



# The F Word

## Power and Gender in *Thelma & Louise*

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As one of the most popular and commercially successful feminist blockbusters of all time, *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) provides a useful starting point from which to reflect on feminism more broadly. For art historian and critic Peggy Phelan, feminism is 'the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favours men over women.'<sup>1</sup> While Phelan herself suggests that this definition may be open to criticism, her understanding of the term emphasises just how broad it needs to be to include the range of ideas, issues and individuals that it seeks to encompass. In this sense, feminism is best understood as a plurality – as *feminisms*, rather than one singular, unified *feminism*. A brief glance at the burst of women's liberation activism that marked its second wave during the 1960s and 1970s in many countries (including Australia) makes the need for this clear: while women en masse sought to gain a voice and to rise up against male oppression, it became apparent that unequal power relations also existed among women themselves. Since the 1980s, a number of feminist critics such as bell hooks, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Aileen

Moreton-Robinson have focused on the relationship between race, gender and power. But even among white, middle-class feminists – whose voices have been the most audible in the past – it would be false to assume that they all share the same beliefs and fight the same battles. For example, American feminist Catherine MacKinnon is a key figure in the anti-pornography movement, while post-feminist Camille Paglia is renowned as a pro-pornography feminist. So if feminism allows such a wide range of voices in regard to gender and power, what particular feminist message (or messages) can be found within *Thelma & Louise*?

### Sticking together

From its opening scenes where the title characters are introduced until its spectacular conclusion as the two friends fly to their deaths in the Grand Canyon in a blue convertible, *Thelma & Louise* is about female unity. The film emphasises the bond between the women, right down to their similar hair colour and accent; they could be sisters, and as such seek to represent a wider sisterhood. This feminist fantasy of two women released





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from the shackles of gender-based oppression who learn to fight back and stand up for themselves was a mainstream box office smash. It garnered a number of prestigious awards and nominations – including at the Oscars and the Golden Globes – for screenwriter Callie Khouri, director Ridley Scott, and lead actors Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis.

*Thelma & Louise* follows the adventures of two female friends. Thelma (Davis) is a naive, browbeaten housewife who escapes her tyrannical husband to go on a weekend trip with her self-assured yet world-weary best friend Louise (Sarandon). After stopping at a bar on their journey, Thelma is sexually assaulted in a car park by Harlan (Timothy Carhart), whom she had flirted with earlier in the evening. Louise saves Thelma by pulling a gun on Harlan, and when he insults her, she shoots him. Assuming the police will not believe their self-defence motive, they run away, and the compassionate yet professional policeman Hal Slocumb (Harvey Keitel) gives chase.

At first it is Louise who is in control. She decides they must flee to Mexico, but insists that they do not go through Texas, despite it being the most direct route. Meanwhile, outraged that his subservient wife may have left him, Thelma's husband Daryl (Christopher McDonald) lets the police tap his phone. Louise's boyfriend Jimmy (Michael Madsen) presents yet another type of man in stark contrast to Harlan, Hal and Daryl, meeting the two women in Oklahoma to give Louise her life savings at her request. Distracted by Jimmy's marriage proposal, Louise is shocked to discover that JD (Brad Pitt), the handsome cowboy hitchhiker that Thelma had sex with, has stolen all their money. Louise reacts badly to the theft, but as she loses her strength, Thelma – in part liberated by her sexual encounter with JD – takes control and robs a store. Via the phone tap at Daryl's house the police trace the women to the Grand Canyon and hound them to the edge of a precipice. In the film's climax, the women refuse to go back to their old lives and drive over a cliff in a dramatic act of solidarity, holding hands and smiling.

As one of the most famous endings in Hollywood film history, the romance of Thelma and Louise's friendship and their determination not to return to the oppression of their former lives – represented by the iconic Polaroid photograph that flies into the air as they take their final leap – makes it easy to forget that these women are in fact committing suicide.<sup>2</sup> The film's feminist message, then, appears to suggest that true liberation for women is one that can only be attained with fatal consequences. To take control of their own lives, Thelma and Louise must ultimately take control of their own deaths. But beyond these utterly extreme choices, there are other crucial ways that power, gender and violence are inextricably entwined in the film.

### **'He was rapin' me!'**

Predicated upon a story of two women on the run after taking vengeance for an act of sexual violence, *Thelma & Louise* at first may suggest parallels with the rape-revenge trope. While rape-revenge films are often assumed to be a part of the horror and exploitation genres (a supposition heavily supported by Carol J Clover in her foundational 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chain*



*Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*), a closer look at film history exposes a vast cross-generic range of films that have been made in a number of different countries and an array of production contexts.<sup>3</sup> While *Thelma & Louise* certainly includes the key acts of rape and revenge, the oppression they rally against is more insidious than sexual violence alone; it is against a tyranny that dominates them on many levels across a range of contexts.

Open to debate is the issue of whether Thelma was even raped at all, and much critical discussion surrounding the film exposes confusion on the part of many critics as to what defines it. Certainly the movie makes it clear that Thelma believed she was being raped, as she exclaims to Louise, 'He was rapin' me!' What we see on screen supports her claim: Harlan beats Thelma severely as she tries to escape, and he has both of their pants pulled down as she lies on her stomach and he forces himself against her from behind. If he does not technically penetrate her against her will, there can be little doubt that it is his intent to do so. That critical treatments of *Thelma & Louise* vary on whether this assault is rape or attempted rape exposes a more widespread lack of clarity about what rape even is. Feminist historian Joanna Bourke acknowledges the significant variations in legal definitions of the term, whereby some jurisdictions stipulate the inclusion of violence, others focus on the issue of consent, and still others problematically outline specific genitalia that must be involved in order to constitute 'rape'.<sup>4</sup>

This scene is the basis for further critical confusion. In the popular memory of the film, Louise is understood to kill Harlan for raping (or, depending on your definition, attempting to rape) Thelma. But – again – the scene itself makes it very clear that something else is happening. After Louise has rescued Thelma, the two women attempt to leave. Significantly, it is only when Harlan begins to swear threateningly at Louise that she responds with violence. Here, she is not only responding to rape, but to a whole range of abuses. While she pulls a gun on him and threatens him in response to the sexual assault, it is not until he verbally abuses the women as they walk away that she shoots him: 'You watch your mouth, buddy,' she says to his corpse. By responding with violence to his words more than

to his physical abuse, it is clear that the oppression she seeks liberation from is much broader than this one act.

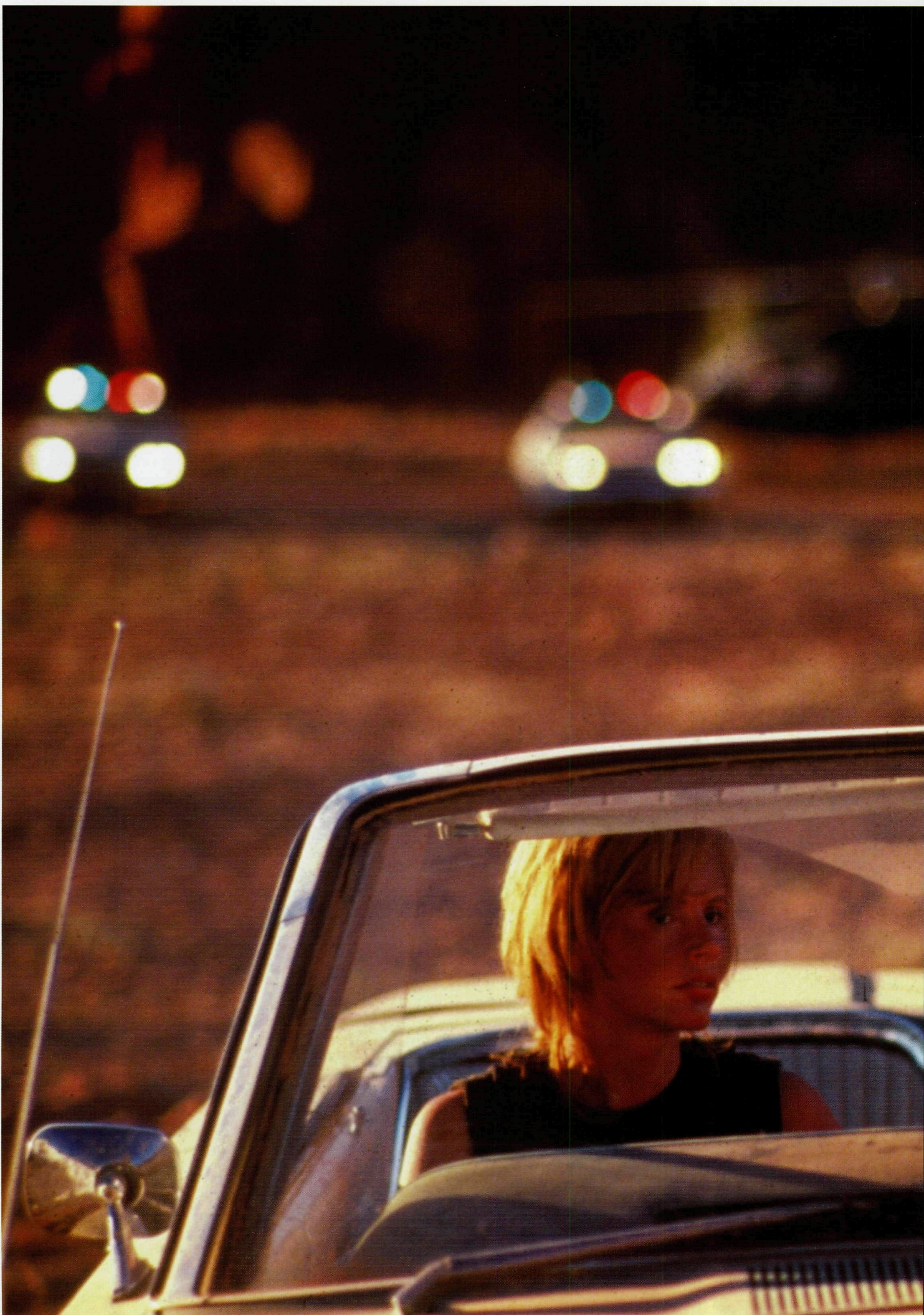
### The Texas question

Louise's history as a victim of sexist oppression thus becomes as central to the film as Thelma's rape, and manifests in the plot as the question, What happened to Louise in Texas? Why does she refuse to even drive through the state when it is the most direct route for their escape to Mexico? As Louise explains later in the film (and as is apparent although unspoken from the outset), her refusal to enter Texas stems from the fact that she was raped there years before. These echoes of the past haunting their present are made tangible in elements of the film's mise en scène: when they begin their adventure, both women wear white (a sign of innocence), with Thelma in a cotton sundress and Louise in 1950s-style sunglasses and headscarf. Even Louise's blue convertible shares this sense of nostalgia, and in many ways functions as a kind of time machine that takes the two women back to an earlier time before they became so unhappy (due to Thelma's unequal marriage and Louise's dead-end job).

As the film progresses, however, Thelma and Louise leave the past behind them and as they do so, their outward appearances also change. They attain more power over their lives and become more masculine in their appearance, foregoing the innocent white clothes, then lipstick, and finally their bras. Their shift from the humdrum realities of their everyday lives into feminist fantasy is nowhere more spectacular than in the scene where they take revenge against a truck driver, who has been harassing them throughout the film, by blowing up his truck. *Thelma & Louise* avoids a simplistic men-versus-women view of the world, however, through the important inclusion of the sympathetic policeman Hal, who appears genuinely concerned for the women's safety and recognises the oppression that they have faced. There are certainly more stereotypically villainous men in the film – the truck driver, Harlan the rapist, Thelma's husband Daryl, and even a police officer who calmly looks at pornographic magazines in Daryl's house while they await Thelma's phone call.

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But the fact that the women themselves shift from feminine to masculine in their appearance throughout the film suggests that gender struggles are more complex than simply boys versus girls.

### Constructing feminism/s

The vision – and version – of feminism presented in *Thelma & Louise* is one that emphasises friendship, love and unity between women as much as it depends upon a vigilante response against the men who abused and oppressed them. It stands as a critique of the glamorisation of rape and the sexual degradation of women by showing the emotional and psychological fallout that such behaviour can cause. But as only one of the many possible variants of feminism that exists, it is a film that raises questions more than it provides answers. To appreciate just how broad the scope of other feminisms is, however, it is fruitful to imagine a number of parallel versions of the film where key factors are altered: how, for example, would the film play out if Thelma and Louise were African-American, Hispanic or Asian women? What if they were younger or older, richer or poorer, smarter or less educated? Would any of these factors alter basic assumptions of guilt or innocence, or shift the way we defend or condemn their behaviour or that of those around them? Does the film advocate violence, both in terms of avenging abuse and in regard to their final suicide, and if so, is this a positive or negative message? Would the feminist ideals presented in the film be as strong or have the same impact without this violence, and if so, what would the alternative message be?

Gender politics is a complex issue, and it is only by opening up our understanding of it from the singular to the plural – from feminism to feminisms – that we can begin to see the ideological construction of a film like *Thelma & Louise*. As Jacinda Read has observed, 'we are living in a culture in which ideas about feminism and its history are as, if not more, likely to be gleaned from popular culture than from reading feminist theory'.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore imperative to think critically about what the mainstream blockbuster success of films such as *Thelma & Louise* says about how feminist issues are understood more broadly.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Peggy Phelan, 'Survey', in Helena Rickett & Peggy Phelan (eds), *Art and Feminism*, Phaidon Press, London, 2001, p. 18.
- <sup>2</sup> In the original version of the film, Thelma and Louise did not die – the ending was changed based on feedback from test audiences.
- <sup>3</sup> Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*, McFarland, Jefferson, 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, Virago, London, 2008, p. 8.
- <sup>5</sup> Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, Manchester UP, Manchester, 2000, p. 7.

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