with most women experiencing the film as "cathartic and affirming" (Maio, 1991, p. 82). The enthusiastic responses from many women spectators reflect far more than women simply enjoying "revenge for the evils men do" (Benson, 1991, p. 1). Further, women's strong endorsements of the movie's protagonists challenge charges that the film betrays feminism (Carlson, 1991). Rather, I argue that the movie's popularity with women can be explained through an explication of the film's alternative cinematic gazes that challenge and resist patriarchal construction, opening the film's text to a feminist reading and offering women unique spectatorship possibilities. The result is a

subversive narrative that effectively negates complaints that *Thelma and Louise's* freedom is self-destructive and that male dominance is reaffirmed in screenwriter Callie Khouri's controversial screenplay.

My study examines how *Thelma & Louise* turned the tables on traditional Hollywood chauvinism, appropriating for its female protagonists as well as for its female viewers the male gaze that Hollywood films have long used to subjugate, objectify, and trivialize women. Before moving to the discussion of the female gazes structuring the narratives in *Thelma & Louise* and a development of the film as a feminist text, the following section provides a conceptual framework for explicating these subversive gazes within film narratives.

Female Gazes as Strategies of Resistance

In her seminal 1975 work, Laura Mulvey asserted that the dominant male gazes in mainstream Hollywood films reflect and satisfy the male unconscious: most filmmakers are male, thus the voyeuristic gaze of the camera is male; male characters in the film's narratives make women the objects of their gaze; and inevitably, the spectator's gaze reflects the voyeuristic male gazes of the camera and the male actors. The result is film narratives that marginalize women and encourage spectator identification with male protagonists. Consequently, Mulvey argued that the patriarchal hegemony dominating Hollywood makes impossible a female gaze free of male constructs, and a feminist voice can only be found in counter-culture cinema. Although Ussher (1997) agreed that the "masculine gaze," which "reifies the social position of 'man' within the traditional script of heterosexuality—the position of power, authority and sexualized control over 'woman' " still dominates mainstream Hollywood films, she argued that just as women have resisted the "Prince Charming" fairy tales of our culture, they have actively "reformulated and resisted the archetypal 'masculine gaze' " in cinema (pp. 85-86).

Indeed, Lorraine Gamman (1989) argued that women spectators may reject the male gaze and, instead, identify with a female gaze they "read" in mainstream media narratives. Further, Gamman stated that Mulvey's work (1975), as well as other psychoanalytical investigations of women's media experiences (e.g., Metz, 1975/1982), do not conceptualize female sexuality adequately, nor do their arguments accommodate how other identification aspects such as race and class may affect the ways in which viewers identify with film characters: "[J]ust how useful is the [psychoana-

lytic] theory for studying female spectatorship if it cannot adequately formulate the significance of the active female experience except in terms that assume a masculine position in language” (p. 24). Similarly, Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca (1990) asserted that feminist film research that concentrates on “male paradigms and male pleasure, even if only to challenge them, may simply miss the mark if our goal is to understand and affirm our own pleasure” (p. 124).

Gamman’s (1989) and Arbuthnot and Seneca’s (1990) arguments mirror those of Gaylyn Studlar (1990), who stated that psychoanalytical theories result in conceptually narrow and theoretically abstract accounts of female subjectivity that cannot adequately address the “complexities of female experience with the cinema” (p. 74). Judith Mayne (1993) agreed, pointing out that Christian Metz’s psychoanalytical work lacks any feminist perspective (p. 52), and that rather than limiting studies of spectatorship to psychoanalytical investigations, what is most crucial is understanding what Mayne refers to as the “paradoxes of spectatorship” (pp. 77-102). Jackie Stacey (1991) concurred, asserting that spectator identification research needs to transcend its reliance on psychoanalytic theory in order to examine the cultural and social dimensions that contribute to how spectators produce identification and subsequent meaning with film texts, even appropriating patriarchal film narratives. In fact, Mulvey’s later work (1989) addressed the problems of approaching spectatorship from her earlier perspective, explaining that it limited researchers to an “either/or” polarization of the male gaze versus the female object of the gaze, and opened itself to constant skepticism that all female film roles reinforce patriarchal forms of spectator identity: “There is a sense in which this argument, important as it is for analysing the existing state of things, hinders the possibility of change and remains caught ultimately within its own dualistic terms” (p. 162).¹

In her articulation of a female gaze, Gamman (1989) argued that through the use of female protagonists and women-centered themes, for instance, media narratives may resist patriarchal construction by appropriating the male gaze, representing instead a female gaze that “articulates *mockery of machismo*” (p. 15). As a narrative strategy, mockery expresses a “coherent, if not controlling, female gaze” that effects “a fissure in the representation of power itself” (Gamman, p. 15), thus disrupting male dominance. For example, in the television series *Cagney & Lacey*, the female gaze is developed from the point of view of Christine Cagney (Sharon Gless) and Mary Beth Lacey (Tyne Daly), who articulate this

challenging gaze through “witty put-downs of male aspirations for total control” (p. 15). Gamman explained that Isbecki—the series’ “macho bore” male character—represents a “conscious narrative device employed to illustrate sexism in the workplace,” but his sexism is subverted through a female gaze that mocks his macho behaviors (Gamman, p. 15). This “playfulness” of the female gaze disrupts rather than assumes dominance in the narratives, and illustrates in a “witty and amusing way why the male gaze is sexist,” inviting spectators to join the mockery of sexism (Gamman, p. 16). Significantly, Gless and Daly are not merely passive objects for male voyeurism: “[T]hey ‘speak’ female desire. *They look back*” (p. 16).

Another strategy Gamman (1989) discussed that co-opts the male gaze in media narratives is the depiction of “ideas of female friendship and solidarity” because these images constitute an “overall female perspective”—a female gaze (p. 12). For example, media depictions of women’s friendships generally reflect the “ubiquitous male gaze of classic Hollywood cinema” where women are not shown as friends, but as competitors and rivals, both in the workplace and in relationships with men (Gamman, p. 13). As an exception to these competitive female relationships, Gamman again cited the characters from *Cagney & Lacey*, because these women were partners, not rivals, and enjoyed a close personal friendship.

Similarly, in their feminist reading of the 1953 movie, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, starring Marilyn Monroe (Lorelei) and Jane Russell (Dorothy), Arbuthnot and Seneca (1990) demonstrated that film narratives depicting women as friends rather than rivals can be read as representing a text that resists patriarchal definition and male objectification. They argued that despite the “superficial story of heterosexual romance” (p. 113) in this movie, the romantic escapades of the film’s characters are “continually disrupted and undermined” (p. 116) by a more central text that is articulated through the women’s resistance to male objectification and their connection to each other. The result is a “feminist text which both denies men pleasure to some degree, and more importantly, celebrates women’s pleasure in each other” (p. 113). For instance, although Monroe and Russell are certainly “spectacles for male attention,” they “return the look,” actively invading male space and making the male characters “spectacles” for women’s attention; in so doing, they refuse to yield to the male gaze (p. 116): “By becoming active themselves, they make it impossible for men to act upon them. They are actors and initiators in their relations with men” (p. 117).

Further, Arbuthnot and Seneca (1990) illustrated how the celebration of the women's "strength and connection to each other" also subverts the "objectifying male gaze" (p. 119):

Russell and Monroe neither accept the social powerlessness of women nor the imperative of a primary allegiance to men. Instead, they emanate strength and power, and celebrate their primary allegiance to each other. The friends' feelings for each other supersede their more superficial connections with men. (p. 119)

Like Gless and Daly's friendship in *Cagney & Lacey*, the friendship between Monroe and Russell lacks the "competitiveness, envy, and pettiness" typical of Hollywood narratives about women's relationships (p. 120). And although Arbuthnot and Seneca did not focus on the mockery in the film's narratives, they nonetheless point out that the depiction of some of the male characters as "ludicrous sap[s]" (p. 119) is a strategy to further subvert the male gaze, which fits Gamman's (1989) conception of mockery as a resistance strategy.

Such images represent important shifts in ideology from mainstream Hollywood films and are particularly appealing to women spectators because the focus is on "female *activity* rather than on female *sexuality*," and on narratives embedded in "general philosophies about meaning *spoken* through the female protagonists" (Gamman, 1989, pp. 19, 21). This, in turn, provides new opportunities for female spectatorship. It is important to note, however, that neither Gamman nor Arbuthnot and Seneca (1990) are suggesting that a female gaze can be achieved by simple role reversals, nor does a female gaze completely replace the dominant male gaze of mainstream Hollywood. Rather, these scholars are suggesting ways in which female gazes privileging women's perspectives are able to "cohabit the space" occupied by the male gaze, while simultaneously subverting the dominant gaze within mainstream conventions (Gamman, p. 16). Again disagreeing with Mulvey (1975), Gamman asserted that a female gaze can be "articulated in the context of masculinist ideologies" (p. 18) as the gaze negotiates "hierarchies of discourse about 'masculinity' and 'femininity' within the narrative itself" from a "feminist sub-text" that "alters the dynamics" of power relations between women and men (p. 16). Similarly, Arbuthnot and Seneca asserted: "It is the tension between male objectification of women, and women's resistance to that objectification,

that opens *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* to a feminist reading. It is the clear and celebrated connection between Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell which, for us, transforms *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* into a profoundly feminist text" (p. 123).

Like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Cagney & Lacey*, *Thelma & Louise* is a product of mainstream Hollywood and its patriarchal environment. In explaining her goals for *Thelma & Louise*, screenwriter Callie Khouri said she was "fed up with the passive role of women" (cited in Simpson, 1991, p. 55) and their predominant depictions in Hollywood movies as "bimbos, whores and nagging wives" (cited in Rohter, 1991, p. C24). "I'm a feminist," Khouri explained, "so clearly it [film] is going to have my point of view" (cited in Rohter, p. C21). Khouri wanted to write a screenplay in which the women characters were not compromised, in order to counter a Hollywood environment that doesn't "really want to see women operating outside the boundaries that are prescribed for them" (cited in Simpson, p. 55). Her screenplay was structured specifically to challenge these patriarchal boundaries—both cinematically and societally—and in turn, the film presents spectators with narratives and alternative gazes that encourage viewers to feel through the "female figures on screen" (Clover, 1991, p. 22): in other words, to identify with women who resist the sexism prevalent in Hollywood and American society. "Usually women enjoy a movie in spite of themselves, not because it's made for them," Khouri explained (cited in Krupp, 1991, p. 142). Women critics appreciated Khouri's attention to a female perspective: "The most revelatory aspect of this film is its unmistakably female point of view, and a tractor-trailer thundering by their car evokes a truth known to every woman" (Shapiro, 1991, p. 63). Others, such as Billson (1991), expressed astonishment that more movies don't offer similar spectatorship options for women: "Hollywood films are about adolescent male wish fulfillment. You wonder why more filmmakers can't see the vast untapped audience of women panting for some wish fulfillment of their own" (p. 33).

The following section discusses the specific strategies explicated from *Thelma & Louise* that articulate female gazes and structure the mockery within the film's narratives, thus presenting audiences with new spectatorship possibilities, particularly for women. The analysis of the female gazes directs this feminist critique of *Thelma & Louise* away from the ways the film's narrative "affords pleasure or denies pleasure, to men," and turns us instead toward ways in which women gain pleasure from the film (Arbuthnot & Seneca, 1990, p. 123). The discussion will demonstrate how

mainstream films “can facilitate a dominant female gaze and a route whereby feminist meanings can be introduced in order to disturb the status quo” (Gamman, 1989, p. 12). As Arbuthnot and Seneca argued, “it is time to move beyond the analysis of male pleasure in viewing classical narrative films, in order to destroy it, to an exploration of female pleasure, in order to enhance it” (p. 123).

Thelma & Louise as a Feminist Text

Female gazes are developed in the narrative structure of *Thelma & Louise* in three key areas: 1) resistance to male objectification and dominance, as articulated through the protagonists’ mockery of the key male characters—Darryl, Thelma’s emotionally abusive husband; the film’s law enforcement officers; the leering truck driver; and Harlan, the would-be rapist; 2) “returning the look” by making men spectacles for women’s attention, particularly J.D., the sexy, hitchhiking con-man; and 3), the celebration of women friendships. Significantly, the female gazes in each area are constructed through the agency granted to Thelma and Louise, thus presenting spectators with narratives that challenge the “traditional cinematic association of activity with masculinity” (Hollinger, p. 1998, p. 122).

Macho Men vs. Wild Women

The most obvious development of a female gaze as mockery of male dominance and sexism in *Thelma & Louise* is articulated through the exaggerated and stereotypical deceptions of the film’s macho male characters. It is precisely the “witty and amusing” (Gamman, 1989, p. 16) exaggerations of the men’s chauvinist attitudes and behaviors that function as narrative devices to encourage spectators’ participation in the humorous ridicule of these characters’ blatant sexism and misogyny. For example, in an opening scene in which Thelma is working up the courage to ask her husband Darryl for permission to take the weekend trip with Louise, she stalls by first asking if he’d like “anything special” for dinner. While Darryl continues to primp his overmoussed hair, he chastises Thelma as if she were a child: “I don’t give a shit what we have for dinner. I may not even make it home for dinner. You know how Fridays are.” When Thelma responds—“Funny how so many people want to buy carpet on a Friday night”—spectators know that Thelma is passively mocking her philandering husband for assuming she’s naive enough to believe his story about

working late. This scene encourages spectators to share Thelma's gaze and participate in her mockery, making it easy to laugh when Darryl slips and falls while getting into his bright red Corvette convertible (a macho symbol in itself).

As Darryl continues to be an easy target for mockery throughout the film, spectators also witness Thelma's growing feminist consciousness, as her simple awareness of the demeaning way her husband treats her progresses to anger toward Darryl specifically, as well as toward broader issues of sexism in society.² Consider Darryl's responses to Thelma's telephone call after she and Louise become fugitives. As the scene opens, viewers see Darryl stretched out in a recliner watching a football game on a big-screen television, surrounded by bags of snack food, wearing gold necklaces and bracelets with his mismatched shorts and muscle shirt. Despite the fact that he returned to an empty house and has no idea where Thelma is, Darryl tells her to "hold on," and finishes watching a play on the football game before ordering his wife to, "Get your ass back here, Thelma, now, goddamnit!" When Thelma reminds Darryl that "You're my husband, not my father," Darryl explodes: "Oh no! That Louise is nothing but a bad influence. If you're not back here tonight, Thelma, well then . . . I just don't wanna say." Everything Darryl says and does in this scene functions as a narrative device to set the stage for spectators to cheer when Thelma retorts—"Darryl, go fuck yourself"—and hangs up on her husband. And in a later scene, viewers see Darryl, still dressed in his shorts and gold chains, step in the pizza he left on the floor, an action that even elicits laughter from the visiting police officer.

Much of the effectiveness of these scenes in encouraging spectators to join in the mockery stems from Darryl's representation as a man overtly confident that he is smart and sexy, although spectators know better. For spectators, there's a sense of vicariousness, or voyeurism—of knowing something about Darryl of which he is completely unaware and participating in making fun of him. We're encouraged to see Darryl as an unsympathetic jerk, not as a character to identify with, a depiction that challenges the male cinematic gaze (Mulvey, 1975).

Law enforcement officers have long been targets for stereotypical depictions of males in film, and *Thelma & Louise* takes full advantage of these macho stereotypes. Consider the Highway Patrol officer who pulls Louise over for speeding. Before he says anything, his meticulous uniform, aviator shades and macho stride cue spectators that this guy is on a real power trip, and if we had any doubts, they disappear when Louise clues us

in—"Oh my God, he's a Nazi." His macho demeanor dissolves into whimpers and sniveling, however, when Thelma and Louise disarm him, destroy his police radio and order him out of his cruiser and into the car's trunk. Before locking him in the truck and throwing away his keys, the women take not only his gun and additional ammunition, but also the beer they find in the cruiser's trunk; as a final insult, Louise trades her sunglasses for the patrolman's aviator shades.

A female gaze is developed in this scene not only through the mockery of a "masculinised notion of power" (Gamman, 1989, p. 15) exemplified by the state trooper, but also through the agency accorded to our protagonists. As Hogeland (1998) explained, from the time Thelma points her gun at the officer, she appropriates "discourses of patriarchal pronouncement" (p. 159) and power by the way she parodies the officer's language. For example, the officer's command to Louise—"You wanna step out of the car, please"—is parodied by Thelma when she politely tells the officer, "You wanna step into the trunk, please?" As the officer climbs in his trunk, Thelma responds to his tearful pleas that he has a wife and children by warning him, "Be sweet to them. Especially your wife. My husband wasn't sweet to me. Look how I turned out." With this response, Thelma has not only parodied the cop's plea for mercy (Hogeland, 1998), but spectators also are reminded of the condescending way Darryl treated his wife. Thus, mockery as a strategy of resistance operates on two levels: the "witty and amusing way" (Gamman, 1989, p. 16) that the male characters' sexism is depicted, and the resistance of the two women who outsmart some of the ultimate symbols of patriarchal authority.

Although not developed as thoroughly as some of the other male characters, the arrogance and obvious ineptitude of Max, the FBI officer, further perpetuates audience identification with the film's "mockery of machismo" (Gamman, 1989, p. 15). Max is the epitome of the power-tripping, ineffectual—and sexist—male authority figure. Max's explanation to Darryl about how to keep Thelma on the telephone long enough to trace her calls, illustrates his condescending attitude toward women: "Just be gentle. You know, like you're happy to hear from her. Like you really miss her. Women love that shit." Thelma is not so easily duped. She immediately sees through Darryl's uncharacteristic sweetness when he answers the phone, and hangs up, thwarting Max's attempts to trace her call. "He knows," she tells Louise. The challenge to Max's authority continues throughout the film as Thelma and Louise effectively evade his efforts to capture them. And when he finally catches up with the women,

Max has called out helicopters and an army of police officers to capture these two "armed and dangerous" criminals. The ultimate insult to Max and his patriarchal position, however, is that despite his battalions of officers with guns and rifles aimed at Thelma and Louise, in the end, the women still evade him and render both his authority and the legal system impotent when they drive off the cliff.

Perhaps no male character better exemplifies the film's witty mockery of sexism than the leering truck driver who Thelma and Louise repeatedly encounter as they flee toward Mexico. From the first time spectators see this man flicking his tongue obscenely at the women and gesturing to his lap, women viewers can identify with our protagonists. Like Darryl, the trucker's sexism is exaggerated precisely to encourage spectators to share Thelma and Louise's perspective and to participate in their mockery of this character. He may call himself the "storm trooper of love," but spectators know that he's really just another sexist jerk. In fact, from a woman's perspective, the man has no redeeming qualities, making it easy to appreciate the way Thelma and Louise confront him in one of the most talked-about scenes from the movie. After repeatedly being subjected to his lecherous behavior on the road, the two women decide to teach the trucker a lesson. When he yells to them—"You girls ready for a big dick?"—Thelma and Louise instruct him to follow them and they pull off the road. The mockery continues as we watch the scruffy trucker remove his wedding ring, squirt breath freshener in his mouth, and swagger toward Thelma and Louise, confident of a sexual encounter. Sitting on top of Louise's convertible, guns tucked in their jeans, the women surprise the trucker by confronting him with his obnoxious behavior and demanding an apology instead. When the belligerent trucker responds to the women's demands for an apology by yelling, "Fuck you," and turns to walk away, Louise shoots out the tires of his 18-wheeler. Still unapologetic, the man yells at Louise, "You bitch!" Thelma and Louise exchange looks. "I don't think he's going to apologize," says Louise, and both women fire shots that turn the tanker truck into a ball of fire. As Thelma and Louise race away from the burning wreckage, congratulating each other on their sharp shooting, we hear the trucker scream over the noise: "You bitches. You bitches from hell." In a final indignity, Thelma retrieves the trucker's hat, emblematic of male machismo, and jams the trophy on her head.

Two things are particularly significant to the articulation of the female gaze in the protagonists' encounters with the trucker. First, witty and humorous "mockery of the lecherous" gaze (Gamman, 1989, p. 23) is used

as a strategy throughout the scenes, encouraging viewers to see the sexism inherent in the male gaze. Had the truck driver been less obnoxiously sexist, Thelma and Louise's actions—and spectators' enjoyment of them—may not have seemed justified. Just as important, the protagonists refuse to become the objects of the pervasive male gaze. Rather, they appropriate the gaze and, through the sexist actions of the trucker, encourage spectators to share their point of view. Thus, we can enthusiastically applaud the truck's explosion and laugh in appreciation when the trucker calls Thelma and Louise "bitches from hell." *New Statesman & Society* film critic Anne Billson (1991) agreed: "My favourite bit in *Thelma & Louise* is when the women act out the fantasies of millions of female filmgoers by teaching a truckdriver some manners. They do this by blowing up his truck, and he calls them 'bitches from hell.' If only real life were half so romantic" (p. 33).

When spectators are first introduced to Harlan, the would-be rapist, the film's structure also develops narratives that humorously mock sexism. His "pick-up" lines to Thelma in the Silver Bullet club are so juvenile and sexist—"Now, what are a couple of Kewpie dolls like you doing in a place like this?" and, "It's just hard not to notice two such pretty ladies as yourself"—that Harlan is depicted as comical. And when Louise and the night club waitress roll their eyes and exchange a "knowing" look in response to Harlan's crude flirting, spectators are encouraged to share that knowledge; women especially can participate vicariously in this mockery of Harlan. From the first words he utters, Harlan is presented to viewers as a chauvinistic, unsympathetic, and simultaneously laughable and dangerous character, a depiction that again challenges the male gaze that has dominated mainstream Hollywood films.

The night club scenes are constructed in such a way as to encourage spectators to feel ridicule for Harlan and empathy for naive Thelma. For instance, while spectators watch Harlan encourage Thelma to keep drinking, and then twirl her around on the dance floor, we know, even if Thelma doesn't, that Harlan is trying to get her drunk, and then "get lucky." The film's humorous mockery of Harlan shifts dramatically, however, when he takes advantage of Thelma's naive "drunken dance-floor flirtation" with him (Kempley, 1991, p. B6), and attempts to rape her. As spectators, our ridicule instantly turns to outrage when Harlan assaults Thelma and she tearfully fights off his attacks. When he strikes Thelma and calls her a "fucking bitch," Harlan functions as a narrative device,

symbolizing simultaneously “a lifetime’s worth of existential rape” of women (Murphy, 1991, p. 29), and the inequity of a societal system in which rape is often viewed by men as something that doesn’t really hurt women.³ The following scene when Louise walks out of the club and interrupts the assault represents both a woman’s perspective of sexual abuse and a challenge to myths about rape:

Louise: Let her go.

Harlan: Get the fuck out of here.

Louise presses a gun to Harlan’s head.

Louise: You let her go, you fucking asshole, or I’m going to splatter your ugly face all over this nice car.

Harlan releases Thelma and raises his arms defensively in the air.

Harlan: Now calm down. We were just having a little fun

Louise: Looks like you’ve got a fucked up idea of fun. . . . In the future, when a woman’s crying like that, she isn’t having any fun.

Thelma and Louise turn to walk away.

Harlan: Bitch. I should have gone ahead and fucked her.

Louise: What did you say?

Harlan: I said suck my cock.

Louise’s rage and subsequent response to the attempted rape and Harlan’s belligerent and unapologetic taunts—almost reflexively shooting and killing him—epitomize a female gaze: women can identify with the terror and outrage Thelma and Louise feel, and see Harlan through the protagonists’ eyes and experiences.⁴ This scene still makes a mockery of sexism, as well as debunking societal myths of rape, but humor is replaced by the harsh reality of male violence against women.

The inequities in a patriarchal system that often assume women ask to be raped because of their actions or dress are an underlying theme throughout the film, overtly challenging the blatant sexism and misogyny inherent in societal myths surrounding rape. For instance, when Thelma suggests that she and Louise should go to the police to report the assault, Louise explains: “Just about a hundred goddamn people saw you dancing cheek to cheek with him all night! Who’s going to believe that!? We just don’t live in that kind of a world, Thelma. Goddamnit!” Similar challenges

to rape myths and an unjust court system are articulated after Louise explains to an incredulous Thelma that they may be charged with murder:

Thelma: I'll say he raped me and you had to shoot him! That's almost the truth!

Louise: Won't work.

Thelma: Why not?!

Louise: Cause there's no physical evidence. We can't prove he did it. We can't even probably prove by now that he touched you.

Thelma: God. The law is some tricky shit, isn't it?

And toward the end of the film when Louise expresses regret for her decisions, Thelma reminds her why she made those decisions in the first place, a conversation that reflects Thelma's growing feminist consciousness:

Nobody would believe us. We'd still get in trouble. We'd still have our lives ruined. And you know what else? . . . That guy was hurting me. And if you hadn't come out when you did, he'd a hurt me a lot worse. And probably nothing would have happened to him. 'Cause everybody did see me dancing with him all night. They would have made out like I asked for it. My life would have been ruined a whole lot worse than it is now.

Further, Louise's implied familiarity with rape prosecution and her refusal to explain an earlier part of her life in Texas, encourage viewers to assume that Louise had been raped herself and that her rapist was not punished. Thus, the narratives function not only to challenge rape myths, but also the patriarchal justice system that turns victims of rape into the guilty parties: "The sheer surprise of *Thelma & Louise* is to have shown, in a way that serious films about the issue of rape (c.f., *The Accused*) could never show, how victims of sexual crimes are unaccountably placed in the position of the guilty ones, positioned as fair game for further attack" (Williams, 1991, p. 28). It is this recognition that women who are victimized by rapists are more often than not also victimized by a male-dominated legal system, that allows the women to view Harlan's murder as justified and in turn, to identify with the unapologetic Thelma when she declares—"And I'm not sorry that son of a bitch is dead. I'm only sorry that it was you that did it

and not me"—a statement that reveals Thelma's rage as she's progressed to the final stages of feminist consciousness.

Critics such as Benson (1991), who complained that in *Thelma & Louise* "men are drawn as cartoons for the express purpose of being toppled, fatally or otherwise," resulting in a movie that "reflects an awful contempt for men" (p. 1), or male critics such as Richard Johnson (1991), who charged that the film was "so degrading to men, with pathetic stereotypes of testosterone-crazed behavior, that Loews Theaters should ban it immediately" (p. 8),⁵ seem to be missing the irony of the film's use of mockery as a narrative device to expose sexism and its consequences for women in American society. The men in *Thelma & Louise* are "drawn as cartoons" that exhibit "pathetic stereotypes of testosterone-crazed behavior," but with a goal of demonstrating "why the male gaze is sexist" (Gamman, 1989, p. 16), not to represent "an awful contempt for men."⁶ Screenwriter Khouri defended the right of a woman to be just as angry and "bad as a man":

Films never deal with the incredible anger women feel about the victimization of their gender Many women feel anger when a baboon harasses them while walking down the street. We are expected to sublimate our humanity, to ignore; does that mean we don't feel it? If old fat women harassed young guys like that, things would be different. (cited in Krupp, 1991, p. 142)

The female gaze in the narratives of *Thelma & Louise* is not limited to the film's mockery of sexist male characters and the rape myths inherent in a patriarchal society. A woman's perspective, and its subsequent challenge to patriarchal construction, also is articulated through the active way Thelma and Louise assert their sexuality, an issue I discuss next.

Thelma and Louise "Return the Look"

Female gazes also are developed in *Thelma & Louise* through the active way the protagonists invade male space when they "return the look" (Arbutnot & Seneca, 1990, p. 116) and make the male characters objects for women's voyeurism. Like the protagonists from *Cagney & Lacey* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Thelma and Louise refuse to yield to the male gaze: they "'speak' female desire. *They look back*" (Gamman, 1989, p. 16). For example, in an early scene Louise defies objectification when she walks past a man at a convenience store and angrily confronts him: "What

are you looking at?" But making men spectacles for women's gaze is articulated most fully through the character played by Brad Pitt, J.D., the hitchhiking con man. From Thelma's first encounter with J.D., she openly expresses her admiration for his "cute butt" and pants suggestively when she tries to convince Louise to give J.D. a ride.

Significantly, J.D.'s character and Thelma's attraction to him function as narrative devices to represent Thelma's liberation from her former passivity, allowing her to become an assertive initiator and actor (Arbutnot & Seneca, 1990, p. 117) in her relations with men. Thelma's ultimate objectification of J.D. is represented in the pivotal scenes in which Thelma and J.D. have sex—Thelma's first satisfactory sexual experience. This scene generated much criticism from some feminists, such as Carlson (1991), who argued that showing Thelma jumping into bed with a stranger soon after she is nearly raped and her assailant killed sends a message that "the only thing an unhappy woman needs is good sex to make everything all right" (p. 57). Carlson further complained that, "It requires a breathtaking midair somersault of faith to believe Thelma would be eager to take up with another stranger so soon and would let him into her motel room and go limp with desire after he admits he robs convenience stores for a living" (p. 57). However, the sexual encounter can be read oppositionally, as the female gaze appropriating the male gaze. As Man (1993) argued, the episode represents empowering narratives for Thelma: "Not only does Thelma gain sexual liberation in her relationship with J.D.; she also gains the opportunity to play out his life story, to adopt a dominant male role when she performs her gun waving bandit act which J.D. taught her" (p. 41). Mellencamp (1995) agreed, observing that sex with J.D. is a liberating experience for Thelma because sex "is no longer a fantasy keeping Thelma captive or a secret key to identity" (p. 149).

From these readings, Thelma's decision to invite J.D. into her motel room can represent an expression of independence, as does her decision to use his knowledge about holdups to aid in their escape to Mexico. In other words, Thelma was simply exercising her right to make choices regarding her own sexual freedom and independence, and her determination to "finally understand what all the fuss is about." Thus, rather than being objectified by the men in the film, Thelma and Louise "'speak' female desire" (Gamman, 1989, p. 16), while simultaneously mocking Darryl's ineptitude that left Thelma sexually unfulfilled during years of marriage. Further, Louise is happy that her best friend has finally been "laid properly:" "Oh darlin', I'm so happy for you," Louise says appreciatively,

"That's great." Here the women's "girl talk" mocks standard male "locker room" bragging: Thelma and Louise appreciate and share the intimacy of Thelma's sexual awakening, bonding in a way that ridicules the macho bravado typical in media depictions of men's discussions about their sexual conquests.

The third strategy of resistance is developed through the film's representation of Thelma and Louise's friendship, a representation that further articulates female gazes as patriarchal resistance in the film's narratives. Men are extraneous, not central, to their lives.

"You're a part of me, I'm a part of you"

As Shapiro (1991) explained in her review of *Thelma & Louise*, "The simple but subversive truth is that neither woman needs a man to complete her" (p. 63). And although some women critics disagreed with her assessment (e.g., Carlson, 1991), foregrounding the "power of female bonds" (Arbuthnot & Seneca, 1990, p. 120) shared by Thelma and Louise, and their ultimate decision to choose each other over men—and even to die together—articulates a strong female gaze that challenges and defies patriarchal construction. For instance, the fact that Thelma and Louise are depicted as "bonding in a sisterhood that offers an alternative to their former male-centered lives" (Man, 1993, pp. 41-42) presents a major threat to patriarchy. Indeed, their bond is expressed in the film's soundtrack: "You're a part of me, I'm a part of you, wherever we may travel, whatever we go through" (Frey, 1991).

Structuring the film's narratives through the lens of Thelma and Louise's friendship is important for women spectators, not only because supportive female relationships that "pose a threat to patriarchy" are so rare in media (Arbuthnot & Seneca, 1990, p. 120; Gamman, 1989), but also because, like *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, the movie's "expression and celebration of women's strength and connection to each other" provide women with "opportunities for our own positive identification with women" in films (Arbuthnot & Seneca, p. 119). Further, because women tend to fulfill their interpersonal needs through relationships with other women (Chodorow, 1978), having such cinematic opportunities that validate and privilege women's connection with each other encourages spectators' identification with the film's female protagonists (Arbuthnot & Seneca). This is where the narratives of *Thelma & Louise* vary dramatically from most mainstream Hollywood feature films: as in *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, the narratives foreground Thelma and Louise's connection

to each other, not to other men. Further, there are no strong male characters in the film with whom viewers might identify in the objectification of women (Arbuthnot & Seneca); rather, throughout the movie, the male characters are either left behind, objectified themselves, defied, ridiculed, or even murdered, presenting a significant challenge to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975).

From the beginning of the film, when Thelma decides to go with Louise on a weekend trip to “teach Jimmy a lesson” rather than to stay at home with Darryl (or ask his permission to leave), spectators sense that their connection to each other is more important than any connection to the men in their lives. The film’s narratives and the visual images create a celebration of the women and their shared relationship. The looks exchanged between the two protagonists—beginning with the playful Polaroid self-snapshot as they begin their weekend—convey a clear sense of their mutual affection. They make decisions based on how those decisions will affect the other, and they verbally express their appreciation for their relationship to each other. When Louise agrees to stop at the night club and later, to pick up the hitchhiking J.D., she makes these decisions for Thelma, who never gets “to do stuff like this,” and wants to “really let [her] hair down.” When Harlan assaults Thelma, Louise rescues her, jeopardizing her own future. In a particularly tender gesture, Louise uses her scarf to clean Thelma’s face after Harlan’s blows have left her bloody and bruised, and assures her terrified friend that, “Everything’s going to be fine.”

This is not to imply that the friendship between Thelma and Louise is flawless—they do become angry and yell at each other—but they quickly set aside their disagreements and anger in order to support each other and maintain their connection, even in the face of traumatic events such as Harlan’s murder. Thelma and Louise share many of the characteristics in their friendship as those articulated by Arbuthnot and Seneca (1990) in their analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*:

Their lives are inextricably and lovingly intertwined. They work together, sing and dance together, travel together. . . . We are rarely shown one on the screen without the other. They also defend each other in the face of outside critics. (p. 120)

Further, like the friendship between Monroe and Russell, the connection shared by Thelma and Louise is free of “competitiveness, envy, and

pettiness" (Arbuthnot and Seneca, p. 120). In both films, it is precisely the strength of the women's bond that represents such a strong threat to patriarchy (Arbuthnot & Seneca). The women take care of each other, exchanging the roles of protector and caretaker symmetrically; in other words, neither competes to be the one in charge, each assuming that role when necessary, when the other falters. Consider the scene when Louise checks them into a motel room after shooting Harlan so she can decide what to do next. A clearly stressed Thelma stretches out on the motel bed, and tells Louise, "Well, when you figure it out, just wake me up." When Louise yells back—"You could help me try to figure it out!"—the women lash out at each other, and Thelma collapses into sobbing. At that point, Louise's anger is channeled into comforting and reassuring Thelma that she'll find a way to fix everything: "I'm sorry, I'm just not ready to go to jail yet, okay? Why don't you to out to the pool and take a swim or something. All right? Now, I'll figure out what to do." Although Thelma's actions at the night club culminated in the murder, Louise is more concerned about her friend and finding a way out of their dilemma than she is with casting blame.

In a later scene, the roles are reversed. After Thelma gets "properly laid" and J.D. steals their getaway money, Louise collapses on the motel room floor and breaks into tears. Now Louise's anger at Thelma's naiveté is replaced with a sense of hopelessness and devastation viewers have not witnessed before from the "in charge" Louise. At this point, Thelma takes charge: "Louise, hey. Now you just listen to me, you hear me? Come on, stand up. Louise, just don't you worry about it," Thelma assures her friend. The role reversals between the two women are further demonstrated as Thelma drags Louise to her feet and in subsequent scenes, drives Louise's car and robs convenience stores to pay for their flight to Mexico.

Blame and anger may enter their relationship with each new obstacle they face, but they are quickly replaced with concern and reassurances that no one is to blame—except perhaps men—for the desperate situations in which they find themselves. For example, toward the end of the film when the two women are being chased by dozens of law enforcement officers, Thelma says, "I know this whole thing is my fault. I know it is." Despite Louise's earlier outburst after Harlan's death that, "If you weren't concerned with having so much fun we wouldn't be in trouble," Louise now reassures Thelma: "Damn it Thelma, if there's one thing you should know by now, this wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault."

Throughout the film, the female gaze and the connection between the two women are further evidenced through the affectionate way they look at each other. In fact, their intimate interactions illustrate Deborah Tannen's (1990) distinction between the conflicting anchoring gazes exhibited by women and men during conversations (p. 246): while women tend to anchor their gazes on each other's faces, a behavior that reflects a distinctly female gaze, men anchor their gazes outward, away from each other's faces (pp. 245-279). Even as the law enforcement authorities close in on Thelma and Louise and they recognize they are about to be apprehended, they continue to comfort each other and celebrate their friendship, as in this affectionate interaction:

Thelma: You're a good friend.

Louise: You too, sweetie, the best. How do you like the vacation so far?

Both women laugh.

Thelma: I guess I went a little crazy, huh?

Louise: No, you've always been a little crazy. This is just the first chance you've had to express yourself.

Finally, the intimate gaze the women share when they clasp hands and kiss each other fully on the lips before driving over the cliff mirrors the gaze they shared in the self-portrait snapshot they took as they began their journey. From start to finish, Thelma and Louise celebrate their friendship. Their choice to commit suicide together further confirms their commitment to each other at the same time as it denies men control over their lives: "When Thelma and Louise decide not to let a flock of police cars choose a fate for them, they are exultant. 'Let's go,' says Thelma. 'Go!'" wrote *Newsweek's* Laura Shapiro (1991, p. 63). And Kathleen Murphy, writing for *Film Comment*, agreed: "As these splendid creatures choose—rather than accept—their fate, they kiss, mouth to mouth, clasp hands, and head into even higher country, celebrating that rarity in American fiction, a 'holy marriage' of females, transcending gender" (1991, p. 29).

Similar to Lorelei and Dorothy in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the men in the lives of Thelma and Louise "never convincingly appear as more important" to the women "than they are to each other" (Arbutnot & Seneca, 1990, p. 123), and this representation of women's loyalty to each other is something with which women spectators can identify strongly. Indeed, Thelma and Louise deny a major patriarchal myth when they reject

the notion that the only way a woman can live "happily ever after" is with the right man. Some would argue that this denial so challenges the patriarchal norm that the film's message must be negated, and hence the suicide ending, in which the women are "punished" for their resistance, and masculine control is reaffirmed. However, an appropriation of the male gaze leads to an oppositional reading, naming the suicide not as punishment of Thelma and Louise, nor as restoring patriarchal power, but as Thelma and Louise mocking sexism and resisting patriarchal domination by denying men control over their lives. As Mellencamp (1995) explained, the suicide is "heroic" (p. 151) because Thelma and Louise are "triumphant in death. . . . Death allows them to 'keep on going.' Life would have meant confinement, in prison or in marriage" (p. 150). Indeed, critic Linda McAlister (1991b) argued that the protagonists' leap off the Grand Canyon allows the women to achieve a profound liberation; and further, their final decision is a "stinging indictment of this society that the choice they make is the sane and reasonable one" (p. 2). From this perspective, Thelma and Louise's decision to die together can be read as the final stage in feminist consciousness—positive action for change—both personally and socially.

Female vs. Male Gaze: And the Winner is . . .

Both female and male gazes may comprise a filmic text, but since Hollywood films have been dominated by male gazes, one result of female gazes that depict patriarchal resistance is a struggle among competing gazes (Arbuthnot and Seneca, 1990; Gamman, 1989). And *Thelma & Louise* is no exception: male objectification and patriarchal containment compete with the strategies of resistance in the film's narratives. However, Arbuthnot and Seneca's critique of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* demonstrated that it is precisely this "tension between male objectification of women, and women's resistance to that objectification"—in other words, the tension between female and male gazes—that opens film narratives to a feminist reading (p. 123). For instance, the narrative of *Thelma & Louise* implies that the primary reason the women leave for their weekend trip is to "teach Jimmy a lesson" for his failure to make a commitment to Louise. In fact, Thelma assures Louise that their trip will result in the commitment she wants: "Jimmy will come in off the road, you won't be there, he'll freak out and call you like a hundred thousand times, and Sunday night you'll call him back and by Monday, he'll be kissing the ground you walk

on." Louise replies, "Exactly." As another example, Thelma has been dependent on a heterosexual relationship almost since puberty, having dated Darryl for four years before marrying him at age 18, and then staying in the abusive marriage for years. At first, Thelma enjoys the novelty of her flirtation with Harlan; and after spending the night with J.D., she tells him that if "he ever goes to Mexico he should look us up," all of which seems to suggest that "heterosexual love is crucial for women" (Arbuthnot & Seneca, p. 122). However, in *Thelma & Louise*, the result of the tension between the film's strategies of patriarchal containment and resistance is similar to that found in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*: neither strategy can fully obscure the other, but the conflict is so "thin that it scarcely threatens the text of female friendship" (Arbuthnot & Seneca, p. 122).

Consider the choices Thelma makes after the shooting. At any point until she robs her first convenience store, she could have gone to the police without fear of punishment for herself. She *was* the victim of the sexual assault, and *not* the one who pulled the trigger. If she had chosen this option, however, she would have betrayed Louise, leaving her friend to face the consequences of preventing Thelma's rape and killing Harlan. After the attempted rape, Thelma does call home to an empty house, but finding Darryl gone at 4 a.m. only solidifies her primary allegiance to Louise. For her part, Louise also could have chosen to confess to Jimmy and accept his marriage proposal. At that point, the women may have been able to formulate a self-defense argument acceptable to the police. Later, when Thelma asks Louise if she's going to make a deal so they can turn themselves in to the authorities, and Louise can return to marry Jimmy, Louise says, "Jimmy's not an option." Likewise, Darryl and her former life with him are not options Thelma wants: "Something's crossed over in me and I can't go back. I mean, I just couldn't live." Throughout the film, their friendship takes precedence over men, effectively subverting patriarchal containment: "It exalts the friendship between its heroines and places their intimate relationship squarely at the center of the narrative" (Hollinger, 1998, p. 120)

Even the fact that the film features two women protagonists in the male-dominated genre of "buddy films" challenges patriarchal construction, as does the plot's narrative development that precludes our protagonists from falling in love with men who might, in turn, rescue them. As Shapiro (1991) argued, "What triumphs in the end isn't guns or whisky [or men], it's their hard-won belief in themselves and the soaring victory that belief makes possible" (p. 63). The primacy of the women's connection

further mocks patriarchy through its appropriation of the lyrics from Glenn Frey's (1991) song; when Frey sings—"You and I will always be together. From this day on you'll never be alone"—he's obviously singing to a woman. But in the film, these lyrics are heard at the precise times Thelma and Louise are reaffirming the depth of their loyalty to, and intimacy with, each other.

The narrative structure of *Thelma & Louise* also represents significant challenges to the typical media depictions of rape, and in turn, to the male gaze. Media rape narratives generally reinforce a hegemonic masculine ideology in which masculinity emerges "as the solution rather than the cause of the victimization of women through rape" (Cuklanz, 1998, p. 444). In other words, media rape narratives are not about "women's experiences with rape," but rather become "stories of male power," offering a media interpretation of "masculinity that could solve the crime, avenge the woman's pain and victimization, sympathize with her plight and nurture her through a difficult time" (Cuklanz, p. 445). Through its depiction of sexual assault as a crime in which no male spectator can "escape responsibility for the continuance of a rape culture that does not effectively prevent this heinous crime" (Hollinger, 1998, p. 123), *Thelma & Louise* transforms the male gaze inherent in rape narratives to a female gaze that actively resists patriarchal construction. Further, as a consciousness-raising narrative, the movie drives to "name the unnameable," and to speak the "realities of women's lives" (Hogeland, 1998, p. 159). It should not be surprising, then, that *Thelma & Louise* has been cited by feminists to exemplify the "legitimacy of feminist anger, the disruptive possibilities of that anger's transformation into power, and this has been its greatest pleasure for feminist viewers" (Hogeland, p. 162).

Are Thelma and Louise feminist heroes? "Of course they're feminists," argued Shapiro (1991), "but not because they have pistols tucked in their jeans. This is a movie about two women whose clasped hands are their most powerful weapon" (p. 63). McAlister (1991b) expressed no reservations, declaring *Thelma & Louise* a "remarkable existentialist feminist film" that "Simone de Beauvoir would love" (p. 1). Mellencamp (1995) concurred that Thelma and Louise are feminist heroes and argued that critics who charged the film represented a betrayal of feminism (e.g., Carlson, 1991) are misreading it. As Mellencamp explained, it was only after subsequent viewings of the film that she recognized the significance behind its early depictions of Thelma and Louise as women who "measured their lives and defined themselves by men's desire" (p. 149),

and made “bungling and stupid narrative mistakes” (p. 148): “Only later in the film do Thelma and Louise, both working-class women, realize they can make choices” and their “happiness is not up to husbands, parents, or children. It is up to them” (p. 148). And it is precisely this change from “dependence on men to female independence” that transforms the film’s narratives into an “inner journey into feminist self-awareness,” as spectators watch Thelma and Louise become “self-reliant and heroic rather than helpless and scared” (Mellencamp, p. 148).

Whether Thelma and Louise are feminists is a question that can be debated, and conflicting opinions on this point challenge the “idea that there should be one monolithic view about feminism,” hence forcing a recognition of the “plurality” of feminisms available to women (Ganman, 1989, p. 26). Regardless of our views of Thelma and Louise as feminists, the film clearly resonates with the many women spectators, film critics and feminist film scholars, precisely because *Thelma & Louise* provides women with narratives and female characters actively challenging patriarchal conventions rarely available in mainstream media.

Implications

The goal of my research was not to investigate the male gaze or the ways in which *Thelma & Louise* “affords pleasure, or denies pleasure to men” (Arbuthnot & Seneca, 1990, p. 123). Rather, my interest was in focusing “more centrally on our own experiences as female viewers than on the male viewer’s experience,” following the dictum of Arbuthnot and Seneca that feminist film criticism needs to “move beyond the analysis of male pleasure in viewing classical narrative films, in order to destroy it, to an explanation of female pleasure, in order to enhance it” (p. 123). As the previous discussion has shown, there is a great deal about *Thelma & Louise* that enhances pleasure for women spectators: “*Thelma & Louise* encourages female spectators both to admire and to be inspired by their female characters” (Hollinger, 1998, p. 132). The female gazes structuring the movie’s narratives encourage women to take “[p]leasure in feminist power” (Stacey, 1991, p. 148) and to identify with “the spectacle of women” (Willis, 1993, p. 125) depicted in roles that challenge the “traditional cinematic association of activity with masculinity” (Hollinger, p. 122).

Importantly, the female gazes represented in the film support the argument that feminist voices are not limited to avant garde films (Mulvey,

1975), but can be "articulated in the context of masculinist ideologies" that dominate mainstream Hollywood cinema (Gamman, 1989, p. 18), thus allowing mainstream films to "facilitate a dominant female gaze and a route whereby feminist meanings can be introduced in order to disturb the status quo" (Gamman, p. 12). Indeed, Ussher (1997) argued that *Thelma & Louise* represents "an explicit subversion of traditional representations of a narrow feminine role" (p. 125), a representation previously limited primarily to avant-garde feminist films and independent feminist filmmakers (Mellencamp, 1995; Ussher). Although alternative feminist films have played a significant role in paving the way for films such as *Thelma & Louise* (Ussher), feminist counter-cinema necessarily denies pleasure as a prerequisite for freedom (Mulvey, 1975), and consequently, these films fail to address women's "fascination with Hollywood films" (Kaplan, 1983, p. 33). As Kaplan explained, Arbuthnot and Seneca's (1990) reading of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a feminist text, "located a central and little-discussed issue, namely our need for feminist films that at once construct woman as spectator without offering the repressive identifications of Hollywood films and that satisfy our cravings for *pleasure*" (p. 33).

There are, however, broader societal implications than simply the appeal of *Thelma & Louise* as an example of a mainstream feminist-inspired film that offers pleasure to women spectators. The wider audience appeal enjoyed by Hollywood films over avant-garde productions is important in challenging the dominate patriarchal discourses inherent in the cinematic male gaze. John Fiske (1987) explained that "discourse is a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area" (p. 14). As the "most politically implicated" contemporary female friendship film (Hollinger, 1998, p. 124), *Thelma & Louise* demonstrates the potential of mainstream cinema to challenge the socially constructed and circulated meanings of patriarchal discourse that deny women's voices and experiences: "Its political message encourages its female audience not only to enter into the controversy surrounding its reception, but also, and most significantly, to take a critical stance in regard to contemporary U.S. society and its treatment of its female members" (Hollinger, pp. 124-125).

Further, from the early days of films, female friendship films such as *The Gay Sisters* (1942) and the 1949 movies *A Letter to Three Wives* and *A Woman's Secret*, "developed almost exclusively into a socially conformist cinematic form that presents female bonding as a useful means of social

integration, guiding women into acceptance of the existing social structure" (Hollinger, 1998, p. 208). Thus, this film genre did not represent a "threat to the way things are and therefore warranted no direct attacks" (Hollinger, p. 208). Then in 1991, *Thelma & Louise* did just the opposite, encouraging women to question and ultimately to reject the existing social order, consequently representing a significant threat to the patriarchal discourses dominating media and society: "*Thelma & Louise* stands alone as the only contemporary female friendship film that can be read as unrecoverably political" (Hollinger, p. 239). Indeed, Rapping (1994) asserted that the primary significance of *Thelma & Louise* resides with its ability to challenge the "longstanding assumptions of classic Hollywood genres, which have always reinforced the gender inequalities upon which this society depends" (p. 66).

Ussher (1997) cautioned that the "archetypal masculine gaze isn't a thing of the past," and for "every *Thelma & Louise* with women living independent lives" there are films depicting women as "terrorized and assaulted, sex object and victim" (p. 130). However, films such as *Thelma & Louise* that disrupt the patriarchal power structure by effecting a "fissure in the representation of power itself" (Gamman, 1989, p. 15) and open the text to a feminist reading (Arbuthnot & Seneca, 1990), can serve as a model for future feminist filmmakers—who want their oppositional voices to reach mainstream audiences, thereby increasing the films' challenges to the limitations of patriarchal construction—and may encourage film scholars to explore ways in which film narratives afford pleasure to women spectators.

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Notes

¹For additional spectatorship research, see for example: Bobo (1988); Byars (1988); Ellsworth (1986); Gamman (1989); Gledhill, (1988, 1991); Griggers (1993); Mayne (1993); Pribram, (1988); Stacey (1991); Staiger (1992); and, Willis (1993).

²In her review of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, McAlister (1991a) relates the stages of feminist consciousness—denial, curiosity, expanding awareness, anger, rage, and positive action for change—to Evelyn's (Kathy Bates) personal growth in the film. Also see Hogeland's (1998) comparison of *Thelma & Louise's* text to consciousness-raising narratives (pp. 147-168).

³See for example: Burt (1980, 1991); Celis (1991); Halper (1993); Johnson & Jackson (1988); and, Malamuth & Check (1980).

⁴Research indicates that most women in American society fear sexual violence (Gordon & Riger, 1991), and one 1985 study found women under 35 feared being a victim of rape over fears of robbery, assault or even murder (Warr).

⁵For other negative critiques from male writers, see for example: Bruning (1991); Johnson (1991); Leo (1991); and, Novak (1991). Not all men reacted negatively; for positive film reviews, see for instance: Cosford (1991); and, Denby (1991).

⁶Khouri argued that her screenplay "isn't hostile toward men" (cited in Shapiro, 1991, p. 63), and responded to the criticism that the film presented negative images of men by suggesting: "If men don't like seeing themselves as caricatures, then imagine how women feel at the movies" (cited in Krupp, 1991, p. 142).