

Lois Brauckmuller

MEDC 5310: Media and Culture

Paper 3 – Thelma & Louise, A Leap of Faith

Dec. 1, 2007

Thelma & Louise hit the road and American theaters in 1991, the same year that Robert Kennedy Smith went to trial for rape and Anita Hill confronted Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas with allegations of sexual harassment. The film may have been an attempt to bring something fresh to theaters, but society saw it as something more. What started out as a simple road trip film about the bonding of two women has become a cultural classic and fodder for cultural studies proponents everywhere.

Thelma & Louise has been labeled as drama, adventure, action, relationship, fugitive-couple-on-the-run, and road trip buddy movie. In essence, it is a journey of self-discovery that begins with a weekend of relaxation and takes a detour when the younger, more naïve Thelma is nearly raped. The aggressor is shot and killed by Louise, who has been victimized in the past. Their destiny unfolds as they try to make sense of it all.

The screenplay for Thelma & Louise was written by Callie Khouri, who was in her early 30s at the time. It was her first screenplay and she won an Oscar for the project. She went on to write Something to Talk About and co-wrote and directed Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood. The film was directed by Ridley Scott, whose projects include Hannibal and his most recent film, American Gangster. (IMBd)

The primary purpose of the film is entertainment, according to Khouri. “I love to laugh, and I wanted this to be a movie you were enjoying and having a good time with because you were watching these women get their lives. Even though they would lose them, they were becoming more and more themselves” (par. 18). As she developed her characters,

however, she shaped their pasts to include repression by the men in their lives and set the stage for a dialogue on women's rights.

In a June 1991 Time magazine cover story about the film, Richard Schickel said:

Whole lot of heavy thinking going on out there. Some pretty heavy journalistic breathing too. Hard to believe that the occasion for this heated exercise in moral philosophy and sociological big-think is a modest and, at its most basic level, very enjoyable little movie...No matter. *Thelma & Louise* is a movie whose scenes and themes lend themselves to provocative discussions (par 6).

In the article, Miami Herald movie reviewer Bill Cosford called the film "a butt-kicking feminist manifesto . . . which sweeps you along for the ride." In contrast, Los Angeles Times film critic Sheila Benson called it a betrayal of feminism, which, she said "has to do with responsibility, equality, sensitivity, understanding — not revenge, retribution or sadistic behavior" (Schickel, par. 5).

Khouri may have created the film for one audience, but the divergence in interpretation clearly illustrates that there is more than one. She wanted audience members to relate to *Thelma and Louise* as typical women and be able to forgive their transgressions, even though they had become outlaws. Khouri said she knew the shooting would need to be prompted by a traumatic event in order to invoke the sympathies of the audience. "There are thousands and thousands of women walking around that have something in their past we don't know about," she said, "and they deserve to be treated with respect" (par. 32).

Including the rape as the turning point was also Khouri's attempt to provide a logical premise for the film. She had been approached inappropriately several years before and called on the anger that she felt to write the film. "It had to be grounded in reality, so

Thelma and Louise would never be in a situation that could never occur,” she said.

“Everything had to be real and believable” (par. 25).

A search for respect may be the underlying theme of the film. When we first meet Thelma and Louise, they are preparing for a weekend road trip to a cabin in the woods. Louise wants to be away from home when her longtime boyfriend with commitment issues returns from a trip of his own. Browbeaten Thelma leaves her husband a note on the microwave because she is too intimidated to ask his permission to leave. Each conflict along their journey is a test of their confidence and their search for respect, albeit in a nontraditional way in a male-dominated culture.

The male characters in the film are stereotypes of men at their worst. Louise’s boyfriend loves her, but won’t commit until it is too late. During a scene late in the film, he says he will marry her and will not reveal her secrets. Louise says: “Damn, Jimmy, did you take a pill that makes you say all the right stuff?” Thelma’s husband yells at her, and does not listen. “He is an asshole,” Thelma says. “Most of the time I just let it slide.” Even the police investigators, who we expect to act professionally, have their moments. A stakeout scene at Louise’s home shows one investigator reading “Boudoir” magazine.

One of the worst stereotypes is a truck driver that the women encounter several times on the highway. The mud flaps on his truck include silhouettes of a naked woman and he makes sexual comments and gestures to the women each time he sees them. They finally get revenge when they blow up his tank truck, which symbolizes a penis, according to director Ridley Scott.

Even J.D., a charming hitchhiker, victimizes the women. He awakens Thelma sexually, and unwittingly leads her to her next crime when he demonstrates how to conduct

a robbery. "I've always believed if done right, armed robbery doesn't have to be a totally unpleasant experience." Then he slips out with their money.

As the film opens, the women have limited control of their destinies. Louise is self-sufficient, but she is not where she wants to be in life. More than once she says, "You get what you settle for." Thelma is under complete control of her husband, who she married at age 18. She has never been with anyone else and has never left town without him. The women are content, however, until Thelma is attacked and Louise's old wound is opened. Their moods vacillate between despair and euphoria as the plot unfolds, with the women taking turns as the stronger friend.

There are several conventional trappings in the film, especially related to gender. Their homes are well kept with lace curtains and other feminine touches. As Thelma prepares for her trip, she wipes out a single drinking glass and places it on a folded towel on the counter. As she packs, she places shoes in plastic bags before putting in them in her suitcase.

At the beginning of the film, the women are the picture of femininity. The older, more serious Louise has her hair pulled up in a bun, a blouse buttoned to the neck, and lots of jewelry. She leaves home wearing a handkerchief. Thelma has a head of well-groomed curls and frilly top. Both women wear makeup. As the film unfolds, their dress becomes more casual, and more masculine. Late in the film, they both wear tank tops, sometimes referred to as "wife-beaters." Louise eventually throws out her lipstick.

Hats also have a significant role. At one point, Louise trades her jewelry for a well worn cowboy hat. After emasculating the truck driver, Thelma claims his "trucker's cap" as her own. And in a final scene, when the women are about to lose their lives, their hats are blown off by the whirl of the helicopter blades.

Other conventional trappings include low-hanging lights in a smoke-filled interrogation room, and a hickey as a trophy of sexual triumph. During a chase scene, the fleeing car crashes through a clothesline, a last brush with domesticity, perhaps?

The conventions and subtle messages seem harmless, and would likely have been considered part of the fabric if the characters of this film had both been men. But the film industry was ready for a twist on the conventional male bonding movie. Time writer Schickel said:

Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider, Dirty Harry and Fatal Attraction — all these movies began as attempts to vary and freshen traditional generic themes but ended up taking their creators, and their audiences, on trips much deeper, darker, more disturbing than anyone imagined they were going to make (par. 8).

The film was released in May, just months after Robert Kennedy Smith was accused of rape. Later that year, Anita Hill bared her soul and stood up to Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, who was confirmed despite her testimony. American women felt victimized. “All the talk, nationally, was of sexual harassment, date rape and crimes against women generally,” said New York Times writer Judith Warner as she recalled the year the film was released (par.14).

The time was right for Thelma & Louise to bring women’s rights into the theater, the living room and the board room. “Consciously or not, these films tend to serve as expressions of the values or confusions jangling around in their society, or occasionally as springboards for earnest discussions of them,” Schickel said.

At a time when moral discourse has been reduced to the size of a sound bite and rapid social change has everyone on edge, the messages conveyed

in even the most frolicking of these movies stir peculiar passions. Such films often have an astonishing afterlife, not only in popular memory but as artifacts that vividly define their times (par. 10).

At the end of the film, Thelma and Louise drive off the edge of the canyon to escape capture and find their ultimate freedom. In an alternate ending, the women escape to Mexico. But in her examination of the film, author Aspasia Kotsopoulos finds the favored ending more appropriate. “In a time of backlash, the possibility of social transformation may very well require women to join hands and take a leap of faith” (34).

Works Cited

IMDb, Internet Movie Database. 1 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103074/>>

Khouri, Callie. “Callie Khouri - On Creating Character: Thelma & Louise.” SydField.com a website for screenwriters: The Art of Visual Storytelling. 1 Dec. 2007.
<http://www.sydfield.com/featured_callichour.htm>

Kotsopoulos, Aspasia. “Gendering Expectations: Genre and Allegory in Readings of Thelma and Louise.” Left History, An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate. Vol 8, No 2 (2003)

Schickel, Richard. “Cover Stories: Gender Bender.” Time online. 24 June 1991. 1 Dec. 2007
<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,973234,00.html>>

Thelma & Louise. Dir. Ridley Scott. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991.

Warner, Judith. “Domestic Disturbances: Thelma & Louise in the Rearview Mirror.” The New York Times online. 20 Sept. 2007. 1 Dec. 2007
<<http://warner.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/09/20/thelma-and-louise-in-the-rear-view-mirror/>>