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**Keywords**
Thelma and Louise, Ridley Scott, Callie Khourie
At the beginning of Ridley Scott’s 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*, the title characters prepare to set off for a weekend trip to a friend’s cabin in the mountains. Thelma asks Louise what to pack and Louise tells her to take her husband Daryl’s fishing equipment. Thelma responds by saying “Louise, I don’t know how to fish.” Louise tells her “Neither do I, Thelma, but Daryl does it, how hard can it be?” (Khourie 9). Although Thelma and Louise never have the chance to fish, they both appropriate a variety of other stereotypically masculine behaviors throughout the film. Louise shoots to kill and rejects the commitment of marriage; Thelma has sex for pleasure and robs a convenience store. Together, Thelma and Louise take narrative control of a classic masculine story.

Shari Roberts argues that the western and road movie genres present shallow, caricatured visions of femininity, where female characters serve as plot-developing devices, aiding the hero in his own personal evolution. Women are limited to a set of male-envisioned tropes: the temptress, a “foil to the laconic, macho, male actor,” or the morally correct wife or daughter. In all of these cases, women “[figure] as helpless, parasitic embellishments to a masculine genre” (62). This tendency is inextricably linked to what Laura Mulvey describes in her seminal 1975 work as “the male gaze” (qtd. in Rob-

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1 When referring to Thelma & Louise, I will be citing the 1991 screenplay by Callie Khourie, unless it is inconsistent with Scott’s film, in which case I will cite the film directly, indicating hour and minute with 00:00.
erts 62). Mulvey argues that the dominant trends in Hollywood film serve the masculine unconscious: because most directors are male, the voyeuristic gaze of the camera is also masculine, most protagonists are male, and films are centered on masculine themes. In this way, the male gaze encourages spectators to identify with the male protagonist rather than the more marginal female characters (837). Lorraine Gamman argues that through the use of female protagonists and women-centered themes, film narratives may appropriate patriarchal constructions and produce a “female gaze” that “articulates mockery of machismo” (15).

On one level, Thelma and Louise does precisely what Gamman suggests; throughout the film, Thelma and Louise direct their gaze onto the men around them. Louise shows Thelma how to see through men’s façades, in order to see them for who they truly are: she teaches Thelma to recognize when men are hitting on her (when she meets Harlan), to understand that telling the police “the truth” will never work, and to realize that truckers do not always live up to their trustworthy reputations. Thelma certainly learns from Louise, but she also has her own experiences with the female gaze, which she directs at J.D.’s character as a sexual object. By the end of the film, though, Thelma and Louise do more than merely appropriate the male gaze. In the final scene, Thelma grabs Louise’s hand and looks beyond the men and forward into the Grand Canyon. Over the course of this paper, I will examine the way in which Thelma and Louise use the female gaze to look through, look at, and look beyond the men in the movie.

Mulvey argues that in films that involve the “male gaze,” viewers cannot identify with a female character to the same extent that they identify
with a male character, because the man is the “representative of power” and the one who makes “things happen” (838). In *Thelma and Louise*, however, the female characters are more accessible to the viewer than their male counterparts. Throughout the movie, the male characters are either left behind, objectified, defied, ridiculed, or even murdered, “presenting a significant challenge to the male gaze” (Gamman 16). Thelma’s husband Daryl is a prime example of this issue with male identification: we have no sympathy for him, and his self-importance engenders our spite and ridicule. At the beginning of the movie, when Thelma asks Daryl if he wants “anything special” for dinner, we might think that Daryl defies Thelma by saying that he “may not even make it home for dinner,” so he “doesn’t give a shit” (Khourie 7); however, Thelma is the one defying him because she knows that she will not be home for dinner after she leaves with Louise. When he says “you know how Fridays are,” Thelma is not naïve enough to believe this story. She responds by saying sarcastically “funny how so many people want to buy a carpet on a Friday night,” and it is clear to the audience, although maybe not to Daryl, that she is mocking him (7). With Louise’s guidance, Thelma is ultimately able to make it clear to Daryl she will no longer tolerate his behavior. When she calls him from Oklahoma, she tells him to “go fuck [himself]” (59). Later in the film, Thelma sees through Daryl completely, even going so far as to manipulate him for her own purposes. She calls him on the phone from another rest stop, hoping to discern whether or not the cops have already questioned him. Daryl greets Thelma with uncharacteristic sweetness—one of the FBI officers had instructed him to answer the phone “like you’re happy to hear from her. Like you really miss her. Women
love that shit” (103). But Thelma is not so easily tricked; she hangs up the phone immediately and tells Louise: “He knows” (125).

At the start of the film Thelma has trouble seeing through the men around her, but Louise seems to possess this skill in spades. When Thelma and Louise stop at a night club, a man named Harlan approaches their table. He asks: “Now what’re a couple of Kewpie dolls like you doin’ in a place like this?” (Khourie 18). Thelma immediately explains their whole situation, while Louise tells him to mind his own business. When Harlan leaves the table, Thelma criticizes Louise for being too dismissive of Harlan, and “jaded” because of all of her “years of waitressing” (20). Louise patronizes Thelma for not being able to “tell when somebody’s hitting on [her]” (20). Louise’s suspicions about Harlan, however, are later substantiated when he attempts to rape Thelma. Louise threatens him with a gun, and he steps away from Thelma; but even with his fly down, exposed in the most literal of senses, Harlan still does not back down. Instead, he looks down the barrel of the pistol and tells Louise to “suck [his] cock” (29); Louise shoots him dead.

The degree of certainty with which Louise decides to kill reveals that she is in an entirely different place from Thelma: she automatically sees danger in the presence of a man, even when his intentions seem honorable. This becomes further evident when Thelma proposes that they just call the police and “tell ’em what happened” (Khourie 31). Louise has seen situations like theirs before and insists that this will do no good because “one hundred people” saw them “dancing cheek to goddamn cheek” (32). She asserts that they “don’t live in that kind of world,” where the police believe
women’s perspective on rape (32). Lynda Hart contends that “Thelma naïvely believes that simply telling the ‘truth’ will exonerate them. Louise has to teach her that the symbolic order is a masculine imaginary” (435). Louise recognizes that she and Thelma can no longer exist in the “symbolic order”; they cannot reintegrate into society. No good will come out of going to the police for Thelma and Louise—just like all of the men in their world, the police will only doubt them. Even when it becomes clear that Hal (the police chief) wants to believe them, his good intentions do not exclude him from the “masculine imaginary” Hart describes.

The final stage of Thelma’s evolution toward Louise’s well-developed ability to see through the men on the road takes place in their encounter with the truck driver. Thelma’s initial impression of the truck driver is that he is letting them pass him because truckers are the “best drivers on the road” (Khourie 111). But when he flicks his tongue at them, Thelma reacts with disgust. Later, when they encounter him again, he asks them if they “are ready for a big dick” and Thelma and Louise decide to teach him a lesson (Scott 01:49). They pull over, he follows them, and Thelma leads the confrontation. She says “I mean really! That business with your tongue. What is that? That was disgusting” (Khourie 169). Louise asks him how he would feel if someone did that to his wife or his mama. They ask him to apologize, and when he responds by yelling “Fuck you!” they shoot out his tires and then blow up his truck (170). By the time they are pulled over by the macho state trooper, Thelma takes the lead in teaching an overbearing man his lesson. She puts a gun to his head, politely telling him to hand over his gun and get into his trunk. Thelma urges him to be “sweet” to the
women in his life because “my husband wasn’t sweet to me and look how I turned out” (149). Whereas the lesson Thelma and Louise taught the truck driver was disciplinary, aimed at a misdeed already committed, the lesson they teach the policeman is pre-emptive, less comic, and more brutal. When they force the policeman to get in the trunk, there is no more going back for Thelma and Louise.

The linear trajectory of Thelma’s progress toward a simple kind of mimicry of bad male behavior is complicated by the appearance, directly in the middle of film, of the hitchhiking cowboy J.D. Right after Thelma tells Daryl to “go fuck [himself],” she trips over J.D., and almost immediately, he becomes an alternative to her pathetic, tyrannical husband (Khourie 59). Thelma does not look through him in the way she is learning to do with other men; instead, Thelma looks at J.D., and she does so with desire: whereas Thelma tells Louise that “you could park a car in the shadow of [Daryl’s] ass,” J.D. has a “cute butt” (63). Thelma voices her desire for J.D.’s body in a sexually empowered way. She goes on to invite J.D. to her motel room late at night, and after a few games and a long, almost flirtatious discussion about J.D.’s armed robberies, they have sex. Margaret Carlson argues that the brief amount of time between Thelma’s attempted rape and her sexual awakening sends a problematic message about assault. She writes that this development suggests that:

the only thing an unhappy woman needs is good sex to make everything all right… 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 (57).

But perhaps Carlson’s point encourages the conception of woman as a passive victim. Patricia Mellencamp makes the alternative observation that this is a liberating experience for Thelma because “sex is no longer a fantasy keeping Thelma captive or a secret key to identity” (149). As Glenn Mann argues, the episode provides 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 act which J.D. taught her” (41). In fact, one could argue that not only does J.D. liberate Thelma sexually, but he also empowers her economically when he describes how he goes about armed robbery—a technique that Thelma goes on to imitate later in the film. And when J.D. steals all of Louise’s money, he inadvertently pushes them into complete financial freedom: it is not until Thelma uses the information that J.D. left her about robbing convenience stores that the women can be truly independent. Brenda Cooper argues that the “sexual encounter can be read alternatively, as the female gaze appropriating the male gaze” (295); as a result of her newfound ability to see through men, Thelma takes charge of her sexuality and her own narrative altogether. Louise, however, does not immediately realize the liberating effect that Thelma experiences with J.D; he retains her deep mistrust of men, regardless of their apparent intentions.

The only point in the film where we question Louise’s steadfast
resistance to male authority takes place when she is on the phone with the police detective, Hal. It becomes clear that Hal only wants the two women to make it out okay. He seems to be on their side, and when J.D. steals all of Louise’s money, he blames J.D. for putting them in the position of needing to commit armed robbery: “Do you think Thelma Dickinson would have committed armed robbery if you hadn’t taken all their money?” (Khourie 121). When J.D. denies his accusations, Hal hits him several times over the head and says:

There’re two girls out there that had a chance, they had a chance!... And you blew it for ‘em. Now they’ve gotten in some serious trouble, and for at least part of it, I’m gonna hold you personally responsible for anything that happens to them… and you’re gonna tell me every damn thing you know so that there’s a small chance I can actually do them some good. (122)

Hal is not the unsympathetic police officer that Louise anticipates; he wants to save them. Louise talks to him on the phone and he says that he “needs [her] help” to make everybody else believe that it was an “accident” (158). But she refuses to let him take them into custody, and she tells him that when she thinks about “incarceration, cavity search, death by electrocution, life in prison” she doesn’t know “if [she] wants to come out alive” (159). And then he tells her that he knows about “what happened to [her] in Texas,” Louise’s previous trauma, the exact nature of which is kept from the audience (Scott 01:45). Hart argues that Louise consciously decides at this moment not to “try to overcome her resistances and allow the sympa-
thetic detective, who in fact does know her history, to ‘save’ her” (Khourie 453). But this is not clear in the movie; when we learn that Hal knows what happened, Louise’s eyes well up and she goes silent. Just as we wonder if Louise will give up running, and perhaps submit back into the patriarchal order, Thelma urges her not to bail out now. Now it is clear that Thelma has completely “crossed over,” as she later articulates. When Louise loses her resolve, it is clear that Thelma can see through the police in a way that she could not before.

Hal sets up J.D. as the villain from whom he must protect the two implicitly helpless women. But in fact, J.D.’s openly self-serving theft of the women’s money does more to set the women up for self-liberation than anything the police chief or Louise’s supportive boyfriend, Jimmy, could do. The relationship between J.D. and Thelma subjugates neither the female character to male narrative control, nor subjugates the man to female narrative control. J.D. functions as a narrative device that helps catalyze Thelma’s and Louise’s ultimate escape from the male gaze; specifically, he facilitates Thelma in her transition from looking at men to looking beyond them. This is especially visible in the use of camera angles throughout the film. For example, when J.D. first enters the film, the camera faces Thelma head on, and we see J.D. behind the car. As she applies her makeup in the rearview mirror, Thelma keeps her head facing forward while she looks at him through her side window. We see the seeds of Thelma’s desire for J.D. grow as her glances to the mirror lengthen in duration. The camera does not show us the view from the mirror until J.D. begins to approach the car—for that brief moment, Thelma’s view of J.D. is entirely hers. Although Thelma
is looking back at the man behind the car, she nonetheless keeps her head facing forward (Scott 02:05).

This continuous look forward continues through the final scene, when the police line up behind the Thunderbird and neither woman looks back at all. Instead, the camera angle shows the women looking at each other and looking beyond, away from the audience, into the Grand Canyon. They look at each other and Thelma says: “Okay, then listen. Let’s not get caught” (Khourie 185). As Thelma tells Louise “Let’s keep goin,” her gaze is directed at Louise (Scott 02:04). And when Louise asks Thelma “What are ya talkin’ about?” (Khourie 185). Thelma glances over the precipice while Louise directs her eyes to Thelma, asking “You sure?” (Scott 02:04). They exchange a long look, then Louise kisses Thelma, looks over into the Grand Canyon herself, and the camera zooms out as Louise steps on the gas. At the end of the film, Thelma and Louise are not focused on the men in their wake at all; their focus is only directed on each other and on what lies beyond.

The evolution of the ways Thelma looks through, at, and beyond men is more sharply defined within the scope of the movie than Louise’s. In the beginning of the movie, Thelma learns to see through men with Louise’s guidance: she exposes Daryl, Harlan, and the truck-driver for who they truly are. Thelma also learns how to look at men in a new way, as we see in the way she gazes at and talks about J.D. At the end of the movie, Thelma is the one who proposes the idea to Louise that they forget about the “army” of men lined up behind them altogether and look beyond (Khourie 180). This evolution is more difficult to track in Louise’s character, though. The
exact nature of Louise’s earlier trauma that shapes her attitudes towards men is not revealed to the audience. Her relationship to Jimmy is ambiguous, too: is she capable of trusting him, unlike other men? The audience does not have access to Jimmy’s character in the same way we have access to other men in the film. He is not comic like Daryl, or sweet like J.D. He shows violent tendencies, as when he knocks over the table in Louise’s motel room, but he also seems to care deeply about Louise. We also know that Louise has the ability to look beyond the men in her life: we see this in her decision to leave Jimmy in the first place, and in her moments of erotic valence with Thelma. Perhaps at the end of the film she has abandoned heterosexual relatedness altogether. In the film’s conclusion, the modes of looking leave the male gaze behind completely; in its void, both the subject and the object of the gaze are female. The final shot does not include Thelma and Louise plummeting to their destruction; on the contrary, it shows them liberated and frozen in the sky above the Grand Canyon. Thelma and Louise demonstrates both cinematographically and narratively how life within the male-dominated order and the abyss is a choice, and they choose the abyss.
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