

Dissolution of Gender Binary and Stereotypical Femininity through Exploration of Cinematic Heroines in the 1990s Filmic Texts^{*}

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Abstract

Thelma & Louise, released in 1991, immediately triggered a fierce debate over the issues such as female violence, revenge and gender equity, prompting the filmmakers to ponder the inadequacy of the traditional representation of femininity in film. The film contributes to the formation of female independence and subjectivity not confined by patriarchal oppression, through the appropriation of violence and vengeance by female protagonists traditionally prescribed as masculine prerogative. Thelma and Louise as the average domestic housewife and waitress are liberated from the constraint of conventional expectation of femininity to cultivate their desire and imagination, free of the male-constructed masochistic passivity and stage a triumphant performance of a more active and assertive feminine principle of subjectivity. It is from *Thelma & Louise* onward that Hollywood begins to spark a series of films highlighting female act of subverting gendered expectation through violent retaliation as a gesture of undermining the stereotypical patriarchal fantasy and ideology of gender and womanhood. *Thelma &*

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Louise's significance lies in its revolutionary act of dissipating the traditional Hollywood representation of female characters by endowing them with new fantasies and reclaiming these women characters as subjects and agents of the narrative to speak out their wants and desires. This study, therefore, will be divided into two parts, with the first part concentrating on the elaboration of gender issues raised and inspired by *Thelma & Louise* and heatedly addressed in other contemporary films of the 1990s and the second part focusing on the content analysis of the individual film *Thelma & Louise* related to the dissolving of the gender binary. Among the films discussed, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* aptly exemplifies the demolition of the traditional concept of femininity through the juxtaposition of two contradicting identities in the protagonist Samantha and Charly played by Geena Davis, whose past performance is non-violent, nurturing, and passive but now she assumes a more aggressive and violent persona, Charly. The film ends up with Charly assimilated into Samantha as a new subjectivity that disrupts the ideological construction of an ideal femininity, suggesting that beneath every housewife might lurk an ever present violent woman, a force of constant antagonism challenging and destabilizing the conventional expectation of a society dominated by gender binary thinking.

Keywords: Gender Binary, Deconstruction of Conventional Femininity, Women and Violence, the Combination of the Masculine and the Feminine in the New Female Hero, Gender Binary and Social Construction, Femininity and Performance, Women's Friendship

The heated debate triggered by the depiction of transgressive female characters in *Thelma & Louise* alerts us to ponder the gender theory propagated by such critics as Judith Butler, who postulates that gender is a social construct, a performance women assume to undermine the long-held conventional view that gender is biologically determined and thus help women release the shackle of the binaristic gender framework. Judith Butler in her groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble* delineates the connection between gender and performance, arguing that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). What she implies is that there is no such thing as a natural gender identity, that is, a person is not born as a man or as a woman. Her purpose is to demolish the impregnable wall formed by stereotypical notion of gender to denaturalize traditional gender categories based on biological determinism. Jeffrey Brown further confirms that “for Butler, gendered identities are not a reflection of one’s authentic core self, but are a culturally coded effect of performance” (22). In other words, it is cultural and social expectation that shapes one’s identity. Simone de Beauvoir foreshadows the idea of gender as social construction when she asserts that gender is not determined by biology but is shaped throughout the course of human civilization: “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch which described as feminine” (281).

Another gender theorist Susan Bordo also punctuates the myth of the ideal femininity by arguing that “through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical charges in fashion—female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, improvement...At the furthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation and death” (745-46). What this passage demonstrates is a tyrannical constraint of male expectation and manipulation upon women to inculcate them to be passive, submissive and silent. Through this process of socialization and coalescence women are expected to adhere to an ideal version of femininity to be sexy, soft and submissive as proper female behavior.

Laura Mulvey's landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" consolidates the dichotomy and binaristic thinking of gender by positing that cinematic representation of female characters becomes a spectacle for male voyeuristic fantasy, thus they are reduced to sexualized objects of male voyeuristic fantasy. Feminist theory based on Mulvey's argument tends to generate an active male subjectivity and a passive female objectivity. Jeffrey Brown also argues that for Mulvey, "the sexual difference demarcated by the active/passive split marks the cinematic gaze as a masculine look that objectifies women as spectacles to be looked at. This masculine gaze of the cinema forces female viewers to adopt either a narcissistic overidentification with women on the screen or a masochistic male point of view" (25). Yvonne Tasker also discerns the trend in the majority of action films in the 1980s Hollywood to relegate the female characters to a stereotypical "hysterical figure who needs to be rescued or protected...All that was required of an actress was an innocently sexual appearance and a ready scream" (16).

It is against such conventional and stereotypical portrayal of female characters that Hollywood engenders a series of films in the 1990s to defy the androcentric narrative such as *Point of No Return*, a remake of *La Femme Nikita*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Thelma & Louise*, *The Aliens Series* and *Terminator Series*, all of which unanimously elicit a controversial debate over how women appropriate and encroach upon the terrain and domain once reserved only for men. Jeffrey Brown even compares the new action heroines of such movies above to a lightning rod to attract public debate because she is "such an in-your-face challenge to basic cultural assumptions about gender roles in real life and in fantasy" (6).

The action and behavior these new heroines exemplify directly pose a challenge to the film theory perpetuated by Laura Mulvey's thinking. Yet the subverting forces released by the emergence of the new female heroes are countered by the uncertainty and doubt put forward by some critics. Sue Botcherby and Rosie Graland raise the question "does the rise of the aggressive heroine really pose a threat to men or does she merely contribute to male fantasy via the eroticization of hardware and violence" (41)? Jeffrey Brown voices his anxiety and reservation by arguing that "on the one hand, she represents a potentially transgressive figure capable of expanding the popular perception of women's roles and abilities; on the other hand, she runs the risk of

reinscribing strict gender binaries and of being nothing more than sexist window-dressing for the predominantly male audience” (43). Susan Faludi vividly captures the conservative and constraining cultural ambience during the 1980s which sees a backlash against the triumph of the second-wave feminism, arguing that media coverage at that time tries to nurture an illusion that gender equity has been achieved, while in actuality women who choose non-traditional options face much stress and difficulty (qtd. in Frances H. Early 100).

Despite the equivocation surrounding the new female heroes, their presence did generate a liberatory discourse to help the new heroine transgress the either/or option to combine both feminine and masculine traits to embrace a new possibility of heroic femininity. Just as Jeffrey Brown puts it: “the real importance of the action heroine is that she is not easily written off as either/or. She does muddy the waters of what we consider masculine and feminine, of desirable beauty and threatening sexuality, of subjectivity and objectivity” (9). The traditional gender binary system is gradually falling apart through the cinematic representation of new female heroes who subvert the patriarchal construction of femininity. Mary Ann Doane aptly encapsulates the deconstruction enacted by contemporary filmmaking, illustrating that “contemporary filmmaking addresses itself to the activity of uncoding, decoding, deconstructing the given-images. It’s a project of defamiliarization whose aim is not necessarily that of seeing the female body differently, but of exposing the habitual meanings/values attached to femininity as cultural constructs” (217).

Elizabeth Hills elaborates on her observation of the rise of the new female heroes in the 1990s Hollywood films, registering their function of deconstructing the gender binary logic by declaring that “aggressive, heroic and transformative characters such as Ripley from the *Alien* series, Sarah Connor from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, both Thelma and Louise from *Thelma & Louise*, and more recently, Samantha/Charly from *The Long Kiss Goodnight* transgress both cinematic genre codes and cultural gender codes which position female characters as the passive, immobile and peripheral characters of Hollywood action cinema....[T]hese powerfully transgressive characters open up interesting questions about the fluidity of gendered identities and changing popular cinematic representations of women” (38).

Here the word “fluidity” suggests the possibility of reversal and shift of gendered

identity and the dissolution of the rigid boundaries of sexual and gender representation. Also from such idea of gender fluidity begets a new concept of female hero who should integrate both the masculine and the feminine, as exemplified by the actress Jodie Foster's comment on her role in *The Silence of the Lambs*: "I think there's something very important about having a woman hero who's a true woman hero, in the most archetypal sense of the word, and yet doesn't have to clothe herself in men's clothing. She's not six-foot-two; she doesn't kill the dragon by being mightier. She actually does it because of her instinct, because of her brain....And that's a real side of female heroism that should be applauded and should be respected....(qtd. in McCaughey and King 14). The idea of gender fluidity is also strengthened by Rikke Schubart's notion of in-between position the new female hero takes. She further argues as the new female hero she becomes a contested site, a paradoxical and ambivalent creature open to feminist as well as postfeminist interpretations, a figure of oppression as well as liberation" (7).

Jo-Anne Shirley Goodwill traces the rise of the new breed of female hero from the 1990s films, suggesting that "she at once lays claim to a status usually inhabited only by men, and at the same time transforms and enriches this heroic status by broadening it to include some traditionally female attributes" (18). Here we should pay close attention to the idea of heroic quality being broadened, which might be related to Deleuze's notion of transformativity, signifying a new emergent system "by bringing together two systems—the masculine and the feminine, which turn out not to be mutually exclusive, but in fact surprisingly complementary and compatible" (qtd. in Jo-Anne Shirley Goodwill 86). Such amalgamation of the masculine and the feminine to forge into a new heroic component is clearly chronicled in the protagonist Ripley of the *Alien* series. She is depicted as a calm and focused officer. There is a scene in *Aliens* when one of the crew members is attacked by the Alien and they ask Ripley to let them enter the spaceship, but she strictly adheres to quarantine procedure and won't open the gate. One of the men becomes hysterical and emotional while Ripley remains cool-headed. She can easily adapt herself to cope with crisis and stress. One moment she fully arms herself to wage a battle with the Alien Queen, and the next she will exhibit her maternal instinct to find and protect the little girl Newt from being slaughtered by the Alien. She epitomizes what Jo-Anne Shirley Goodwill designates in her thesis as "the female

masculinity” which “consists in female-bodied persons expressing characteristics that have traditionally been considered quintessentially masculine” (53). However, another critic Sherrie Inness is still trapped by gender binary thinking, arguing that “in our culture femininity and masculinity are in opposition and therefore exclude one another” (107). Viewed from this perspective, she can only interpret Ripley’s resilience and toughness as a male disguise in a woman’s body. Eventually she is reduced to just another Rambo figure. Yet as Jo-Anne Shirley Goodwill reiterates in her thesis, according to Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam, the portrayal of Ripley’s transgressive behavior is completely innovative. Because in the conclusion of her thesis, Jo-Anne Shirley Goodwill asserts that the significance of these new female heroes lies in their incorporation of the best parts of femininity and masculinity to embark on a journey of dynamic transformation “as they flexibly and freely choose from a range of hitherto gender-linked behaviors to create a new mix that enable them to be an entirely new kind of hero” (130). “These female action heroes have thus set an exciting and liberatory example for all people, by demonstrating that authentic gender-linked behavior derives from choice, not from biology” (130).

What Ripley’s behavior represents is an idea that masculine and feminine performances and behaviors and ways of thinking should not be viewed as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive opposites, but should be viewed as “a giant smorgasbord of exciting and useful possibilities from which they have freely chosen whichever behaviors seem appropriate for given situations” (Jo-Anne Shirley Goodwill 130).

The Long Kiss Goodnight is also a film about the possible dissolution of gender binary through the schizophrenic portrayal of the female character Samantha/ Charly. In the very beginning Samantha played by Geena Davis, is an amiable housewife who suffers from amnesia. Yet gradually her past memory is rekindled and she discovers her true identity as a former assassin hired by the secret agency of the government. Throughout the film we witness how the female hero is torn between these two identities. Yet Jeffrey Brown argues that *The Long Kiss Goodnight* is “a literal stripping away of the feminine masquerade embodied by Samantha in favor of the underlying masculine character Charly” (54). But Joanne Shirley Goodwill suggests that he is still plagued by the binaristic gender thinking, failing to perceive the possible reconciliation

of the masculine and the feminine in Samantha and Charly when Charly employs the masculine characteristics to rescue her daughter and wipe out the bad guys (75). The new female hero can gain access to “a form of power that has been systematically denied to women, while simultaneously demonstrating that the association of ‘maleness’ with ‘power’ is not innate but culturally defined” (Jeffrey Brown 50). Empowered by the idea of gender as culturally determined, these new female heroes can make their own choice to behave as they like, refusing to abide by the terms of sexual difference dictated by society. Once the shackle of gender binary is set loose, the instability of the gender binary system is exposed. Sherrie Innes points out how the filmic texts in the 1990s blaze the trail to create a new possibility for women: “Xena...and other tough women...are shaking up women’s roles beyond American popular culture. Such figures...show their female audience members that they can challenge generations-old stereotypes about what it means to be a woman. For centuries, women have been taught to be physically and mentally nonaggressive if they wish to be accepted by society. They were also expected to wait for men to save them. Now, the media’s tough women are teaching real women dramatically different ideas about what it means to be female. For example, being aggressive is desirable, and women should not wait for men to save them” (15).

La Femme Nikita and its American remake *Point of No Return* are films flirting with the idea of gender as a mercurial performance and masquerade which further challenges the androcentric and gender binary thinking. *Point of No Return* tells the story of the female hero Maggie, a drug-addicted social outcast who is sentenced to death for her violent crime of cold blood murder. But she is spared her life by reaching a deal with the secret agency to receive training as an assassin. Throughout the film she experiences a drastic transformation from a violent, rampant and relentless misfit into a lovely woman of sophistication and elegance. Yet through her transformation we discern how the stability of the conventional expectation of gender is destroyed when Maggie can freely exploit her opponent’s perception of her as a weaker sex to outwit her opponent. Maggie is taught how to behave like a lady and we also witness her change. The gender reversal takes place in many key scenes. In one scene we see how Maggie is assigned by Bob to kill a person, but she is shown a false exit after she has completed her mission. When she tries to escape and encounters a bodyguard, she

suddenly morphs into a helpless and vulnerable woman, thus lowers the bodyguard's alertness and she kills him instead. In such scene is enacted a femininity as a masquerade she uses to her advantage, thus dissipating the belief about the naturalness of gender. As Jeffrey Brown suggests: "she can swear, punch, and shoot like a man..., as easily as she can wear high heels, bat her eyes, and feign helplessness" (40).

Diane Dubois finds out that *Silence of the Lambs* is a composite of four genres—the horror movie, the psychiatrist and patient movie, the protégé and mentor movie and the serial killer movie. Yet what makes this film different from a sexist film is its portrayal of a female hero Clarice Starling and the subversion of the conventions of the genres above. For example, in this film Starling's flashbacks are not contained and controlled as they are in the conventional psychiatrist-patient story, as Diane Dubois asserts: "the flashbacks validate Starling's subjectivity and in so doing go beyond the patriarchal structures that seek to control, interpret or discredit the heroine's story. All these films mentioned above tackle the issues of gender and femininity as social construction and the need to redress the prejudiced gender binary logic. Throughout the analysis and discussion of these films it is hoped that a new concept of female hero will emerge who can embrace both the masculine and the feminine behaviors and thinking to raise richer possibility for gender performance and expression.

Thelma & Louise, released in 1991, immediately triggered a fierce debate over the issues such as battle of the sexes, female violence and gender inequity, forcing the filmmakers to rethink the inadequacy of the cinematic representation of femininity and to develop a genuine depiction of female subjectivity. Through this film we witness how the traditional concept of womanhood is turned on its head, with the focus on how the two protagonists Thelma and Louise through their flight from the persecution of the patriarchal authority gradually undergo an inner illumination and transformation. Thus they reinvent a sisterhood which entails a strong friendship transcending gender differentiation to assure them a career away from male-centered lives. The acquisition of female independence and subjectivity is achieved by the appropriation of the male gaze traditionally used to subjugate and objectify women and by the opening up of a vision free from the patriarchal construction to advocate a female spectatorship capable of embracing alternative choices other than heterosexual dynamics. Instead of merely

resisting the phallogocentric exploitation, *Thelma and Louise* as the paradigm of female liberation cultivates a desire for freedom and choice, which enables them to slough off the male-constructed masochistic passivity and stage a triumphant performance of a more active and assertive feminine principle of subjectivity, a realization of female independence nowhere more poignantly articulated in Thelma's utterance: "I feel awake, wide awake. I don't remember ever feeling this wake. Everything looks different."

Right after *Thelma & Louise* is released, it sparks heated debate which tends to polarize into two camps, with male critics denouncing it as a male-bashing, toxic feminist film, where all the male characters are relegated to a marginalized, debased caricature of macho stereotypes while some female critics affirm its attempt to reexamine the year long oppression and mistreatment plaguing women. *Los Angeles Times* film critic Sheila Benson even accuses *Thelma & Louise* of betraying feminism. It raises questions such as "what will happen when women possess the same power as men do?" and "what consequences women may face when they transgress their boundary and step into the hitherto enfranchised territory and domain of men." The second wave feminism's progression is severely obstructed in the 1980s when the rise of conservatism as represented by Reaganism and Thatcherism gives birth to such films as *Fatal Attraction*, which is concerned with how the peaceful life of the male protagonist Dan Gallagher is ruined by his casual fling with a woman named Alex Forrest. The majority of the film is focused on Alex's abnormal behavior and strong urge to revenge on Dan when she wants to perpetuate the extramarital affair but is rejected by Dan. The portrayal of Alex as an obsessive and impulsive woman who seems to wreck endless destruction on Dan's lives corresponds to Susan Faludi's book *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women*, which mainly highlights the counterstrike of conservatism in suppressing the emerging feminist thought of liberation when women are beginning to make gigantic stride in pursuing independence and autonomy. Robin Wood observes that "restoration of the Father, the father understood in all senses, symbolic, literal, potential is the dominant project, ad infinitum and post nauseam of the contemporary Hollywood cinema" (172). The final scene enacts a rivalry between Alex and Dan, who eventually kills her, thus symbolically exorcising and expelling her from the cinematic narrative.

Yet the vengeful and assertive woman who defies the dictates of patriarchal society

continues to pop up in contemporary Hollywood films. As Marita Sturken puts it: “In the year that *Thelma & Louise* was released, there was a series of films which addressed issues of women and violence—*La Femme Nikita*, *Sleeping With the Enemy*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *The Silence of the Lambs*—all of which were, on the face of it, more appropriate texts for public debates about gender. Yet *Thelma & Louise* was by far the most controversial film of its time” (9). Janice R. Welsch makes an in-depth analysis of *Thelma & Louise* by contrasting it with *Fatal Attraction*. She argues that *Thelma & Louise* breathes in fresh air for the stagnant cinematic representation of women in Hollywood films. In the very beginning *Thelma and Louise*, the two ordinary women of lower class plan to have a weekend trip to get away from the monotonous dreary routine. But a series of accidents force them to defy against the patriarchal status quo. As they progress on their journey, they become more mature and self-determined as symbolized by the gradual expanding vista and landscape while Alex in *Fatal Attraction* is driven to the edge of madness. As Janice R. Welsch further demonstrates: “Louise and Thelma, despite their diminishing options as they rush toward Mexico, grow stronger and more self-assured during their flight; on the other hand, Alex, and with her Dan and Beth are themselves increasingly closed in and diminished... With Alex eliminated, *Fatal Attraction*’s final image of the closely cropped and framed Gallagher family portrait contrasts significantly with the dynamic motion of Louise’s Thunderbird as it spins our over the Grand Canyon” (253). The recuperation of peace and stability in the family epitomizes the consolidation of the patriarchal concept of femininity.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey poignantly argues that within the traditional Hollywood paradigm female characters are designated as the passive objects of male desires. It is the male characters that assume the role of the looker (qtd in Glenn Man 38). Under such circumstance the female spectators are provided with limited options. Either they are led to identify with the male agent within the film or they may identify with the female characters but in a masochistic way. Therefore the possibility of constructing an authentic female agent and identity is obliterated. Mary Ann Doane also points out the difficulty in forging a female identity by arguing that “the attempt to subjectivize or give a significant degree of agency to these women characters is fraught with difficulty because the roles given to women are confined within the spectrum of the mistress, the daughter, the mother, the girl in love,

the secretary, the nurse” (qtd. in Glenn Man 39).

Thelma & Louise's significance lies in its revolutionary act of dissipating the traditional Hollywood representation of female characters by endowing them with new fantasies and reclaiming these women characters as subjects and agents of the narrative to speak out their wants and desires. Brenda Cooper's argument further strengthens *Thelma & Louise*'s contribution to the construction of a female gaze that disrupts the traditional Hollywood depiction of female characters which perpetuates the essentialist myth about a feminine essence that is non-violent, self-sacrificing, nurturing, passive, non-aggressive (qtd. in Aspasia Kotsopoulos 27). Mulvey's theory is severely inveighed against for its failure to endow the female spectator with agency. The current view tends to focus on “the multiplicity of gazes and identifications that might exist in a viewing context....In the complexity of contemporary image culture, men are increasingly imaged as the object of a gaze and women are sometimes seen as those who can look with power” (Marita Sturken 78-79). As a result, through this film we witness how the female protagonists take control of the gaze and redefine the idea of gender via the active gaze. The director uses the symbol of the mirror to indicate the protagonists' realization of their own strength through their gazing into the mirror, with Louise discarding her lipstick upon gazing her reflection into the mirror and Thelma reveling in her gazing upon J. D. through the car mirror. During the sex scene the camera spends much more time focusing on Brad Pitt's body than Geena Davis's, which makes Marita Sturken suggest that “it could hardly be argued that J. D. is disempowered by the gaze of the women and the camera upon him as a sexual being” (82). Therefore the new female gaze entails a paradigm shift where female characters become the bearer of the look and are inscribed as subjects and agents of the narrative; such subversive gaze is meant to challenge and resist patriarchal construction, “opening the film's text to a feminist reading and offering women unique spectatorship possibilities” (Brenda Cooper 279).

Some female critics perceive the message behind *Thelma & Louise* which implies the predicament women face in contemporary society such as sexual harassment and rape, and “the law's insensitive treatment of women victimized by such crimes” (Aspasia Kotsopoulos 13). The screenplay writer Callie Khouri voices her anger by arguing that it is the absence of proper roles for women in traditional Hollywood that

forces her to write this screenplay. All these revolutionary gestures attest to the subversive power *Thelma & Louise* engenders, encapsulated by Manohla Dargis' words: "In the absence of men, on the road Thelma and Louise create a paradigm of female friendship, produced out of their willful refusal of the male world and its laws; No matter where their trip finally ends, Thelma and Louise have reinvented sisterhood for the American screen" (18).

In the very beginning of the film both Thelma and Louise decide to take a short vacation in the mountains without informing their men beforehand. Thelma prepares dinner for her husband Darryl in the microwave oven with a note that she will be back on Monday. The opening scene is intercut between Louise working in the busy and crowded restaurant and Thelma trying to cater to her domineering husband. When Louise first asks Thelma to join her on a weekend trip, Thelma's response is that she has to ask her husband for permission. Louise reminds her that he is her husband, not her father. These hesitations show that Thelma and Louise are still concerned with how their men think about them, as Glenn Man suggests: "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" (39). Once they embark on their journey of adventure, they gradually begin to disengage themselves from their commitment to patriarchal domesticity and the hegemonic authority of the law. The catalyst to precipitate these women's transformation into a non-conformist is the incident of near rape of Thelma by the womanizer Harlan. Having just released from the control of her husband, Thelma is immersed in joy and freedom; she does not discern the danger and sexual threat behind Harlan. He aims to take advantage of Thelma by forcing her to drink. Then he takes her into the parking lot where he brutally beats her when Thelma rejects his advances. It is in the moment of crisis when Thelma is nearly raped by Harlan that Louise intervenes to rescue her by pointing the pistol at him. He could have walked away had he not uttered the dirty words. It is his unremorseful and rude behavior that enrages Louise to shoot him to death. "Harlan is symbolically exorcised, cast out, by Louise's bullet in punishment for all the times a woman's agency has been denied, either through violence or language" (Aspasia Kotsopoulos 20).

Sarah Projansky suggests that the attempted rape in this film is used as a metaphor for various forms of sexual harassment including visual and verbal assault and the act of

killing by Louise can be seen as a revolt against rape culture (127). After the tragic incident Thelma naively suggests they go to the police for help, yet Louise pessimistically replies that many people see Thelma and Harlan dance cheek to cheek, thus nobody would believe Thelma's testimony. Because Louise also encounters a similar sexual assault in Texas but she does not get protection and care from the law and institution. Mia Carter succinctly captures the predicament women face in the rape trial where they have to revisit the terrible experience, suffering the second violation by making the following comment: "The sad truths of the real world and disappointing scenarios of too many recent rape trials have taught women that they will not be believed, however battered and bruised and no matter how well-witnessed the crime...Many women understand all too well why Thelma and Louise fled" (134). Despite the detective Hal's sympathy towards Thelma and Louise, they know that eventually the law is not on their side, that it ignores the psychic wound that continues to torture them, forcing them to take the law into their own hand. Almost all the male characters are parodied as chauvinistic caricatures in the film. But detective Hal throughout the whole film expresses sympathetic understanding towards Thelma and Louise. He never gives up his try to save the girls from being arrested. Even by the end of the film when all the guns are aimed at Thelma and Louise, Hal still runs after them to persuade them to change their mind before it is too late. In an attempt to help Thelma and Louise, he even stands up against his FBI colleague Max, protesting "how long are these women going to be fucked over" (qtd. in Marita Sturken76). Disappointed at the mechanism of the judicious system, Louise decides to escape to Mexico, while Thelma under the guidance of Louise, gradually sheds her passive and submissive resignation to assume a new self of power and confidence. Together they "undermine the passivity, self-sacrifice, and masochism associated with the conventional roles of wives, mistress, daughter, mother, girl in love that have haunted the Hollywood screens of the past" (Glenn Man 40).

Unlike the traditional Hollywood films where women are always portrayed as competing with each other to fight for the man they love, *Thelma & Louise* glorifies female friendship, free of jealousy and competition to highlight the allegiance and loyalty shared by each other. The true essence of friendship transcends gender and heterosexual love. When Thelma is traumatized by Harlan's brutal assault, Louise

rescues her, risking her own future. In a tender gesture, Louise uses her scarf to clean Thelma's face after Harlan's blows have left her bloody and bruised. When Thelma is at sixes and sevens, Louise takes the lead to figure out what to do next. Later when the hitchhiker J. D. steals their money, shattering their dream of escape, Louise collapses, unable to maintain her composure, Thelma suddenly matures to compel Louise to lift out of despair. "The women take care of each other, exchanging the roles of protector and caretaker symmetrically; neither competes to be the one in charge, each assuming that role when necessary, when the other falters" (Brenda Cooper 296). Such friendship is not flawless. They disagree on many issues, yet gradually they tend to synchronize, reaching a common ground to leave behind their past self. Louise has the chance to reunite with her boy friend Jimmy. There is a scene where Thelma is worried that Louise might make a deal with the police, betraying Thelma to marry Jimmy. Yet Louise's firm reply confirms their mutual trust and affection. Louise says that "Jimmy is not an option." One of the soundtracks for this film comes from Glenn Frey's lyrics: "You and I will always be together. From this day on you'll never be alone." This song is mainly about a man serenading love song to his beloved. But it takes on a new resonance within this film because it is when Thelma and Louise express the deepest commitment to each other that the song plays on.

A hybrid of various genres can be located in *Thelma & Louise*, running the gamut of western, buddy film, outlaw couple film and road movie. Yet they are employed mainly to bring about an unexpected result which will frustrate the audience's conventional expectation. Among them the outlaw couple film is often focused on the protagonists' uncompromising resistance to the hierarchy of social stability. However in the end they are often ostracized and punished, sending a message of recuperation and containment. But as Aspasia argues: "as a generic hybrid, this film (*Thelma & Louise*) blends aspects of the road movie and the woman's film, offering gender-bending twists to old Hollywood convention" (12). Here the word "gender-bending" vividly resonates with Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance; for her gender is performed—"that is, made up of a series of acts and rituals that are consistently repeated—it not only questions the naturalness of gender, but also calls into question the existence of a true gender" (Donna Peberdy 27). Viewed from such perspective, gender as a mercurial social performance ready to subvert long-held expectation and

prejudice of gender facilitates Hollywood's cinematic representation of crossover of traditional genre for both the new notion of gender and genre challenges the stagnant and rigid convention and opens up diverse possibilities in cinematic representation. Butler's idea of gender could further be interpreted as a facet of ideology, "created and fuelled by public and social discourse in order to normalize what is conceived to be 'masculine' or 'feminine' at any given time" (Donna Peberdy 27). With the awareness of gender as cultural and social performance, Hollywood's strict adherence to conventional boundary of genre gradually dissolves; once genres are intermingled and rearranged the once limited range of female or even male roles are widened, allowing them more space to cultivate their agency and subjectivity. *Thelma & Louise* diverts from traditional western in its depiction of female characters as the symbol of empowerment, replacing the male heroes as the explorers and adventurers of the frontier; while the most conspicuous attribute of road movie is the wide open space, a microcosm of the inner expansion and growth of the protagonist. As Thelma and Louise's journey progresses, they witness the grandeur and beauty of the huge mountain and rock formation. There is a scene where they are driving through the night just before dawn and Thelma is amazed by the infinite immensity of the open sky. She feels as if she is rejuvenated and reborn, saying that something has crossed over me and I cannot go back. This act of initiation attests to Thelma's inner growth and transformation, shedding her immaturity and sentimentality. As Thelma assumes more independence and authority her threat to the patriarchal authority escalates. Thelma and Louise's behavior becomes all the more transgressive and subversive as symbolized by their gradual discarding of symbols of traditional femininity. When Louise waits outside as Thelma enters the liquor store to stage a robbery, she stares into the rearview mirror, noticing her lack of makeup. Yet no sooner does she reach for her lipstick to add her make-up than she decides not to wear it and throw it away. As Marita Sturken illustrates, the mirror has been a token of female narcissism, a tool for the construction of femininity (80). The idea of gender as performance and construct is deeply explored in Bernie Cook's article in which she argues that the film itself repeatedly emphasizes that gender is a social construct, performed and not essential, opening possibilities for mobile identification...It is important to note that, as Louise and Thelma continue their visual, stylistic, and gestural transformation away from their construction in the early

scenes, they do not move away from a construct toward an essence. At the same time as the women cast off symbols of conventional femininity, they take up symbols stereotypically associated with lower-class, white masculinity (27-28). By the time when both Thelma and Louise have experienced inner transformation and illumination as expressed through Thelma's utterance: "something has crossed over in me and I cannot go back," which means they have given up "a compulsory, unreflective performance of gender for a more playful, self-conscious performance of gender," that they can take a complete control of their performance of gender to forge a new, hybrid construction and "drawing upon conventions of both masculinity and femininity" (Bernie Cook 29). This act of refusal signifies the rejection of traditional femininity as dictated by the patriarchal society. In Kathleen Rowe's view, *Thelma & Louise* is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnavalesque," a kind of parody to subvert the social rules and regulations. Thelma and Louise's deviation from the patriarchal social norm, viewed this way, becomes a Bakhtinian laughter to tear apart the social constraint. As Kathleen Rowe further argues : "during the chaos of the carnivalesque moment, inversions of social role create a world where women, constrained perhaps most of all by the social labors of propriety, can become 'unruly': angry, loud, sexually aggressive, or physically exuberant, all behaviors outside the boundaries of feminine compliance, especially the social rules that encourage women to keep their bodies under constant control. They thereby show the artificiality of those rules through their easy dismissal and give women vital access to those physical and emotional excesses ordinarily forbidden to them under the cultural warnings against hysterical behavior" (qtd. in Victoria Sturtevant 48). Thelma and Louise's transgressive behaviors appropriate the concept of "hysteria" which once possesses negative connotation to signify female irrational and emotional sentimentality. Once it is manipulated by the patriarchal system to act as an accusation "that serves to silence women and gives masculine authority the green light to ignore women's voices and their emotions" (Victoria Sturtevant 45). Even their final heroic act of flying over the Grand Canyon is interpreted as a sublimely hysterical choice, a willful refusal to play by the patriarchal rule which can only make them inert and inactive.

Some critics like Margaret Carlson finds it unbelievable that after from such terrible assault by Harlan, how can Thelma recovers from it so soon to embrace a

stranger J.D.(qtd. in Brenda Cooper 293). But from the perspective of female empowerment and gaze, this affair symbolizes Thelma's sexual awakening and liberation. She is simply exercising her right to make choices regarding her own sexual freedom and independence. As Glenn Man observes: "Not only does Thelma gain sexual liberation in her relationship with J. D., she also gains the opportunity to play out her life story, to adopt a dominant male role when she performs her gun waving bandit act which J.D. taught her" (41). In the love scene where the camera focuses on the torso of J.D. we can perceive the traditional dialectics and dynamics of male gaze are reversed. Here J.D.'s body becomes the sexual spectacle, As Marita Sturken points out that such scene demonstrates "the extent to which the film defies traditional formulas of the gaze, and shows the complexity of the power relations of looking" (82-83). All these subverting gender-bending maneuvers epitomize the film's attempt to appropriate the female agency and subjectivity and identity from the hitherto male-dominated genre and domain.

Another defeating of the male chauvinism takes place when Thelma and Louise decide to teach the truck driver a final lesson, who keeps voicing obscene words toward them. Despite Thelma and Louise incessant request for his apology, this man is still relentless and unrepentant, reminiscent of the misogynist Harlan. His rude manner fuels Thelma and Louise rage, forcing them to shoot and blow away his truck, thus symbolically castrating him and rendering him impotent. The only male character who sympathizes with Thelma and Louise's predicament is the detective Hal, who when he arrests J.D., condemns him for depriving them of the only chance to be saved. As Thelma and Louise's journey draws to a close before the edge of the Grand Canyon, we witness his desperate act to help them. He yells at Max, who is in charge of the investigation, uttering: "How many times are these girls gonna get fucked over!" Yet despite Hal's persuasion, Thelma and Louise realize that surrendering to the patriarchal system would mean accepting "the compromise of retaining a permitted degree of independence within and under the auspices of the establishment" (Glenn Man 46). Again their determination to leap over the cliff rather than be persuaded by Hal to be contained and institutionalized again demonstrates the defeat of the patriarchal authority and the unbridgeable gap and difficulty of negotiation between men and women, symbolized by Hal's desperate run after Thelma and Louise's convertible. The camera

utilized slow motion to highlight the distance between them, implying that he never gets real close to them (Sarah Projansky 136).

With the police carried with heavy arms closing in on from every direction, Thelma bravely suggests that they should go on with their journey. The director uses the freeze frame to mythologize Thelma and Louise into a timeless symbol of resistance and liberation. The screenplay writer Callie Khouri refuses to view this ending as a suicidal act. Rather she characterizes them as flying away: “Women who are completely free from all the shackles that restrain them have no place in this world. The world is not big enough to support them. They will be brought down if they stay here. They weren’t going to be brought down. So let them go. I loved that ending and I loved the imagery. After all they went through I didn’t want anybody to be able to touch them” (qtd. in Marita Sturken 73). They clasp hands and kiss each other, mounting all their courage to fly over the valley. On the surface this suicidal act might connote failure in their struggle against the male domination. But viewed at a deeper level their heroic gesture has turned them into an icon of existential integrity and female subjectivity. Just as Glenn Man argues, “the women’s grand leap into unencumbered space is no less a propulsion out of time and the constraints of the social discourse” (45). Sarah Projansky interprets Thelma and Louise’s suicidal flight as both utopic because it represents the total severance with Patriarchal manipulation, an unyielding spirit of freedom and tenacity, and as dystopic in that the assaultive male-dominated social order is still persistent that the only way to avoid it is to choose death” (123). Her idea corroborates with Janice R. Welsch’s argument in the final part of her essay, which argues that “given the impact of the women’s movement and of feminism over the past quarter century, women have been redefining and sampling an array of ways to be in the world, pressing men to readjust and rethink their positions as well. *Thelma & Louise* suggests how difficult this process is given the patriarchal restraints still in place. The responses to *Thelma & Louise* suggest how wide the gulf is between those who deeply resent and resist changes in the status quo and those who welcome and applaud any progress no matter limited, toward gender equality” (263).

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從 1990 年代電影女性英雄角色看性別二元論述及傳統女性氣質的解構

賈繼中*

摘要

1991 年好萊塢推出「末路狂花」(*Thelma & Louise*)之後，立即在批評界引發激烈的爭辯，主題圍繞在女性暴力、復仇及爭取性別平等議題，提供了電影工作者相當多的素材，對過去傳統電影對於女性角色的特質描述，開始做深刻的省思。這部電影的最大貢獻在於形塑女性獨立精神啓蒙與自主性，跳脫父權思維框架，展現在女主角跨越傳統以來惟男性獨尊的領域。「末路狂花」的兩位女主角一開始的身分只是平凡的家庭主婦與餐廳的女侍，但他們在公路上所經歷的遭遇啓發了他們掙脫傳統對女性氣質的期待與貶抑，進而開始醞釀自我的想像與欲念，重新打造新女性英雄的主體意識。從此片開始，1990 年代開始陸續推出以探討女性角色顛覆傳統性別特質認定的影片，而「末路狂花」的重要性在於在拆解過去對女性角色的論述呈現上，扮演了推波助瀾的角色，賦予女性英雄新的想像空間來主導電影敘事。本研究結構上分為兩部分，第一部分著重在分析 1990 年代重要的電影性別論述，同時將其應用在分析與「末路狂花」同時期的其他重要電影文本，而第二部分則針對「末路狂花」電影本身進行分析研究，同時導入拆解性別二元論述議題。與「末路狂花」同時期的另一部重要電影是「奪命總動員」(*The Long Kiss Goodnight*)，其中主要的主题探討透過女主角極端性別特質的融合來解構傳統刻板的女性特質論述，性別二元論述的架構因此而鬆動，性別已不再

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是由生物學所決定，而是透過自主意識所做出的自由選擇，從其中可以為女性英雄找到更寬廣的呈現方式與揮灑空間。

關鍵詞：二元性別論述、傳統女性氣質的解構、女性與暴力、新女性英雄的融和特質、性別論述與社會建構、性別氣質與展演、女性情誼