

Gender, Genre, and Myth in *Thelma and Louise*

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The configuration of gender, genre, and myth that I refer to in my title suggests three of the areas that comprise the rich intertextuality of *Thelma and Louise*, the 1991 film directed by Ridley Scott, scripted by Callie Khouri, and starring Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon. Harvey R. Greenberg refers to this intertextuality as "*Thelma and Louise's* exuberant polysemy." Greenberg specifically has in mind the differing ideological agendas that the film addresses, the feminist, antifeminist, progressive, and reactionary: "Such a film typically offers a wide range of possibility for contestation across the political spectrum over issues 'whose time has come' out of one contemporary circumstance or another" (Martin 20). In turn, the ideological agendas tie into other discourses that the film addresses as well--the classical Hollywood paradigm and its genres with their gendered lines of agency, spectacle, spectatorship; and the suturing process that naturalizes the myths perpetuated by the paradigm and its genres.

Thelma and Louise challenges Hollywood's gendered myths in its attempt to transform the classical paradigm into a female narrative with authentic female agency neither coopted nor recuperated by dominant male narratives. As it questions old myths and suggests new ones, it unmaskes the fictions of the past and involves the spectator in the fantasy of its two protagonists, an identification

process that glosses over its own fictitious nature and naturalizes it in our consciousness.¹

And so it is little wonder that we discover life imitating art when we read in *Newsweek* that four women appropriated the film's primary image of feminist rage when confronted by an obscene truck driver, snubbing feminine passivity and living the desire of *Thelma and Louise*: "Last week four women who had seen the film were walking down a Chicago street when a truck driver shouted an obscenity at them. Instantly, all four seized imaginary pistols and aimed them at his head. 'Thelma and Louise hit Chicago,' yelled one" (63). In *Time*, Margaret Carlson claimed this fantasy as her own: "...the next 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" (57). It is clear in these cases that spectator desire meshes with the fantasy of *Thelma and Louise*, generating new myths that undergird contemporary living.²

Thus critics who chide *Thelma and Louise* for its implausibilities miss the point.³ In our postmodern age, works of art become cultural events not so much because they correspond to what is really out there, but because they revise in a timely way basic traditional paradigms. And in the case of cinema, the prevailing paradigms are Hollywood genres that have proved malleable to reinscription and transformation according to the *zeitgeist* of the times. In self-consciously exposing the "construction" of myth in the classical Hollywood cinema, the narration of *Thelma and Louise* generates a complex process of recapitulation, transformation, and creation of new fantasies for spectator appropriation.

The discussion that follows taps into this complex process of narrative and genre transformation in order to suggest the complicated discourse of the film and its complicated relationship to the myths it sloughs off and those that it generates. The first part of the discussion focuses on the film's attempt to break down the classical paradigm's tendency to privilege male narrative over female narrative, whether that privilege derives from the male character's active part in the narrative in contrast to the female's passive role or from the female agency's containment, cooption, or recuperation by the dominant male structures within the diegesis. In this attempt, the discourse of the film would seem to be successful. The second part of the discussion looks at the film's relationship to its genres, focusing on the basic generic pattern of conflict between the myth of the individual and the myth of integration that we find in the western, the gangster film, and the melodrama. Such an analysis reveals that *Thelma and Louise* does overturn many of the gendered construc-

tions associated with these genres, but that in the end it cannot escape certain conventions and contradictions that qualify and complicate its bold fling at an authentic female discourse. The last part of the discussion then looks at the film's mythic resonance within the culture and among its audience-consumers despite the contradictions that hound its feminist discourse.

Narration/Female Discourse vs. Male Discourse

In this part of the discussion, I want to pursue a line of argument that would claim for *Thelma and Louise* an authentic female discourse that subverts the classical paradigm and its privileging of the male discourse by such feminist critics as Mulvey and Doane. In her seminal article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that the traditional role of women in the classical Hollywood paradigm has been that of passive objects, while that of men active agents. The man is the bearer of the look, while the woman is the image "coded for strong visual and erotic impact...to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Visual Pleasure 19). Mulvey's explanation for this stems from a psychological basis. As the "other" that lacks, the woman represents a threat, awakening male castration anxieties. The male compensates for this by controlling and dominating the female in one of two ways: through a voyeurism that devalues and punishes or through a fetishism that overvalues the physical beauty of the woman as object, "transforming it into something satisfying in itself," so that "it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (Visual Pleasure 21.) In either case, the woman is subordinated as a pawn within the province of a male narrative, either as spectacle or as an object to be acted upon.

In relation to spectatorship, Mulvey identifies the classical apparatus as a male camera that parallels the male subject within the diegesis. The apparatus induces the spectator to identify with a male outlook and with a male subject within the film. The apparatus is itself the bearer of the gaze mediating between masculinist desire within the spectator and those within the film text (Visual Pleasure 19-21). For women spectators, two options are open: they may either identify with the male camera and the male agent within the film or they may identify with the female object within the film in a masochistic way. In either case, they sacrifice the construction of an authentic female identity and act complicitly in the construction of the dominant system. Mulvey sees this as a struggle between the claims of a passive, but law abiding femininity and those of a

misogynist masculinity. This struggle within the spectator parallels the struggle within many women protagonists in the melodrama, a struggle that cannot possibly lead to a "settled" femininity since the terms of the conflict are defined by the patriarchy (Afterthoughts 35-36).

Mary Ann Doane extends and complicates the Mulveyan paradigm in her study of the women's film in *The Desire to Desire* (1987). Doane argues that the 1940s Hollywood woman's film posits a female agency and addresses a female spectatorship, but within the framework of a discourse that traditionally privileges the male as subject and specularizes the female as object. Put another way, the woman's film attempts to narrativize the woman's story, make her the subject of the film, but the conventions and ideology of the classical cinema complicate this attempt so that female agency, though privileged, is also contained and recuperated in various ways. Doane's point throughout her work is that the two conflicting agendas are neither of them entirely successful in the negotiations to subjectivize female characters on the one hand and specularize them on the other. The attempt to subjectivize or give a significant degree of agency to these women characters is itself fraught with difficulty since it turns on the already compromised roles of women in society: the wife, the mistress, the daughter, the mother, the girl in love, the secretary, the nurse, and so forth.⁴

Thelma and Louise consciously operates to overturn the classical paradigm as defined by Mulvey, and it leaves little room for the kind of negotiations that Doane explores in the 1940s woman's films as the two women resist traditional constraints and attempts at recuperation. In transforming the classical heroine, *Thelma and Louise* frames new fantasies for spectator appropriation, those that link the feminist desires within the film's audience to those of its female protagonists. The attempt is no less to construct a new way of seeing, a new bearer of the look, as it is to deconstruct traditional male structures.

What the narration of *Thelma and Louise* attempts to do then is to inscribe both women as subjects and agents of the narrative, give authentic voice to their desires, and mute the discourses of the male characters. Thelma (Geena Davis), a housewife, and Louise (Susan Sarandon), a waitress, subvert the expectations of the male discourse. They desert their men for a weekend in the mountains without informing them beforehand. Louise calculates the surprise nature of the trip in order to disturb her boyfriend Jimmy enough to move him towards a firmer commitment. Meanwhile, Thelma tags along for the ride and company, leaving dinner for her husband

Darryl in the microwave oven along with an explanatory note that she will be back on Monday. In other words, the women's actions at the beginning, though bold, reflect not so much their independence as their ties to a system in which marriage plays an essential role. In the course of their journey, however, both women extricate themselves from commitments not only to the males immediate to their lives, but also to the hegemonic authority of the law.

The catalyst for the women's rebellion is Thelma's near rape by the womanizing Harlan and Harlan's scornful attitude after being caught in the act by Louise. The incident triggers Louise's experience of her past rape and the consequent injustice that she experienced at the hands of the law. She kills Harlan as he says "Suck my cock." Convinced of the futility of justice in a male-dominated court system, Louise breaks all ties and flees to Mexico ("Things have changed, everything's changed...I think it's time to let go"). She flees from bondage and further victimization and finally asserts her own authentic voice hitherto subsumed in fear and secrecy and silenced in the suffering of a persecution complex ("Certain words and phrases keep drifting through my mind; things like incarceration, cavity search, death by electrocution, life imprisonment, shit like that. You know what I'm saying? So do I want to come out alive? I don't know..."). At first reluctant, then inspired by her friend, Thelma herself sloughs off her passive resignation and adopts a more honest stance ("I don't know what he's mad about; I'm the one who should be mad!"); gains sexual liberation ("I finally understand what the fuss is all about now"); turns her back on marriage and her former life with Darryl ("Something crossed over in me and I can't go back; I just couldn't live."); assumes the mythic status of a wild west gunslinger ("I believe I got a knack for this shit."); and basks in her pristine state ("I feel awake, wide awake. I don't ever remember feeling this awake; everything looks different.").

Thelma and Louise overturn the classical paradigm in two important ways. They take over the dominant roles normally assigned to men, and they resist to the end the enticement to compromise or recuperate. In both cases, they undermine the passivity, self-sacrifice, and masochism associated with the conventional roles of wife, mistress, daughter, mother, girl in love that have haunted the Hollywood screens of the past. Louise's revenge unleashed on Harlan, Thelma's gunslinging liquor store robbery and kidnapping of the highway patrolman, and the two women's explosion of the sexist trucker's fuel tank punctuate their assumption of male agency. They subvert the Law of the classical paradigm in subverting the Law within the diegesis in their appropriation of a

criminal role, one that is most closely associated with J. D. (Brad Pitt), the male who seduces Thelma and robs Louise of her money. In this context, J. D.'s discourse is not the conventional male one that reasserts itself in classical narration to punish a female agency that has gotten out of hand. Instead, it functions in an opposite way to empower the two women. For one thing, Thelma refuses to interpret J. D.'s actions as payment for her lustful pleasures. Instead, she turns this event into an opportunity to play out her fantasy of what Sharon Willis calls "cross gender indentification" (124). 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. In other words, Thelma's search for self-identity includes the incorporation of J. D.'s discourse into her own. In one sense, the narrative aligns J. D. with the women: he is a fugitive from the law; he is arrested by Hal and the FBI; and he flaunts the convention of marriage when he taunts Darryl about Thelma: "I like your wife." For these reasons, J. D.'s voice remains fluid, vibrant, challenging, unlike those of the other men whom Thelma and Louise frustrate and render helpless.⁵

Though the two women gain dominance in their appropriation of conventional male roles, it is in the second way in which they overturn the classical paradigm that they develop an authentic and discrete female agency. The women simply refuse to compromise, and they resist recuperation to the very end, a desire crystallized in their ultimate action of flying over and into the Grand Canyon, thereby sealing their subversion of the law that would lasso them in alive. By the time of their flight off the margins of the cliff and into free space, the women have sloughed off the accouterments associated with the spectacled woman. Thelma's smeared lipstick, smudged makeup, runny nose, and bruised and bloodied lip after her near rape mock the feminine masquerade that had appealed to Harlan's sadism. When Thelma goes off to rob the liquor store, Louise waits in the car and becomes self-conscious of her lack of makeup when a couple stares at her. After instinctively reaching for her lipstick, she decides not to put it on and throws it out of the car. When the T-Bird whips across the plateau on its way over the edge, the camera cuts to a closeup of the polaroid shot the two women took of themselves all prettied up before leaving for their long weekend in the country. The photograph, a flimsy reminder of their past identities, flits away, blown back towards the police as they speed forward. Another sign of the women's discrete agency apart from that associated with men is their bonding in a sisterhood that offers an alternative to their

former male-centered lives. The women's kiss and clasped hands seal their symbolic marriage in the barrelling T-Bird, but another visual sign of their bond had appeared earlier when they drove through the desert in the silence of the night. In this sequence, the apparatus dissolves from one woman's face to the other by superimposing them, figuratively uniting them at a time when the two are truly one in their resolve, occurring as it does the night before their suicidal pact.

The women's most telling actions in the forging of a discrete agency are those that touch on their lives with the men most immediate to them, Louise's boyfriend Jimmy (Michael Madsen), Thelma's husband Darryl (Christopher McDonald), and the police lieutenant Hal (Harvey Keitel). In rejecting the discourses of all three, the women extricate themselves from the subservient formulations within male narratives. Louise refuses Jimmy's offer of marriage, Thelma scorns her former life with Darryl, and the two women resist Hal's plea to surrender. The latter may be their most significant decision--to frustrate the male authority who is most sympathetic to their cause. The women have no delusion about Hal. He is not a figure of higher consciousness, an icon who integrates the male and female vision into a kind of Blakean harmony. On the contrary, he is most at home in the company of his male colleagues, comfortably participating in their comradery that includes jokes at the expense of women. Hal projects a sympathetic understanding of the women's plight and offers them a supporting voice, but his voice is a Siren-like plea that tempts the women to cooperate and reintegrate. It serves the larger interests of the law and would silence them if given the chance. But it is he and the other two men who are silenced instead: Jimmy acquiesces to Louise's desire for a life apart from his; Darryl grieves for his loss as he attains initial awareness of Thelma's wondrous transformation; and Hal futilely chases after Louise's T-Bird convertible before it soars off the cliff, leaving him and the forces of law and order lined up behind him, speechless.

Genre/The Myth of the Individual and The Myth of Integration/ The Western, Gangster Film, and Melodrama

Thelma and Louise's incorporation of Hollywood genres into its discourse further complicates its process of challenging the classical paradigm. As it overturns generic conventions, it also includes them in a complex pattern of recapitulation and transformation. To give focus and structure to the film's kaleidoscopic

reference to genres and other films, I will limit my discussion to the two basic conflicting myths that undergird all Hollywood genres--the myth of the individual and the myth of integration--with references to the three major genres that the film takes on: the western, the gangster film, and the melodrama. The western embodies a pattern of subversion (the individual) and integration (the community) in a conflict between wilderness and civilized values. The dichotomy includes such opposites as westerner vs. easterner, country vs. city, cowboy vs. schoolteacher, independence vs. marriage. The conflict is often internalized within the western hero who cooperates with the community to save it from outlaw forces, furthering the expansion of civilization, but who in the end forsakes the community and marriage, flees to the frontier, and preserves his rugged individualism. Meanwhile, the gangster film embroils the conflict between the individual and society by associating the individual with criminal elements; the gangster figure overcomes the limitations of class and background and realizes personal desires fostered in part by the capitalist society he emulates; in doing so, however, he disrupts the forces of containment and the status quo; the classic resolution to this conflict is the punishment of the gangster by prosocial forces to effect a normalization of class and the social hierarchy.⁶

The melodrama highlights the frustration or compromise of personal desire by environmental constraints. Unlike the plastic environment of the musical, which articulates the fulfillment of personal desire through the identification of the external with the internal, the environment of the melodrama resists transformation by the individual. It either defeats the protagonist or permits the existence of an uneasy tension. Even when the protagonist achieves personal happiness at the end, style and form undercut the resolution. Either the artificiality of the action and the excess of sentiment will parody the achievement and highlight its conventionality or the overdetermination of the *mise-en-scene* throughout the film will work against a satisfactory resolution. The clutter of the decor, hemmed-in locales, tight framing, extreme closeups punctuate the claustrophobic, oppressive quality of the world and give the lie to the "happy" ending.⁷

In the woman's film, a major form of the melodrama, environmental constraints are exacerbated because female desire must be accommodated within a system of patriarchy. Two major forms of resolution appear in the woman's film. The first involves female agents who realize pockets of desire within a discourse of systemic permission. In *Now Voyager* (1942), the paternal psychiatrist Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains) allows his patient Charlotte Vale (Bette

Davis) a modicum of independence to practice psychiatry herself. He permits her to foster a relationship with the disturbed young daughter of the man she loves, sublimating her sexual passion into a maternal one. Hemmed in by social forces that forbid an adulterous relationship, Charlotte compensates by transforming that relationship into an acceptable one that she controls on her own terms. The second major type of resolution involves female agents who achieve a significant degree of independence but who are then subverted and reincorporated into patriarchy when they acquiesce to one of its subservient modes--Barbara Stanwyck's self-sacrificing mother at the end of *Stella Dallas* (1937) or Joan Crawford's penitent return to husband and hearth at the conclusion of *Mildred Pierce* (1945). As pointed out earlier, the woman's film fails to negotiate successfully the contradictions of its attempt to subjectivize and empower women as agents because of a predetermined patriarchal system within the diegesis and within the operations of the apparatus.

In its reworking of the myth of the individual and the myth of integration, *Thelma and Louise* aligns itself with the anarchic tendency of the former, but ultimately settles on the *tension* that exists between the two. The narrative's resolution may seem to favor one over the other, but its effect is more disturbing than satisfying. As feminist gangsters, Thelma and Louise rebel against the patriarchal system of law and order; they kill a rapist, commit armed robbery, assault, and kidnapping. Analogous to such forebears as Rico (Edward G. Robinson, *Little Caesar* 1930) and Tony Camonte (Paul Muni, *Scarface* 1932), who dare to disturb the hierarchy of class in society through criminal violence, Thelma and Louise disrupt their gendered placement in society and therefore must be brought to task or eliminated as threats to the status quo, the traditional fate of all movie gangsters. (The women also recall, of course, the *femme fatale* of *film noir*, the outlawed conniving, castrating woman who must be punished for her rupture of both judicial authority and the laws of society governing the position of the sexes.) In a more complicated way, Thelma and Louise recapitulate the rural gangster couples of such films as *You Only Live Once* (1937), *High Sierra* (1941), *They Live By Night* (1949), *Gun Crazy* (1950), *Bonnie and Clyde*, (1967), and *Badlands* (1973). Several of the women protagonists in these films find some kind of fulfillment in the life of crime (*Gun Crazy*, *Bonnie and Clyde*), but all of them find fulfillment in an attachment to their male counterpart. *High Sierra* and *They Live by Night* reinforce the empowerment of the male that we find in this generic couple through their female protagonists' weeping, eulogistic tribute to the dead gangster-

patriarch. In contrast, *Thelma and Louise* upsets the incorruptibility of heterosexual romance that we find in the rural gangster film and portrays such romance as an experience that lies at the heart of the women's sense of oppression. What once passed as social/class oppression in the genre now becomes a social/gender oppression in the 1990s. The women's symbolic marriage before driving off the edge of the canyon (their kiss, their clasped hands) seals their relationship off from the heterosexual conventions of their former lives.

As contemporary *westerners*, Thelma and Louise appropriate the function of the male--they ride the open spaces, shoot the villain, stage a robbery, and elude pursuers, while their men stay at home domesticated (Darryl) or wishing for domestication (Jimmy). Their journey to the Grand Canyon recapitulates the coded significance of the frontier in the development of the west and of the western genre--from a once flourishing frontier to its decline and disappearance with the growing encroachment of civilization. The women's trek from the city to the open desert releases them from the tug of a complacent domesticity at the same time that they take on the frontier values of rugged individualism, self-reliance, and the survival of the fittest. It also releases, however, the enforcement agencies of civilization that threaten these values as they close in upon the women. But like Wyatt Earp (*My Darling Clementine* 1945), Shane (*Shane* 1953), Butch and Sundance (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* 1969), and the Wild Bunch (*The Wild Bunch* 1969) before them, Thelma and Louise resist the press of a social order. They refuse to compromise the frontier they have established within themselves; they choose death over containment. In this way, their death does not represent a punishment meted out as in the gangster film, but an existential act of integrity. Their gesture is at once dramatic and sensational, as was the spectacular suicidal mission of the Wild Bunch in Peckinpah's film. The women's grand leap into unencumbered space is no less a propulsion out of time and the constraints of the social discourse.

Thelma and Louise is, however, probably closest to the melodrama both in its pattern of conflict between the individual and society and in its handling of stylistic elements to create tension and disturb any easy resolutions such as the idealist agenda proposed above. Like their counterparts in the melodrama and in contrast to the protagonists of the musical, Thelma and Louise fail to transform their environment into a reflection of their psychic and emotional desires. However, unlike their counterparts in the woman's film, Thelma and Louise refuse to resolve the conflict in either of the two

ways that would favor the environment over the individual--they neither resign themselves to their defeat and accept the subservient roles offered to them in a spirit of self-sacrifice, nor do they accept the compromise of retaining a permitted degree of independence within and under the auspices of the establishment. Instead, they befuddle and defy their would-be captors in their suicidal leap into the canyon.

Before we grant the women the freedom this action would seem to confer, however, we would do well to look at the visual style of the film that checks any attempt to label the progressive quality of their action as untroubled. The visual style of *Thelma and Louise* functions analogously to that of the melodrama, complicating the conflict between personal desire and the environment and subverting any affirmative resolution. As was noted earlier, visual excess and overdetermination of objects and gestures in the melodrama undercut the progress of personal motivation by highlighting an unaccommodating environment: cluttered rooms and tight framing; Sirkian flowers that punctuate a feminine world of domesticity; studio sets or obvious paintings representing landscape in picture windows that underline the illusion of openness and freedom. Similarly, visual style and technique in *Thelma and Louise* work to convey the restrictive environment of the two women and to associate it with the threats that encircle them even as they realize new spaces for themselves. The visuals of the credit sequence function in just this way. The beginning credits (white on black) dissolve to a desert landscape (in black and white); the camera pans and tracks to a road leading up to a mountain and pauses; the black and white turn to color; the picture dissolves to a black background, and the credits come to an end. The apparatus cuts to the waitress Louise bustling in a crowded, busy cafeteria, then cuts to the housewife Thelma engulfed in the clutter of her kitchen. The coded elements of this first sequence suggest enclosure and dead ends. The subliminal shot of the road that leads up to the mountain stands for the end-of-the-line quality of the women's present lives and future actions; the dissolves to black and white and then to black again during the credits contribute to the atmosphere of fatalism that dog the women on their journey. The change to color may suggest the possibilities their journey open up to them, but this is only a temporary relief before the fade back to black. At the beginning, the women's definite goals within the patriarchy mark the dead end quality of their lives--a long weekend in the mountains, return to commitments back home, waitressing, homemaking, and pleasing their men.

The cramped nature of the *mise-en-scene* (cluttered environment, tight framing, extreme closeups, etc.) defines the first stage of the journey up to and including J. D.'s robbery, the stage in which the external impinges most heavily on the women: the extreme closeups of Thelma and Louise in the car; the crowded suffocating, smoke-filled truck stop; the jam of bodies in front of the mirror in the women's rest room; the car-filled parking lot where Harlan assaults Thelma; the huge trucks that frame the women's T-Bird on the road as Louise screeches her getaway from the scene of the crime; the phallic oil rigs and derricks that dwarf the T-Bird as it eludes the police. The first stage does include extreme long shots of the car on the road, but these shots don't dominate until the second stage of the journey. After Thelma's robbery, when the women are at their most maverick, the visuals open up through tracking and panning shots of vistas; the camera frames the women in medium two shots when they are in the car, in contrast to the closeups and shot-reverse-shots of the first stage. In other words, the camera does not crowd each woman as it tended to do earlier. The women's drive through the desert at night among the strange, wondrous rock formations highlights this process of open visualization on the second stage of their journey. Thelma and Louise give themselves over to the silent, solitary, unencumbered natural environment, a privileged moment that underscores their new allegiance, but also an interlude before the onslaught of the law that hems them in the third and final stage of their odyssey.

The final *mise-en-scene* realizes perfectly the opposition between enforcement and resistance that the narrative and its visualization suggests throughout the film. The entrenched powers of the state police and FBI with their machinery for capture and incarceration stand poised on one side of the plateau, the side leading down the mountain and back to society; on the other side, Thelma and Louise sit in their convertible on the *margin* of the cliff, the symbolic other mapping out an identity apart from the Oedipal basis of the male discourse. In between stands Hal, the male who is sympathetic towards the women and wants to make sure they receive justice in a fair way, but whose desire to do this necessarily includes co-option and recuperation. The tableau stretches beyond the edge of the cliff to accommodate the clarity and integrity of the women's vision as they speed away from the picket fence of authority and soar into open space. The extreme closeups of the women's faces in a shot-reverse-shot as they take a final glance at each other highlight the moment in which they are most privileged as subjects/agents. The freeze frame of the car in mid-air expands the moment of transcend-

ence that the women achieve; the flash of burning whiteness consumes the women in a shroud that matches their passion and purity.

Thelma and Louise triumph and they do not. They construct a new authenticity through individual choice, but they cannot maintain and foster it in the available environment. The women are not allowed, finally, to realize their newfound identities within life itself. The extreme closeups of their faces before their plunge do privilege them as agents in their moment of choice, but the closeups also support the containment-in-living that the rigid rank and file behind them suggests. Living entails defeat at worst, compromise at best. Ironically, the women's most privileged moment of agency involves the decision to obliterate subjectivity. Extinction of the self follows upon an act based on a heightened awareness of individual self-worth. The women's existential victory is not hollow, but because it is transcendent, it fails to resolve the tension between inner desire and the environment. The women escape the conflict; they do not overcome it. The desperation of their final act complicates its endorsement and only sharpens the tensions generated within the text by the conflicting elements associated with personal desire, social constraints, and a generically encoded visual style.

The Myth in the Mind's Eye

Thelma and Louise resists easy resolution, resists closure. Instead of tying things together, the ending provides yet another element that other elements within the text can play off. The world of the film bristles with a tension that no one element can ease, whether that element be associated with the forces of centralization and marginalization that vie for space, or with the filmic apparatus and its presentation of the narrative. The ending catapults Thelma and Louise outside of time and leaves the forces of containment speechless, but the transcendental nature of the act and its parodic quality (it deliciously reenacts in one way or another the endings of *The 400 Blows* (1959), *Jules and Jim* (1962), *The Wild Bunch*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*) give the lie to its "resolution." It becomes just one more resource, a resilient one to be sure, that other resources within the text can taunt as it were in the continuing debate which is the film.

The ending resists closure in yet another way. It extends beyond the text, beyond the frame of the screen within the consciousness of the spectator and beyond that, within the cultural

consciousness of the nation, so that it enjoys a mythic life of its own. Audience reaction to the ending embedded the image of a flying car forever suspended in the popular imagination. The filmic apparatus participates in the creation of this myth through its freeze frame and fade to white; it eschews the fade to black signifying death and closure. The apparatus further defies the pull of gravity in its reprisal of scenes of Thelma and Louise after the fade to white. The movie really ends with a medium two shot freeze frame of their beatific smiling faces. The narration's act of freezing the moment in mid-air before the actual plunge into the canyon and its reprisal of scenes play into the public's expectations for sequels to financially successful movies--the women left suspended leaves open the question of their fate and extends indefinitely their potential for resuscitation. Co-stars Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon reinforced this expectation in their references to the openended nature of the film at the 1992 Academy Awards. In their appearance on stage to present the award for film editing, Sarandon introduced the award by noting the importance of editors, "in whose hands lie the fate of whole movie." Then this dialog ensued:

DAVIS: That's true; like in our film, *Thelma and Louise*; the way the final scene was edited, it was sort of left ambiguous what really happened to us at the end.

SARANDON: Ambiguous, Geena? Our T-Bird went off the edge of the Grand Canyon; that's not ambiguous.

DAVIS: Well, nobody saw us land did they? . . .

SARANDON: What did you think people thought happened?

DAVIS: We could have grabbed onto something; or we were going fast, maybe we made it to the other side. Susan, if we didn't survive the crash, there's no sequel.

SARANDON: We could have bounced!

DAVIS: There you go.

The conversation between Davis and Sarandon recalls another cultural phenomenon to which the film's conclusion alludes, this one from out of the past--the suspenseful climaxes of the adventure serials of the Saturday matinees of the 30s and 40s. The climax of each serial chapter leaves its heroes and/or heroines suspended at the moment before doom, always with the promise of a solution in the following chapter. By some unexpected element in the diegesis or a trick of the discourse, the impending disaster of the previous week is averted at the beginning of the new episode. *Thelma and Louise* seem to be in a no-win situation, but who knows? We may forever wish that by a trick of the discourse they too could be extricated as were our heroes of old. We were always disappointed,

of course, at those kiddie matinees when the apparatus manipulated the action of the previous week, and we discovered that the climax never really happened the way it had been fabricated. Instead, something disrupted the narrative, allowing our heroes to escape with a minimum of effort in contrast to the impossible maneuvers we had hoped for from week to week. Oftentimes, it took just a simple cut, an act of editing to alter the earlier action or provide our heroes with an unforeseen avenue of escape.

One could probably think of other cultural discourses that would extend indefinitely the trajectory of *Thelma and Louise* through space. I would even tap into the recent and present Roadrunner cartoons on Saturday morning tube in which Wile E. Coyote survives every fall into the desert bottom, but also in which Roadrunner is able to suspend himself in mid-air before scrambling back onto the plateau. This Saturday morning cartoon links up with the other cultural discourses mentioned--the Saturday matinee serials of the 30s and 40s, the commercial sequencing of genre and character, our everyday references to the two women who somehow touch a nerve--and they conspire with the film's troubled because not wholly successful feminist discourse and with the apparatus' penultimate freeze frame, fade to white, and reprisal of earlier scenes to protract the lives of *Thelma and Louise* within the cinema of our imaginations over and above the naturalistic implications of their pitch off the edge of existence.

Notes

¹ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York 1972); Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28:2 (Winter 1974-75): 39-47; Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 28:1 (Fall 1974): 22-31; and Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fourth Edition, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York 1992): 682-689.

² Sharon Willis discusses *Thelma and Louise* as "emphatically fantasmatic," a "production of artifice" in relation to audience desire and the viewer's "pleasure in constructing herself as an image, an image staged and performed" (123) in her article "Hardware and Hardbodies, What Do Women Want?: A Reading of *Thelma and Louise*" in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary

Radner, & Ava Preacher. Collins (New York 1993): 120-128.

³ See, for example, Margaret Carlson, "Is This What Feminism Is All About?" *Time* (June 24, 1991): 57, and Stanley Kauffmann, "Stanley Kauffmann on Films," *The New Republic* (July 1, 1991): 28.

⁴ Other feminist critics have qualified Mulvey's paradigm in various ways. See Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (1987), chapter one, "The Desire to Desire," especially 3-9, Teresa de Laurentis' chapter on "Desire in Narrative" in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984), and Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother,' *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington 1990), 141-147.

⁵ As my readers have generously pointed out, this alignment of J. D. with the women and their feminist discourse begs qualification. J. D., after all, does seduce Thelma and rob Louise. He also assumes the traditional male role of competitor for the woman, where the woman is an object of barter and exchange, particularly in his confrontation with Darryl in the police station.

⁶ Useful works on the western and gangster films that discuss this dichotomy of the individual and the community include Jim Kitses' *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (Bloomington 1969), Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York 1981), and Robert Warshaw's "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner" and "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" in *The Immediate Experience* (New York 1971).

⁷ See Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin 1986): 291 & 300. Also, Elsaesser's "Vincente Minnelli," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London 1981): 8-27, provides an illuminating discussion of the contrast between the blunting environment of the melodrama and the plastic, flexible one of the musical.

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