Chapter 4: Feminism and the Popular: Readings of Rape and Postfeminism in Thelma and Louise

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Feminism and the Popular

Readings of Rape and Postfeminism in Thelma and Louise

Near the end of *Thelma and Louise* (1991), Thelma asks Louise if she is thinking about making a deal with Hal, the sympathetic, paternalistic cop who helps to track them for murdering Harlan, the man who rapes Thelma early in the film. While on the phone with Louise, Hal uses his inside knowledge about "what happened to [her] in Texas" (presumably rape) to try to persuade her that he understands her unlawful response to sexual assault (killing the rapist), while also trying to keep her on the phone long enough for fellow officers to trace the call. While Louise is at a loss for words, Thelma, who is standing next to Louise, cannot hear Hal's attempts at friendly persuasion; worried about being caught, Thelma hangs up the phone. Hal's spell over her now broken, Louise promises Thelma she will not make a deal and turn herself in, saying, "We don't wanna end up on the damn *Geraldo Show*!"

If "Geraldo" stands in for "talk shows" in general, which stand in for publicity, heated debates, scrutiny of feminine pleasures, and ultimately community sanction, then Louise is right about what will happen to her and Thelma if they reenter society. While Thelma and Louise avoid a mass-mediated fate by choosing death within the diegesis, the popular press reviews of and commentaries on the film place *Thelma and Louise* (the film) and Thelma and Louise (the characters) on a figurative talk show, debating issues such as feminism, feminine identity, violence, and women's pleasure in literally hundreds of reviews and articles that continue to appear even in the late 1990s, years after the film's release.[1] Furthermore, the scholarly press has responded to and participated in this media spectacle, publishing (so far) two forums in scholarly magazines,[2] three articles in the July 1991 issue of *Sight and Sound*,[3] and dozens of essays and book chapters about *Thelma and Louise*, most of which at least

in part confront the issue of feminism in relation to the film.[4] In addition to articles specifically about the film, and thus fairly easily found through typical research methods, any number of scholarly essays and books, many more (I assume) than those I happen upon while reading on other topics, use *Thelma and Louise* as a representative example of a feminist (or occasionally nonfeminist) popular film.[5]

I choose *Thelma and Louise* for a single-film case study, then, because it is probably the most highly mediated fictional rape narrative to have appeared in U.S. popular culture since the early 1980s, establishing it as the single most talked about post-1980 rape film.[6] Furthermore, much of this discussion has focused on the film's relationship to feminism and postfeminism: the popular press primarily discusses postfeminist definitions of feminism in relation to the film, while the scholarly press asks how feminist the film's feminism really is. Given its hypermediation, *Thelma and Louise* offers an excellent opportunity to examine the relationships among postfeminism, feminism, and rape. Looking at the film from a double perspective, I ask two questions. First, how do the film and the scholarly response to it at least implicitly reveal ways feminism resists postfeminism? And conversely, does the postfeminist discursive context of the popular press's response to the film potentially limit any reading of feminism in the film, particularly a feminist perspective on rape?

While answering these questions, I examine (and, admittedly, add to) the discursive mediation of *Thelma and Louise,* paying particular attention to the representation of rape and the film's relationship to feminism and postfeminism in the process. While some feminist criticism of the film does discuss rape briefly, to the best of my knowledge, no sustained analysis of the representation of rape in the film has yet appeared in print.[7] Thus, in the first of three sections of this chapter, I consider *Thelma and Louise* as a rape film, related to the other rape films and television shows I discuss throughout this book. Taking my cue from many of the feminist scholars who find something of value in the film, I explore how the film's narrative about rape and sexual violence can be read to challenge sexualized violence. From this perspective, I argue that *Thelma and Louise* represents a critical and resistant relationship to rape by drawing attention to links between rape and men's control over language and the gaze.

Additionally, I argue that the film offers at least four potential responses to sexual assault, each linked to women's self-preservation in a context of gendered and sexualized oppression: run from it, ignore it, defend oneself from it and get revenge for it, and learn from and about it.

These multiple responses invite a complex understanding of sexual assault that leads to an ambiguous and ambivalent conclusion to the narrative: Thelma and Louise's climactic flight into/over the Grand Canyon is both utopic, because it evokes women's freedom and pleasure, and dystopic, because it suggests that the assaultive male-dominated social order is so powerful the only way to escape it is to die. Through my analysis of sexual violence in the film, I also argue that the film's relationship to postfeminism is ambivalent: it both draws on and revises certain aspects of postfeminist rape narratives, such as those I describe in chapter 3. Overall, I argue that the film's ambivalence about both rape and postfeminism allows *Thelma and Louise,* on its own, to articulate a resistant relationship to both sexual violence and typical postfeminist representations of rape, women, and feminism.

In the second section of this chapter, however, I argue that coverage in the popular press resolves the film's ambivalence over and implicit resistance to postfeminism by glossing over sexual assault and offering circumscribed answers to questions about feminism and feminine pleasure. The press asks whether or not the film is feminist (answer: mostly yes), what kind of feminism it offers (answer: mostly nonconfrontational and playful postfeminist feminism), and, later, how women in general can take pleasure in *Thelma and Louise* (answer: primarily as a means of cultural consumption). Thus, I argue that the popular press "posts" what could be considered feminism in the film.

The first two sections of the chapter, then, set up a tension between (1) a critical reading of the film as offering a feminist critique of sexual assault and a sexually assaultive culture and (2) a transtextual reading that places the film in relation to the constraints of its reception. I do not mean the tension between these two types of critical analysis to be a debate over where the meaning of the film "really" lies. Rather, I foreground this tension to emphasize *both* the feminist possibilities in a particular film *and* the ways the popular press implicitly works to contain those possibilities. From my critical perspective, the meaning in the film's representation of rape and feminism oscillates among definitions of the film as an individual text, definitions of the film as a media event, and the relationship between these two definitions.

In the third and final section of the chapter, I turn to other scholarly analyses of the film that argue for and illustrate a variety of feminist pleasures availed by the film. This scholarship offers feminist pleasures of science fiction (Barr 1991, 1993) and butch-femme coming out stories

(Griggers 1993), for example, both of which are distinctly absent from the popular press coverage. Here, I examine scholarly work on *Thelma and Louise* (including my own in the first section of this chapter) in order to identify what kinds of pleasures are being claimed in the name of feminism and whether and how those pleasures illuminate and escape the limits of postfeminist rape narratives that also exist in and through the film and its popular press reception. Overall, I argue that while the feminist critical pleasures associated with the film are multiple, like the popular press, the scholarly press tends to sidestep the role of rape in the film. As a result, these pleasures depend on—but do not address—rape: a paradoxical, even troubling, position for feminist criticism to take, particularly given that the popular press makes the same move, also in the name of a (postfeminist) feminism.

My goal throughout the chapter is to advance a critical practice that centers an analysis of the representation of rape in order to challenge various ways rape may be naturalized, ignored, or depended on—often in the name of feminism. *Thelma and Louise*—as text, media event, and site of feminist theory/criticism—both helps and hinders this process.

Thelma and Louise

> You watch your mouth, buddy.
>
> —Louise to the dead rapist, after shooting him

In *Thelma and Louise* the rape/death scene in a parking lot outside a bar (while not the first scene of the film), like so many other rape scenes, instigates the forward motion of the narrative. Until this moment, Thelma and Louise move in fits and starts, delayed by tasks at home, Louise's work, and Thelma's husband, only just barely getting out of town, buried as they are under the weight of Thelma's excessive luggage.[8] Even when they are on the road heading toward their weekend getaway in the woods, Thelma immediately persuades Louise to stop for something to eat.[9] That stop precipitates the rape and the death that set the narrative in linear motion, justify the road trip to Mexico, and change Thelma and Louise's future forever. In this section, I examine how the film represents this rape, Louise's memory of another rape in Texas, and a series of additional encounters with a sexually assaultive truck driver. In the process, I focus on how the film links men's use of language, the gaze, and rape; of-

fers multiple and complex responses to rape; and negotiates its relationship to various aspects of postfeminist rape narratives. In each case, I argue that the film at least potentially offers a feminist perspective on and critique of rape that go beyond postfeminist definitions of feminism.

Critique of Language/Gaze/Rape

Particularly in the prelude-to-rape and rape scenes, the film offers a potentially powerful critique of women's everyday experiences of rape and sexual harassment, one that links sexual assault to masculine control over both language and the gaze. From the moment Harlan approaches Thelma and Louise in the roadside bar, calling them "Kewpie dolls" and complimenting them in polite language, Louise responds to his words and gaze as assaultive. Three close-ups capture each character's different perspective on the situation. While Thelma enjoys Harlan's attention, batting her eyelashes and smiling broadly, a close-up of Louise reveals her attacking Harlan's instrument of assault—his gaze—by blowing cigarette smoke in his face. A third close-up shows Harlan batting his own eyelashes in frustrated response and purposefully turning his gaze from Louise to Thelma. These three close-ups construct a complex power dynamic of sexual harassment and eventually rape. Louise understands and articulates the links among gentlemanly language, appreciative looks, and sexual threats, and consequently rejects Harlan; Harlan realizes Louise is resistant but is not dissuaded from using his tools of pursuit on Thelma; and Thelma, who does not yet understand Harlan to be a sexual threat, responds innocently by pursuing a sense of freedom from her controlling husband.

Theoretically, at the point at which these three linked close-ups appear, the film suggests that either Thelma's or Louise's interpretation of Harlan can be correct. The film quickly weights this opposition in Louise's favor, however, offering her perspective on both the bar environment and Harlan as foreshadowing Harlan's eventual rape of Thelma. While the narrative development has yet to prove her right, Louise senses the potential for rape from the moment she enters the bar. "I haven't seen a place like this since I left Texas," she says, as they cross the crowded bar toward their table. This is her first mention of Texas, the perpetually (just) offscreen site of her previous "unspeakable" experience, an experience that the film's enthymematic structure repeatedly alludes to as rape. Neither Thelma nor the spectator knows enough yet to understand the brief

reference to rape that Louise makes here (subconsciously or not).[10] Nevertheless, by repeatedly illustrating that Louise's interpretation of Harlan as villainous is correct, the structure of the scene supports her omniscient knowledge that the narrative will inevitably move toward sexual assault.

For example, once Harlan and Thelma are on the dance floor, the handheld camera follows them closely, always remaining nearer to Thelma and showing Harlan's face as he purposefully spins her (in and out of the frame) in order to contribute to her drunkenness. The camera jerks as it follows Thelma, emphasizing the deliberateness of Harlan's actions and supporting Louise's perception that Harlan is a threat. Thus, this prelude-to-rape scene makes clear who is to blame for the upcoming rape. While Thelma's positive responses to Harlan may imply she is naive, his purposeful manipulation and Louise's intuitive understanding of his actions naturalize the feminist claim Louise and Thelma both articulate later in the film: the woman is never to blame for rape.

Having used alcohol and dancing to make Thelma dizzy and sick to her stomach, Harlan maneuvers her outside to the parking lot, ostensibly for fresh air but actually to rape her. This scene represents Harlan's body as a threat that his use of language and the gaze only thinly veil. Having used his gentlemanly and appreciative voice to promise Thelma he will not hurt her ("you're so beautiful"), having said he "only wants to kiss her," he resorts to physical force when she does not respond positively to his verbal manipulation as she did in the bar. After slapping her face once, he says, "Now, I said I wouldn't hurt you," making it ironically clear that he will physically do the opposite of what he verbally says. Only when Louise arrives and threatens to shoot him does Harlan stop raping Thelma.

In both the prelude-to-rape and the rape scenes, the film's framing of Louise's perspective of Harlan as purposefully manipulative connects men's use of sexualized language and the gaze to rape. By emphasizing Louise's perspective that Harlan's attempts at getting Thelma to consent are in fact coercive, the film offers what can be read as a feminist critique of rape by understanding it to be both linked to men's flirtations and an inevitable part of women's everyday experiences. When Louise shoots Harlan, not to defend herself physically or to stop his physical assault of Thelma but to stop his *verbal* assaults, her action conveys the language-gaze-rape links directly. After Harlan slides to the ground, eyes wide open in death, Louise leans over him and says, "You watch your mouth, buddy." Elayne Rapping (1991) argues, "that Louise shoots after the danger of rape is gone muddies the political waters hopelessly" (31); however, I

consider that fact to provide much of the political power of the film from a feminist perspective that does not isolate one act of physical sexual assault from various forms of sexualized assault—including verbal assaults—that pervade women's lives.

By representing Harlan's actions as extensions of everyday forms of sexual harassment that include visual and verbal assault (even when they are appreciative or gentlemanly), privileging Louise's perspective on Harlan, and providing Louise with the means to stop the assault, the film both acknowledges the pervasiveness of rape (similar to some of the films I discuss in chapter 1) and provides an image of a woman who fights back powerfully against both verbal and physical assaults—hence, against rape culture. The film continues to offer this perspective on sexual assault and to depict the women fighting back when, for example, later in the film Thelma and Louise encounter a truck driver who has images of naked women on his mud flaps, makes obscene gestures and comments, and assumes (when they finally stop the car in response to his verbal and visual assaults) that they are actually interested in him sexually. While he does not physically rape them, as Harlan does Thelma, he nevertheless represents men's sexualized language and gaze as an assaultive part of women's everyday lives. As I discuss in more detail in the next section, as with Harlan, Thelma and Louise eventually are able to defend themselves against the trucker.

Responding to Language/Gaze/Rape

The film's powerful acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of sexual assault—as past unspeakable horror (Texas), present unavoidable event (Harlan), and future inevitable threat (truck driver)—leads to a variety of responses from Thelma and Louise. While some responses appear more often in the film than do others, all these responses circulate throughout the film, without replacing each other. Thus, the film acknowledges at least some complexity in women's potential responses to rape and resists simplistically privileging one particular response over all the others. None of the responses offered in the film ultimately is effective in preventing further rapes, however. Instead, they function as a series of options (rather than solutions) for dealing with a continuously assaultive world.

Running from rape is one way to understand Louise's response to what happened to her in Texas. Not only did she leave Texas some time prior to the beginning of the film, but she refuses to go back, presumably because

the entire state represents rape to her. Even when she and Thelma are "running for [their] lives," as Thelma puts it, Louise refuses to travel through Texas on their way to Mexico. She is perpetually on the run from rape/Texas, despite the fact that she reencounters rape elsewhere. Through this response, Louise acknowledges rape (at least to herself) and then refuses to return to the location of that rape.

Simply *ignoring sexual assault,* refusing even to acknowledge that it has happened or is happening, is another option. For example, the second time Thelma and Louise begin to pass the truck driver Louise tells Thelma to "ignore him," knowing that as soon as they are in his line of vision he will assault them again. He does, but they just drive by, looking straight ahead. Nevertheless, they encounter him again later in the film and thus face his assaults yet a third time. Louise's refusal to talk about what happened to her in Texas is another way she ignores rape. Whenever Thelma or Hal mentions Texas, in fact, Louise either tells Thelma not to talk about it or becomes virtually catatonic. For example, when Thelma says that she thinks Louise was raped in Texas, Louise immediately stops the car. The camera cuts to outside the windshield, shifting from intimate shot/countershot close-ups to a crowded and anxious pan from Louise toward Thelma as Louise says, "Drop it. I'm not going to talk about that." When she begins driving again, she looks straight ahead, expressionless. Later she gets the same blank look on her face when Hal says, "I know what's making you run. I know what happened to you in Texas." If running from rape (for Louise, running from Texas) represents a determined action, ignoring rape (for Louise, refusing to talk about her past) represents inaction.

While Louise is perpetually both running from and ignoring the Texas rape, in the present Thelma and Louise also use versions of *self-defense and revenge* to respond to sexual assault.[11] For example, when Louise interrupts Harlan's rape of Thelma, Louise practices a form of self-defense, or more accurately, friend-defense. She holds a gun to Harlan's neck, and she tells him in no uncertain terms to "let her go." She articulates for him her knowledge about rape. She instructs him about women's communication by defining crying as a signal that he should let a woman go ("In the future, when a woman's crying like that, she's not having any fun"). Harlan, however, like the other men in the film, is not the learning type. He responds to Louise's "lesson" with more verbal assaults ("suck my cock," "I should have gone ahead and fucked her"). Louise has already had enough of these assaults in the bar and in her past, experiencing verbal taunts as directly linked to physical assaults. Louise neither walks

away as Thelma suggests, ignoring his final assault, nor leaves/runs from the scene, having successfully interrupted the rape with friend-defense, because neither really stops Harlan or the men Louise sees reflected in him. So she kills him.

Relatedly, when they encounter the truck driver for a third time, they again take revenge. They take control of the situation through their own use of language, telling him they are interested in "get[ting] serious" and directly discussing his gaze by asking him to remove his sunglasses so they can see his eyes. While they are getting serious about stopping his harassment, he assumes they are getting serious about having sex. As with Harlan, despite the lesson they attempt to give him, he refuses to apologize, refuses to stop using his voice to assault. So Thelma and Louise use their guns to destroy his truck in one of the most spectacular "action" scenes of the film.

When Louise tells him that they will "make [him] sorry" if he does not apologize, she implies a connection to having made Harlan sorry for not apologizing; but instead of killing the trucker, instead of destroying his *power* to rape and harass, they destroy the *symbol* of his power to rape and harass; they blow up his truck.[12] The energetic music; the women's use of their car to circle the trucker as he gets down on his knees and calls them "bitches from hell," shot from an extremely high angle that captures the burning tanker; and Thelma's exuberant physical ability to lean out of the car to grab the trucker's hat off the ground all emphasize pleasure in the wild ride and the act of revenge. While a spectator may take pleasure when Louise shoots Harlan, this scene much more specifically *invites* a pleasurable spectatorial experience of their actions, coded, for instance, by the upbeat music and the main characters' laughter. Thus, the film not only offers self-defense/revenge as a viable response to sexual assault, but defines such actions as potentially pleasurable.

While avenging sexual assault is prevalent in the film, Thelma and Louise also *learn about and criticize rape and rape law*—a fourth kind of response. In particular, Thelma learns that the law will not believe them, that they will be blamed for the rape, and that going to the police is useless. In short, when the film begins Thelma is ignorant of this perspective on rape, which Louise has to explain to her, and when the film ends they both understand not only that the law is ineffectual but that Thelma was not at fault for the rape.

Nevertheless, Thelma and Louise do not move through this learning process in a linear fashion. The film includes a complex representation of

the difficult process of understanding and criticizing rape. Immediately after the rape/death, Thelma and Louise discuss what to do. Thelma argues that they should go to the police and tell them what happened. Louise, however, articulates her knowledge about rape, teaching Thelma that the police will blame her for the rape, or worse, will not believe she was raped at all. "Just about 100 goddamn people saw you dancing cheek to cheek!" she says, emphasizing the disjuncture between the legal interpretation of "dancing" and "flirting" and her knowledgeable interpretation of Harlan's manipulative actions that the handheld, sick-to-its-stomach camerawork demonstrates. While Louise and the camera saw Harlan coercing Thelma, Louise assumes that the law will see Thelma consenting. Thelma learns quickly, however; when they stop for coffee immediately after the rape to figure out what to do, Thelma criticizes Louise for now implying that Thelma *is* at fault.

> *Louise:* If you weren't concerned with having so much fun, we wouldn't be here right now.
> *Thelma:* So this is all my fault, is it?[13]

Immediately after setting up an opposition between Louise's knowledge and Thelma's naïveté, the film reverses their positions. Now Louise takes the same naive position she was criticizing in the previous scene by blaming Thelma for the rape; and Thelma reminds her that a woman who is raped is not responsible for that rape. Louise does not function as an ideal toward which Thelma moves; instead each character influences the other in the process and illustrating that there is no one right way to respond.

As the film progresses, Thelma's naïveté resurfaces so that she and Louise must continually participate in the learning/teaching process. Their conversations about both Texas and Harlan structure this process. While Louise never actually tells Thelma she was raped in Texas, several scenes build on each other and lead Thelma to voice this interpretation. When Louise refuses to take the shortest route from Oklahoma to Mexico—through Texas—Thelma asks, "What happened to you in Texas?" While Thelma does not yet "know" that Louise was raped there, she begins to imagine this possibility. She understands that some horrible unspeakable thing happened. In a later scene, when Thelma again suggests going to the police, Louise reminds her that even if the police would have believed Thelma was raped if she had gone to them immediately, by this point all the physical evidence (blood and bruises) is gone. Thelma, sensing there is a source for Louise's knowledge and drawing attention to the

structured absence of Louise's rape, asks, "How do you know all this stuff?" The last time Thelma confronts Louise about Texas, she finally shifts from questions to statements and actually tells Louise she was raped in Texas. While Louise continues to refuse to talk about it, Thelma responds with the knowledge she has gained from her own rape, soothing Louise with "It's O.K. It's O.K." and touching her tenderly.

Despite Thelma's overarching progression toward knowledge received from Louise, each character also sometimes contradicts her role in the learning/teaching process. For example, even after experiencing Harlan's assaultive combination of language/gaze/rape and even after Louise has explained how rape laws function, Thelma naively assumes the truck driver will be polite when he waves them by the first time they encounter him on the road. As they pass, the camera shows them from underneath the truck, tracking their car until it picks up the truck's mud flaps with silhouettes of naked women on them. While Louise says, "How typical," automatically articulating her knowledge about the links between her other experiences of sexual assault and the trucker's gaze at and display of naked women, Thelma forgets what she has already learned and is temporarily persuaded by the "gentlemanly" actions of the trucker, who moves over to let them pass. As their car gets closer to his cab, however, a shot from the women's point of view shows him making obscene gestures. Thelma is surprised, saying, "That's disgusting," while Louise, who presumably anticipated what was coming, gives him the finger and drives away.

In another example, Thelma and Louise reverse their positions on rape: late in the film, *Louise* takes responsibility for everything that has happened to them, saying, "I don't know why I didn't go to the police right away." *Thelma* then teaches Louise what Louise taught her earlier: "Nobody would have believed us." Shifting positions yet again, after the final chase scene begins, *Thelma* takes responsibility and *Louise* says, "If there's one thing you should know by now, it wasn't your fault." In short, while overall Louise functions as a more knowledgeable teacher and Thelma moves from being naive to being informed, both characters also continually shift positions. Thus the film not only offers a critique of rape law as a potential response to rape, but it does so *repeatedly* as a result of the characters' frequent conversations during which they tell each other not to accept blame. Furthermore, the film offers that response as one among many possible responses.

The end of the film combines all these potential responses—except ignorance—in Thelma and Louise's complex and contradictory choice of

suicide over either murder or imprisonment by the law. While Louise loads her gun and prepares to fight back in self-defense, Thelma has another idea: she continues to learn from and develop a critical response to sexualized assault. Instead of submitting to the assault that the slow-motion extreme close-ups and the amplified sounds of the FBI and police loading and cocking their guns symbolically promise, Thelma suggests they drive away (run away), off the edge of the Grand Canyon. Thelma and Louise refuse to let the representatives of the law carry out the death threat that their looks through the crosshairs of their guns promise, choosing their own form of death instead. The freeze-frame that suspends Thelma and Louise above the Grand Canyon, moments before their inevitable death, represents a women's relationship and homosocial/homoerotic gaze, frozen in space and time, rather than the assaultive male gaze that pervades the film. Shot from the side, as though the camera/spectator is also in the air, the image excludes both the men and the men's perspective, freeing the spectator from the material and social order, as well. Furthermore, a close-up of a photograph flying out of the back seat shows Thelma and Louise together when they were relatively carefree at the beginning of their journey. This image anticipates the final credit sequence of clips from their happy moments on the road that focus on women looking at and being with women rather than on the punishing male gaze. In these final moments of the film, Thelma and Louise practice a variety of responses to sexual assault when they *run* from what they *understand* to be the law's assault, in an act of *revenge and self-defense* that denies the police the satisfaction of their deaths and Hal the satisfaction of saving them for the legal system.

Given the circularity of the narrative, as it moves continually from one assault to another, it is inevitable that the film ends in a way that does not allow Thelma and Louise to eliminate assault altogether. The film articulates a critique of men's language/gaze/rape through Louise's knowledge, Thelma's growing knowledge, and the camera's privileging of their perspective, while simultaneously defining this knowledge and perspective as ultimately ineffectual. Not only is rape a necessary precursor for Thelma and Louise to have this knowledge, but having the knowledge does no good; verbal, visual, physical, and legal assaults continue. The only option remaining at the end of the film is ambivalent: both a utopic freedom from masculine assault and a suggestion—through their deaths—that sexual assault is inevitable and women are helpless to do anything substantive to change it. At the end of the film, Thelma and Louise escape

one final assault, but they do not end assault. They simply leap into a freeze-frame, hands clasped, music blaring, caught on the precarious brink between death and life, between feminist resistance to assault and a feminist critique of the inevitability of assault.

Is *Thelma and Louise* a Postfeminist Rape Film?

I primarily read this ambivalent representation of sexual assault as escaping the bounds of a postfeminist definition of feminism by offering a complex and multiple analysis of and response to sexual assault and a learning process that does not involve a more fully informed postfeminist man to bring the women to consciousness about rape. Nevertheless, the film corresponds with a number of the postfeminist rape narratives I discuss in the previous chapter. For example, the moment Thelma takes action independently of her husband, exploring her own pleasures and desires, the moment she claims a right to the independence postfeminism promises her, she faces rape. Conversely, Louise's previous rape has made her self-sufficient, wise, and independent, and Thelma moves toward a similar position through the course of the film after her rape and as a result of Louise's instruction about rape. Thus, as in many of the examples I discuss in chapter 3, rape both leads to (can be understood as a necessity to achieve) and is a result of (can be understood as a punishment for) a general postfeminist independence.

Furthermore, both Harlan, as a rapist, and Thelma and Louise, as women who face rape, correspond with many aspects of the typical rapist and the typical women who face rape in film that I discuss in chapter 3. Harlan is white, attractive, and acquainted with Louise.[14] He is not an enemy rapist, but a friend-turned-enemy rapist. While Christine Holmlund (1993) points out that, out of a series of recent "deadly doll" films in which women kill, *Thelma and Louise* is the only one to address "attempted date rape" (128), the fact that it represents acquaintance rape in particular is typical of many mainstream post-1980 film and television rape narratives.[15] Additionally, Harlan is unambiguously villainous, an individual whom the woman who serves Thelma and Louise in the bar identifies as particularly assaultive. While the film is relatively unusual because it does not define him as the *only* sexually assaultive man in the narrative, he and these other men are often read as an exaggerated "string of stereotypical male bimbos" (Rapping, 31), what Marsha Kinder (1991–92) calls "a veritable postmodernist parade of treacherous male characters from well-known movies and

popular male action genres" (30). As stereotypes, these male characters can function as comical jokes that undermine the film's representation of *everyday* codes of masculinity as legitimating rape. Notably, Thelma and Louise are also typical of white and attractive women who face rape in innumerable postfeminist narratives.

The racial specificity of the story becomes particularly clear in one gratuitous scene, completely unrelated to the narrative, in which an African American man with dreadlocks, who is incongruously smoking what appears to be pot while riding a bike, happens upon the police officer Thelma and Louise have trapped in the trunk of his own car.[16] Surprised by the sound of banging, he looks around and finally sees the police car. When a voice from inside the trunk explains that he is a police officer, the man takes a huge puff of his joint and blows the smoke through the air hole Thelma has so thoughtfully shot into the trunk of the car so that the imprisoned cop can breathe. This is the only scene in which an explicitly nonwhite character appears as anything other than a fleeting background figure. He does not, however, speak; he is a spectacle of gratuitous humor rather than part of the movement of the narrative, marking the narrative as explicitly about whiteness.[17] The biker marks racial difference triply: he is not part of the narrative and does not speak (like white people in the film), he is not sexually assaultive (like white men in the film), and he offers comic relief (unlike Thelma and Louise, whose humor moves the narrative forward).[18]

Despite these ways the film does illustrate aspects of typical postfeminist rape narratives in terms of women's independence, acquaintance rape, and whiteness, there are also a number of ways the film is ambivalent about the common rape narratives that appear in other post-1980 films and television shows. For example, the film *does* consistently represent the women's point of view on sexual assault, making it clear that they do not desire the assaults they experience, but it *does not* rely on previously codified images (e.g., a post-rape shower) to represent their perspective quickly and then move on. Instead, the film returns again and again not only to their conversations about, perspectives on, and responses to the Texas rape and Harlan's rape, but also to a series of other assaults. Similarly, the rape event *does* give Thelma and Louise power over the narrative, setting it in motion around the decisions they make from the moment Louise kills Harlan, but that power over the narrative *does not* lead to the kinds of individualized triumphs over individualized crazed men and heteronormative family reunions that the raped women of *Trial by Jury* (1994) and *Rob Roy* (1995), for example, experience at the

end of their films. Furthermore, while the film *does* criticize rape law repeatedly, it *does not* then hold the women responsible for either changing that law or finding a way to use law against itself, as does *The Accused* (1988), for example. Instead, the women's continuous inability to escape either sexual assault or the law reiterates criticism without offering an easy solution to the problem of rape in general.

Furthermore, while I argue above that the film links rape to the male gaze, thus accessing what I define in the previous chapter as a common element of postfeminist rape narratives—the critique of the male gaze—this film shows a link between the gaze and rape rather than either supplanting rape with the gaze or celebrating men who gaze and then speak out against what they have seen. In other words, while many other rape narratives from the same time period represent men who watch rape as either worse than rapists or as saviors for women who have been raped, this film suggests that gazing sexually at women is just one of many culturally sanctioned behaviors, including rape.

While from one perspective *Thelma and Louise* takes rape much more seriously than do other films and television shows that displace it with an excessively villainous watcher, from another perspective the film also downplays its own critique by at times representing the act of watching as humorous. The scene in which Thelma robs a convenience store after her one-night stand, J.D., first teaches her how to be a "gentlemanly" robber[19] and then enacts his lesson by stealing all her money after charming her into the best sex she has ever had, offers a good example.[20] The film represents the robbery from Hal, Darryl, and other officers' points of view while they watch a black-and-white security video image. Thelma begins to tell Louise the story ("Well I just said . . ."), but a cut interrupts her narration. Instead of depicting Thelma's experience or even Louise's experience of hearing the story, the film represents the robbery from the perspective of the law by cutting back and forth between the surveillance camera's image and the men's incredulous faces. One of the FBI agents, in fact, eats while he watches, suggesting a humorous correspondence between his watching Thelma's crime in progress and his watching, perhaps, a television drama in his living room at home. In the prelude-to-rape and the rape scenes the film aligns the spectator with Louise and her understanding of Harlan's gaze as sexualized assault, but in this scene the film aligns the spectator with the men. While the *disjuncture* between the spectator's ability and the men's inability to understand Thelma's actions contributes to the scene's humor, the surveillance camera also distances

the spectator from Thelma's perspective and laughs at the men watching more than it emphasizes a link between their act of watching and the assaults that appear in the rest of the film. In short, *Thelma and Louise* both exceeds and deflects (through humor) postfeminist rape narratives' villainization of men who watch.

The representation of the "New Man" through Hal is perhaps the most ambivalent representation in the film in terms of postfeminism. On the one hand, Hal is a perfect example of a sympathetic and knowledgeable (about rape and women's experiences) postfeminist man. For example, when he breaks into Louise's apartment, he pauses to look at a picture of her as a little girl. In this scene, the film emphasizes his sympathetic attitude toward her with an extremely subjective brief sound of the birthday party Hal imagines as he says "Happy birthday, lady" to the picture. And when he brings J.D. in for questioning, he arranges to be alone with him, after which he yells at him for taking the only chance "those two girls . . . had" (their money). By phone, he asks Louise whether she wants to tell him what happened; tells her he feels he knows her; says "I believe you" when she implies he does not; and, finally, tells her that he understands her, that he knows that what happened in Texas is making her run now. Even in the last scene he is still trying to help them: he yells at Max, the man who is running the investigation, "How many times are these girls gonna get fucked over!?" in an attempt to prevent the shoot-out he thinks is coming but which Thelma and Louise evade.

Despite all these (and many other) representations of his sympathetic understanding of Thelma and Louise—depictions that mark him as a typical postfeminist man who knows more about rape and women's response to it than everyone else in a narrative—unlike typical postfeminist men, Hal is completely ineffectual. Not only do Thelma and Louise distrust his reassurances that he will help them if they turn themselves in, but the end of the film emphasizes just how ineffectual he is. A telephoto lens shows him running after them, but slow-motion and the lens distortion exaggerate the distance between him and the women, emphasizing the fact that he has never even been close to being able to catch or "help" Thelma and Louise. Furthermore, Hal exists in the context of a film that shows repeatedly that men's gentlemanly behavior masks their intent to rape (Harlan) or steal (J.D.): in short, to assault women. To be gentlemanly in this film is to be marked as untrustworthy and potentially dangerous, as much as is being explicitly nasty, like Darryl and the truck driver. Thus, the film undermines even Hal's attempt to "help" the women, whom he repeatedly calls "girls."

In short, I am suggesting that, as a rape narrative, *Thelma and Louise* is both postfeminist and not postfeminist, and that this ambivalent relationship to postfeminism contributes to a reading of the film as offering a critical feminist perspective on rape that cannot be entirely subsumed by postfeminism. *Thelma and Louise* accesses many of the standard elements of postfeminist rape narratives, but can also be read to undermine them, challenge them, or convert them into humor.

These readings suggest that the film offers a more complex and critical look at rape and sexualized assault than do the majority of (if not all) postfeminist rape narratives discussed in the previous chapter. Paradoxically, however, the film also takes postfeminism one step further, drawing on a postfeminist play with pleasure in scenes such as the convenience store robbery, killing the trucker's truck, and the utopic women-bonding death scene. This playful strain of postfeminism potentially undermines the critique of sexual assault that runs throughout the film and simultaneously invites the postfeminist definitions of the film's feminism that appear in the popular press, definitions that, as I argue in the next section, repress rape's place in the narrative.

Living in the Freeze-Frame of Postfeminism

> I never had a second thought about the ending. It just seemed appropriate that they carry on the journey. It's a metaphorical continuation. The film's not about rape. It's about choices and freedom. The only solution is to take your choice which is to take your life.
>
> —Ridley Scott, director of *Thelma and Louise,* quoted in Amy Taubin, "Ridley Scott's Road Work"

> Of course they're feminists, but not because they have pistols tucked into their jeans. This is a movie about two women whose clasped hands are their most powerful weapon.
>
> —Laura Shapiro, "Women Who Kill Too Much"

> Our weekend would be *Thelma and Louise* without killing someone in the parking lot. —Lynn Snowden, "Thelma and Louise, Part II"

The final freeze-frame of the film arrests Thelma and Louise in an other-time/other-space of a utopic separatism that they choose instead of the dystopic world of perpetual assault that they cannot escape. This freeze-frame allows Thelma and Louise to avoid the narrative and material logic of

death. Oscillating between tragedy and utopic fantasy, both precipitated by rape, Thelma and Louise live on after the narrative ends, behind the final credits, in clips and freeze-frames depicting pleasurable aspects of their road trip. In the context of the film itself, this contradictory utopic/dystopic ending, which simultaneously enacts life and death, concludes where the film began, with a critique of male-dominated culture (marriage, work, heterosexuality, law) as sexually assaultive of women. As I discuss in this section, however, Thelma and Louise also continue to live on *outside the film* as cultural icons in such places as popular press articles that debate whether or not the film is feminist and whether or not its feminism is valuable; the June 24, 1991, cover of *Time*; editorial pages in the *New York Times*;[21] the 1991 Academy Awards ceremony; popular cartoons;[22] and subsequent women-road-trip films that refer back to *Thelma and Louise*[23] (among many other places). The critical tension in the impossibility of their immortal death thus dissipates as their immortality overpowers their diegetic death.

Not surprisingly, the extensive critical response to this film in the popular press does not address the film's lesbian possibilities[24] or the film's sustained critique of men's language/gaze/rape. Instead, Thelma and Louise's discursive immortality, supported by the immortal death in the film's final freeze-frame, constructs specifically nonconfrontational postfeminist subjectivities that all women are invited to emulate.[25] As Jane Arthurs (1995) argues, most of the reviews in the popular press represent the film's feminism as "funny, sexy, exciting, entertaining" (91). Avoiding a discussion of rape altogether, the popular press transforms *Thelma and Louise,* Thelma, and Louise into representatives of the postfeminism about which I have argued this film is ambivalent.[26] Becoming only a trace presence in the popular press, rape functions as a vague justification for Thelma and Louise's, then Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon's, and ultimately all women's playful response to gendered and sexualized assault.[27] This version of depoliticized and nonconfrontational postfeminist feminism—which I discuss below in relation to Thelma and Louise, then Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon, and finally represented spectators/readers—is unaware of (and certainly not critical of) rape.

Thelma and Louise

By early June 1991, only two weeks after *Thelma and Louise*'s theatrical release, nearly every review of the film begins with a summary of a debate

over the value of the film's "feminism." While the reviewers represent the debate in which they themselves are engaging as "balanced" between celebrations and criticisms of the film, in fact, almost all reviewers praise the film. Each review generally uses the terms "man bashing" and "toxic feminism," quoting from two specific reviews (Novak 1991 and Leo 1991, respectively), to illustrate the criticism of the film. In the process, each review tends to misrepresent these two reviews as only a *fraction* of the negative criticism about the film, when in fact John Leo (1991) and Ralph Novak (1991) pretty much represent *all* the negative criticism.[28] The reviews then proceed to argue against that negative evaluation. Most reviews defend the film as life-affirming and fun, but in doing so they tend to deflect the critique of rape culture offered by the film. As a whole, then, the "debate" over *Thelma and Louise* is primarily a straw argument created by the reviewers and against which they then justify viewing *Thelma and Louise* as a harmless representation of feminism, a mere postfeminist pleasure. Collectively, the reviews represent Thelma and Louise as 1990s postfeminists, rather than as potentially radical outlaws in a perpetually sexually assaultive culture.

Reviews most often cite Leo's discussion of the film in *U.S. News and World Report* when mentioning "man-hating" interpretations of the film. Entitled "Toxic Feminism on the Big Screen," his article argues that the film is "fascist" because, like (his interpretation of) Andrea Dworkin's version of feminism, it represents men as completely evil:

> All males in this movie exist only to betray, ignore, sideswipe, penetrate or arrest our heroines. Anyone who has ever gotten to the end of a Dworkin essay knows how this movie will turn out: There is no hope for women. . . . Though the situation for women is hopeless, a form of pre-suicidal spiritual liberation is possible, and the key to this is violence. . . . With this repeated paean to transformative violence, found in none of the male-buddy movies, we have left Dworkin and entered a Mussolini speech. Here we have an explicit fascist theme, wedded to the bleakest form of feminism.

Leo objects to the pervasive "stereotypical" representations of men in the film, arguing that "violence" against the "phallic symbols" (trucks, "would-be rapists") is "fascist." Claiming that the film goes too far in reversing gender behavior, he suggests that the violence in this women's "buddy film" is problematic. For Leo, this simple reversal of women and men's roles defines the film as feminist—a bad thing. Novak, writing for *People*, implicitly

agrees with Leo's critique of the film. Echoing the "negativity" in the women's "violence" against men, he writes, "Any movie that went as far out of its way to trash women as this female chauvinist sow of a film does to trash men would be universally, and justifiably, condemned."

While the positive reviews of the film obviously take issue with Leo and Novak, they do not challenge the terms of the debate. They accept the film as feminist, simply celebrating it as woman-affirming feminism rather than challenging it as man-hating feminism. Most strikingly, without exception, they collude with Leo and Novak in defining what happens between Harlan and Thelma as a "near rape" (e.g., Carlson 1991), "attempted rape" (e.g., Klawans 1991, 863; Rafferty 1991, 86), or "would be rap[e]" (e.g., Alleva 1991, 515). Without fail, the reviews accept Harlan's interpretation of the event as an uncompleted rape, an interpretation that leads him to say, "I should have gone ahead and fucked her," rather than Thelma's interpretation of the event as a rape, an interpretation that leads her to say, "He was raping me." In the process, each review covers over and neutralizes the threat that the representation of rape represents both to the pleasure the reviewer takes in the film and to a clearly defined dichotomous debate over feminism in the popular press. Having disregarded the actual violence against women in the film, the reviews quickly move on to an analysis of the women's friendship and their resistance to masculine assault as evidence of the film's pleasurable feminism. The reviews implicitly define feminism as a positive outcome of rape. They transform that rape, however, into an inconsequential almost-rape, focusing on the idea of a "female community" and "resistance" instead.

An article entitled "Women Who Kill Too Much" in *Newsweek* (Shapiro 1991), for example, avoids discussing rape by highlighting the women's connection to each other versus their "violence" against or "resistance" to men:

> What seems to disquiet this movie's critics is the portrayal of two women who, contrary to every law of God and popular culture, have something on their minds besides men. Yet they can't be dismissed as man-haters. . . . The simple but subversive truth is that neither woman needs a man to complete her. . . . Of course they're feminists, but not because they have pistols tucked into their jeans. This is a movie about two women whose clasped hands are their most powerful weapon.

Rather than praise the resistance in the image of "pistols tucked into their jeans" or address why they need guns to protect themselves, this article

explicitly claims that Thelma and Louise are not "man-haters" and focuses on the connection between them, arguing that women's solidarity (their "clasped hands") is their most powerful weapon. The reading of the film as a woman-bonding pleasure ride avoids the fact that their clasped hands and (although this review does not mention it) their kiss represent a death pact—necessary because of the unending sexualized assaults Thelma and Louise face—just before they drive off the edge of the Grand Canyon (Johnson 1993).

Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon

In the popular press, whether the authors consider the film's feminism "good" or "bad," there is no discussion of rape. Instead, the women's connection to each other (as opposed to the male world through which they move) comes to the fore as an ideal (or occasionally horrific) form of "feminist" behavior. Star discourse about Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis builds on this emphasis on "women's bonding," further transforming Thelma and Louise into celebrated postfeminists as the actors come to embody this particular ideal. As Linda Frost (1998) puts it, "While these periodicals obviously featured Davis and Sarandon to cash in on the *Thelma and Louise* hype, their writers also carefully disarm the political possibilities of the characters" (157–58). The film's focus on a culture in which women experience the violent effects of an unequally gendered power structure (such as rape) becomes less and less important as Thelma and Louise become more and more entrenched as immortal icons of postfeminist pleasure.

At the 1991 Academy Awards ceremony, for example, while presenting the award for best editing, Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis discuss the possibility that Thelma and Louise actually live through their flight into the Grand Canyon. Sarandon, drawing on her more realistic Louise character, laughs at Davis for suggesting that the film's ending is ambiguous enough for Thelma and Louise actually to survive. Davis, however, draws on her more hopeful and imaginative Thelma character and suggests that they could have "grabbed onto something" or "made it to the other side." When Davis points out that if Thelma and Louise do not survive there will be no sequel, Sarandon, still drawing on the practical Louise character who lost her life savings, changes her mind and suggests that they could have "bounced." In the face of the physical reality of death, the film's and Davis's optimism persuades Sarandon. Despite Sarandon's

initial skepticism, this Academy Award reparteé plays on the fact that, sequel or no sequel, Thelma and Louise are still very much alive as part of Sarandon's and Davis's star personas.

The most telling example of the connection between the characters and the stars in terms of their relationships to men in particular appears, ironically, in the "Chatter" section of the same issue of *People* in which Novak's negative review appears:

> *Geena Davis* admits that costar *Susan Sarandon*, 44, became a role model for her during the making of their new film, *Thelma and Louise*. "She'll be embarrassed if I say this, but Susan is my hero," says Davis, 34. "She's very strong and outspoken and presents herself the way she is. The goal I had was to be stronger, more myself and more secure in how I feel. To claim my power and take responsibility for my life." Does that mean Susan influenced Davis's decision last year to divorce actor *Jeff Goldblum*? "No. Nothing like that," says Davis. "The sort of personal journey I'm talking about isn't freeing myself from men or in any way antimale." (Castro 1991)

This passage draws a direct connection between Davis and Sarandon's relationship and Thelma and Louise's relationship. The gossip suggests that Sarandon is strong and outspoken; whereas, Davis needs to be "stronger" and to "take responsibility" for her life. The relationship, however, is no longer about a shared experience of sexual assault but instead is about vague feminine power explicitly unconcerned with gendered power. That this quotation includes Davis's acknowledgment of a potential reading of the film (and of her decision to divorce Goldblum) as antimale reveals how purposefully the discourse works to move away from the "debate" over the film's feminism to a fun-filled celebration of the film. As though speaking to Novak's condemnation of the film published 103 pages earlier, the gossip diffuses the film's potential critique of men. Although Novak condemns the film, Davis asserts that the relationship she has with Sarandon, like Thelma's relationship with Louise, is based on women bonding rather than on women hating men. Additionally, this article displaces the lesbian potential in the relationship between Thelma and Louise, evoked in the film by Louise's explicit arguments against Thelma's marriage and Louise and Thelma's physical closeness: Davis assures the interviewer that Sarandon had nothing to do with her decision to leave Jeff Goldblum. Thus, Davis and Sarandon's relationship is an adjunct to, rather than a replacement for, heterosexuality; it is homosocial, not ho-

mosexual. In these reviews, Thelma/Davis and Louise/Sarandon have a fun, playful relationship, no longer precipitated by rape, sustained by self-defense and revenge, or motivated by lesbian desire.

With its May 1991 cover story on Geena Davis, *Harper's Bazaar* initially creates a similar parallel between the actor and the character, defining them both as independent women. The article curbs the feminism that independence might offer, however, when it asserts that Davis does not actually *want* independence from either men or femininity. The contents page blurb describing the cover photo of Davis reads, "Academy award–winning actress Geena Davis is driven by change. This spring, she blossoms in a bold, new direction: co-starring in the female buddy film *Thelma and Louise* and forming her own production company. (More on both, see page 140.) This take-charge attitude is reflected in her straightforward choice of makeup" (2). Using terms that allude to the film, such as "driven" and "new direction," this description draws a parallel between Davis and Thelma, aligning Thelma's journey with Davis's new production company and drawing on Thelma's growing knowledge and independence in the film to construct Davis as "blossoming" and "bold." Like the bit of gossip in *People,* however, the blurb quickly asserts that the parallel between Davis and Thelma does not extend to anything other than an independent, "take-charge" femininity (such as robbing convenience stores or choosing death over masculine police authority). The actual article published in this issue, entitled "Straight Shooter" (Rhodes 1991), makes the same two moves:

> Davis formed Genial Productions to develop projects in which she can star. Geena, just like Thelma, is trying to take control of her own destiny. ". . . I'd like to do more action stuff—maybe even play a cop. I think I have a *knack* for it. It does make me angry that more of those kinds of opportunities aren't out there for women. I'm trying to turn it around in whatever way I can. A lot of actresses are starting their own production companies now, and I guess that's the way to go. If they're not gonna do it for you, do it yourself." (175, emphasis added)

Quite explicitly, the article says Davis is "just like Thelma." The quotation from Davis, in fact, mirrors one of Thelma's lines from the film in which she says she has a "knack" for being an outlaw. But Davis's statement mutes the resistance and the refusal of the law that can be read in Thelma's statement, as her "knack" changes from being an "outlaw" to

playing "action roles"; Thelma's resistance to the law becomes Davis's ability to enact the law. In short, *Harper's Bazaar* shifts the resistance both Davis and Thelma pose (to Hollywood, to men in general, to heteronormativity, to the institution of marriage) into a nonthreatening instance of homosocial woman-identified, non-antimale independence.[29]

The Rest of Us Women

As the furor died down in the press and the film's advertising moved from "the year's most sensational and controversial film" to "lay off Thelma and Louise" and finally to "everyone loves Thelma and Louise," the question of whether the film represents "good" or "bad" feminism began to disappear.[30] Later articles about *Thelma and Louise* have no need for this straw argument; they take the film's "feminism" for granted, continue to read Thelma and Louise as independent women who can survive in a "man's world" without challenging men, and then go one step further by using Thelma and Louise as stand-ins for all women, or rather, for specifically class-privileged postfeminist women who have access to both personal and economic independence. Perhaps Lynn Snowden (1992) illustrates this type of representation best in her *Working Woman* article, "Thelma and Louise, Part II." While describing her recent "spa weekend" with a close friend, she writes, "Our weekend would be *Thelma and Louise* without killing someone in the parking lot" (99). Or, I might add, without getting raped or losing one's entire life savings. Not only do Thelma and Louise live on in their freeze-frame of independence, not only do Davis and Sarandon embody their characters' friendship and independence as non-antimale, but Thelma and Louise become icons for all women to emulate. Their independence becomes a discursively constructed postfeminist subject position that hails the woman spectator/reader: to be a woman is to be like Thelma and Louise is to be playfully and nonconfrontationally empowered by spending time and lots of money with one's women friends—but only for a weekend.

Popular discussions that focus more directly on the film's audience generally assume that men feel threatened and women feel empowered by the film. Many articles quote Davis as saying, "If you're feeling threatened, you're identifying with the wrong character" (e.g., Rohter 1991, C24). While Davis's statement implies that men in the audience might identify with, as Charla Krupp (1991) puts it, "the rapist—or the trucker," most articles that discuss the audience simply focus on women, repeat-

edly constructing images of "real" women who playfully enact (who "are") Thelma and Louise:

> Among women moviegoers, *Thelma and Louise* has tapped a passion that hasn't had a decent outlet since the 70s, when the women's movement was in flower. 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. (Shapiro)

This *Newsweek* article explicitly defines *Thelma and Louise* as offering a feminism through which women can express their resistance to, or at least frustration with, men's sexual harassment without facing the threat of death or retribution, no matter what the narrative and/or legal logic might suggest. Focusing on the film's trucker rather than the rapist, the article emphasizes Thelma and Louise's playful response and, furthermore, replaces their actual pistols with imaginary ones.[31]

In a *New York Times* editorial, Mary Cantwell (1991) offers a similar position for her readers but further curbs the resistance and, like Snowden, depends on class privilege to do so. Cantwell begins by recounting a story about eight recent college graduates who rented a cottage on Cape Cod: "All they wanted to do was lie on the beach, swim if it was warm enough and eat as many lobsters as possible. What they did not want to do was spend any time with the young men . . . who'd rented the house next door." The men, however, "couldn't imagine eight young women choosing to forego the pleasure of their company" and continued harassing the women, finally throwing a brick through a window. As Louise would expect and Thelma learns to expect, when the police arrived they told the women they were inviting the attention by renting the cottage "by themselves." Cantwell tells this story, and then, rather than criticizing the men or the police or discussing the women's response to this treatment, she suggests that these eight women would "enjoy the new movie *Thelma and Louise*." Cantwell simply juxtaposes this story of sexual assault and police sexism with a quick plot summary of the film, implying that the eight women's experience is similar to Thelma and Louise's experience. By depending on juxtaposition to make her argument, Cantwell drops Thelma and Louise's specific rape experience and the real women's greater economic advantages (cottage on Cape Cod, eating lobsters).

Furthermore, her focus on the women's pursuit of pleasure before the assault (beach, swim, lobsters) and then her suggestion that, after the

assault, these women would "enjoy" *Thelma and Louise* emphasize a process of consumption as a means to middle-class women's independence. Cantwell is not just arguing that "the pressures that propel" Thelma and Louise are very "real"; she is also arguing that these women, or any "young women" for that matter, will enjoy the film, will enjoy watching the representation of rape, will enjoy the process of learning the links between language, the gaze, and rape, will enjoy vicariously and playfully destroying *symbols* of men's sexual and social power, and then will enjoy watching women's playful and pleasurable death.

Like the examples from chapter 3 that implicitly invite spectators to fight rape simply by watching narratives about rape, Cantwell's article suggests that watching, consuming, and enjoying a film like *Thelma and Louise* can take the place of activism against sexual harassment or assault and police sexism. While sexual assault *instigates* independent postfeminism, this postfeminism is a freeze-frame of perpetually playful fun that traps Thelma and Louise on the brink of death and "real" women in the pleasurable act of consuming without being antimale. In short, in the popular press's response to *Thelma and Louise*, film viewing becomes the vehicle to women's freedom, while addressing a feminist critique of rape (which I have suggested the film at least gestures toward) appears outmoded and unnecessary.

Feminist Critical Pleasures

> In the end Thelma and Louise defy gravity, gaining mastery of themselves, becoming triumphant in death. The ending is courageous, profound, sublime.
>
> —Patricia Mellencamp, *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism*

Thelma and Louise opens up the possibility for critical and resistant responses to rape that draw on a feminist-informed understanding of connections among language, the gaze, and rape in both an explicit and everyday sense. Yet, simultaneously, the film includes and its reception emphasizes a playful and pleasurable response to sexual assault (a joyride) that sees feminism as ineffectual or beside the point, rape as inevitable and relatively unimportant, and the damaging effects of assault and resisting assault (like death) as avoidable. In short, I have argued so far that while the film's representation of rape is ambivalent in relation to

typical postfeminist rape narratives, working both with and against them, the popular press's response almost exclusively focuses on and extends the ways the film accesses and supports postfeminism's ineffectual versions of feminism.

Recently, when I alluded to this argument about *Thelma and Louise* in a public presentation on the larger project of this book, a feminist scholar who has written on *Thelma and Louise* challenged me, saying (I paraphrase from memory), "How can you call *Thelma and Louise* postfeminist? I *like Thelma and Louise*." In this last section, I want to address the irritation, anxiety, and possibly even anger that I read in (admittedly, perhaps "into") her comment.[32]

This critic's separation of feminist critical pleasure from postfeminist culture is a common, but I would argue problematic, one. Bonnie J. Dow (1996b), for example, argues that *Designing Women* is less postfeminist than is *Murphy Brown*, because the former represents women bonding while the latter represents an aggressive masculinized woman. But, as I have suggested in my analysis of the popular press response to *Thelma and Louise*, it is precisely the focus on women bonding in the press that diffuses much of the criticism of sexual assault in the film. This representation of "women together" as—*by definition*—feminism, in which I would argue *Designing Women* participates, is a key component of postfeminism's displacement of feminist activism, an aspect of postfeminism that Dow herself identifies.[33] Frankly, I take pleasure in watching *Thelma and Louise* (as does the feminist scholar to whom I refer above), and I will admit that (unlike Dow) I prefer *Murphy Brown* to *Designing Women,* but that does not stop me from identifying ways *all three* contribute to and depend on postfeminism. My point here is that women's pleasures, even feminist pleasures, can be gleaned from postfeminist culture. This is a resistant relationship to postfeminist culture that feminist criticism, I would argue, needs to articulate in order to break postfeminism's stranglehold on popular definitions of what feminism is.[34] In relation to a rape narrative such as *Thelma and Louise,* however, it is *also* imperative, I would argue, that feminist criticism address the role representations of rape play in both postfeminism and feminist critical resistance. I return to this point in the conclusion of the chapter. First, however, I examine some of the ways feminist scholars have taken and offered pleasure in *Thelma and Louise* through their writing, asking how these pleasures relate to the readings of rape in the film and postfeminism in the popular press that I offer above.

Marleen Barr (1991, 1993) and Sharon Willis (1993), in particular, articulate persuasive arguments about the importance of *Thelma and Louise*'s pleasurable fantasy.[35] For Barr, Thelma and Louise are idealized heroes, driving their car/spaceship away from patriarchy until they leap impossibly *up* into the Grand Canyon and enter an "alternative text" of feminist science fiction. She writes, "Thelma and Louise plunge into a magical place of nonhuman signification; they enter an alternative text. By doing so, they themselves become fantastic, magical, surrealist. Their car does not adhere to the laws of gravity; instead of immediately falling, it flies. Thelma and Louise are no longer brought down by patriarchal law" (1991, 85). Along with Davis and Sarandon, who think Thelma and Louise may have grabbed onto something or bounced, Barr specifically rejects the question of "reality" some critics in the popular press raise. She admits that the male characters "*truly* exemplify the sorts of men women routinely confront" (1991, 82, emphasis added) but adds that the film is a fantasy, anyway. More specifically, she defines the film as a "power fantasy" that allows women to escape the everyday reality the men in the film represent.

Willis (1993) further discusses the relationship of the film's fantasy to a feminist reading. Refusing to reduce her interpretation to the "reality" of Thelma and Louise's deaths at the end of the film, she looks at the fantasy of "partiality and disruption" (124) played out along the way. Willis focuses on the pleasure of "travel, speed, force, and aggression" (125) that the woman spectator's uncharacteristically non–cross-gender identification provides. While Willis does not unilaterally celebrate this pleasure, recognizing its grounding in consumer capitalism, she does argue, primarily, for a focus on pleasure in what she calls the "fantasmatic identification" that Thelma and Louise's ride toward the Grand Canyon offers to women spectators, in particular.

Many other scholars participate in the kind of fantasmatic identification Willis sees the film offering: Cathy Griggers (1993) reads Thelma and Louise as lesbians who come out during the course of the film;[36] Ann Putnam (1993) celebrates Thelma and Louise as women who share ownership of the gaze with men; and Cara J. MariAnna (1993) uses Thelma and Louise as guides who draw the spectator through Native American mythology and Mary Daly's radical feminism toward a new, nonpatriarchal state.[37] Patricia Mellencamp (1995), in her chapter titled "What Cinderella and Snow White Forgot to Tell Thelma and Louise," rewrites the film as a fairy tale that addresses questions such as "What does 'happily' mean for women? What does 'ever after' cost women?" (8).[38] And, in her

study of self-defense culture, Martha McCaughey (1997) argues that even though *Thelma and Louise* is "not a film about women's self-defense and contained no scene of justifiable violence, images of women's violence, whatever their cinematic context, might help women experience and deploy their bodies along the lines of differently fantasized self-definitions [and] . . . can produce a new body-consciousness complementary to women's self-defense training" (100). Although McCaughey offers a very literalized reading of the film's relationship to "self-defense" and "justifiable violence," she nevertheless claims the power of the film as fantasy to transform women's bodies in a feminist way.[39] Finally, Patricia S. Mann (1994, 1996a, 1996b) claims that *Thelma and Louise* is postfeminist, not feminist, but not in the way I define postfeminism in this book. Mann is one of a very few scholars who embrace postfeminist theory as a theoretically viable political project, as a theoretical move that incorporates postmodernism, addresses the ways the "issues raised by feminists twenty-five years ago have become mainstream concerns" (1996b, 24), and moves toward a "micro-politics."[40] For Mann, postfeminism is a contemporary, updated version of feminism. Thus, when she calls Thelma and Louise postfeminists, she makes a move similar to that of scholars who claim them as feminists. She writes, "Thelma and Louise are postfeminist heroines in their resourceful and courageous response to the unexpected turn their lives have taken. Accepting a gendered struggle on the terms by which it arose, they have seized the micro-political moment and made the most of it, as one must do on frontiers" (1996a, 236).

Other scholars take up *Thelma and Louise* in the process of theorizing specific issues in film studies, particularly genre.[41] In the process, many of them return to the question of the feminist value of the film. For example, Carol J. Clover (1992) argues, on the one hand, that *Thelma and Louise* is a perfect example of a rape-revenge film crossing over from low-budget video distribution to big-budget mainstream distribution.

> In its focus on rape, its construction of males as corporately liable, its overt mistrust of the legal system to prosecute rape, and its interest in self-help (= direct revenge) and sisterhood, *Thelma and Louise* is at dead center of a tradition [of rape-revenge films] that emerged and throve in the lowest sectors of filmmaking for years before it trickled into major studio respectability. (234)

On the one hand, generically *Thelma and Louise* does fit the category of rape-revenge films and does draw on the women's movement to put women

in the center of the narrative and to give them the "property" of men: cars, guns, tee-shirts, and jeans. On the other hand, from the perspective of Clover's work on spectatorship in conjunction with genre, she argues that *Thelma and Louise* is a "very, very, safe" (235) film because Hal, as a "point of insertion for the male viewer" (234), belays the need for cross-gender identification for men in the audience. Susan Morrison (1992) is less ambivalent about the film. She explicitly begins her essay on *Thelma and Louise* as an example of the "woman's film" genre by opposing her reading of the film as "potentially progressive" to both popular critics and a fellow feminist who argue that "the film merely substitutes female 'buddies' for male ones in an otherwise conventional and regressive road movie" (48). In response, by shifting the film's generic category, she finds the conclusion an "ironic and conscious" comment on the inevitability in the woman's film of punishment for "women who choose . . . to live outside the socially framed parameters of middle class morality" (52). Also focusing on genre, in this case action cinema, Yvonne Tasker (1993) points out that *Thelma and Louise* is typical of the genre, by "figuring . . . possession of the gun as a symbol of power for women" (26) and representing "a rites-of-passage narrative" (137). But, she argues that the film also undermines and transforms the action genre through its representation of gender, for example by representing "the uniformed cop" not as a representative of the law with which a hero has "at best, a strained relationship" but as a "[caricature] of masculine identity" (62) and by using rape as the mark of "traditional vulnerability of the hero" in action films (151, see also 161). Furthermore, like Morrison, Tasker explicitly sets her own reading up against other (unnamed) critics who would reject the film, in this case for depending on a "masculine" genre. She writes, "Ironically a designation of 'inappropriate' images derived from a feminist critical tradition, coincides here with a more conventional sense of feminine decorum, a sense of knowing one's place within a gendered hierarchy. As much as anything, this critical trajectory reveals the operation within feminist criticism of a class-based, high-cultural, attitude towards the popular cinema" (136). For Tasker, it is important to claim *Thelma and Louise* not only as an action film but also as a potentially valuable action film from a feminist perspective so that she can illustrate how women in action films can transform both that film genre and feminist film criticism.

Pairing Tasker and Morrison, who have related interpretations of *Thelma and Louise* as generically transformative, points to an irony: *Thelma and Louise* can be "reclaimed" for feminism whether defined in

the context of the "masculine" action film or in the context of the "feminine" woman's film. Furthermore, as in the popular press, Tasker's and Morrison's use of the oft-repeated feminist critic's need to "reclaim" the film is, in fact, a straw argument. Of the dozens of published scholarly pieces on the film, many of which I discuss here, the large majority argue that the film *does* provide feminist pleasures.[42] In short, *Thelma and Louise* is an extremely versatile film for feminist film critics, transforming both the most masculine and most feminine genres, accessing pleasurable fantasies of escape from patriarchal law, providing women with non–cross-gender identification, telling lesbian coming-out narratives, claiming the gaze for women, engaging in mythic cycles of beginnings, rewriting fairy tales, reshaping women's body-consciousness and deployment, illustrating micro-political action, infusing mainstream Hollywood with the concerns of the lowest sectors of filmmaking, and (to add my own argument to the list) identifying and challenging the pervasiveness of sexual assault in women's everyday lives. For feminist film scholars, while the popular press may "post" the feminism in the film, *Thelma and Louise* is still available for alternative feminist uses.

Conclusion

What then is *Thelma and Louise*'s relationship to postfeminist rape narratives? Does it test or does it reinscribe the limits of postfeminism? It is easiest to answer these questions in relation to the discursive reception of the film. The popular reviews and articles sometimes notice that the film depicts a "would-be" rape, but they go no further. Although rape precipitates the narrative and the women's bonding, the popular discussion focuses on the narrative effects of rape while dissociating those effects from sexual assault as the film's narrative fulcrum. This move in the popular discourses allows them easily to draw on and contribute to postfeminist celebrations of women's independence, distinct from any attention to what women may want to be independent *of*. In this context, because the popular press addresses, questions, and then overwhelmingly embraces what it defines as (a particular kind of) feminism in the film, *Thelma and Louise* functions as an ideal example of a postfeminist film.

Nevertheless, as many scholarly critics have shown, the film offers much more to feminism than the popular press takes up. Thus, one thing the collective scholarship on *Thelma and Louise* reveals is that no matter

how large a mass media spectacle a film becomes, no matter how fierce the debates (even if they are straw arguments), the text itself is potentially more complex and radical than the hundreds of articles about it can ever show. In this case, even though the popular press closes down potential feminisms in the film, characterizing it as either a direct reversal (in search of equality) or a nonconfrontational bonding experience of nonantimale consumption, the scholarly press opens up the potential feminism in the film, importing spaceships, lesbians, and fairy tale characters into the diegetic world in order to envision that world differently.

As much as I do take pleasure in imagining Louise's car as a spaceship, Thelma and Louise as engaging in lesbian desire, and the film to be a rewritten feminist fairy tale, these scholarly critical interventions are nevertheless a little too close to the responses in the popular press for my comfort—at least in terms of the representation of rape. Like the mainstream press's pleasures, these feminist critical pleasures depend on rape as a legitimating reason, a narrative cause, but do not address what it means for feminism to depend on the representation of rape in order to access these particular pleasures. Thus, for example, even as I read Thelma and Louise through the lens of lesbian desire and against the grain of the pervasive heterosexuality in the text, I worry that it takes a man's rape of a woman to unleash that desire in the text.[43] In short, I am not arguing against taking any number of feminist pleasures in the text, but I am arguing for understanding how those pleasures depend on representations of rape and thus may contribute to the naturalization of rape in our representational world. When feminist pleasures elide rape, they contribute to the culturally structured absent presence of rape that precludes a critical confrontation with rape in postfeminist discourses and perpetuates a long-standing narrative dependence on rape. If feminist scholarship does not address this process, it may inadvertently collude with the many ways post-1980 rape films and television shows use rape in the service of constructing and maintaining particular versions of feminism.[44]

That leaves me with analyses of *Thelma and Louise* that directly address the sexual violence in the film: in particular, McCaughey's, Clover's, and my own.[45] Collectively, these analyses suggest that while the film depicts rape in a way that is potentially transformative from a feminist perspective, that transformation is limited. For McCaughey, while the images of violent women can help women transform their bodies, especially "if [they] already feel vulnerable to men precisely because they do not see images of

women prevailing over men, and in fact routinely see the opposite" (100), the film nevertheless avoids a direct representation of women's violence as legitimate self-defense. While McCaughey herself articulates the power of fantasy here, she also implies a need for what I would call "practical" representations as well. Working more directly in the context of film studies than is McCaughey, Clover and I each place *Thelma and Louise* in relation to a set of rape narratives. For Clover, in the context of a tradition of rape-revenge films, *Thelma and Louise* is not only not unique in its representation of women's revenge for rape, it is relatively tame in its confrontation of the spectator with the act of revenge. For me, in the analysis in the first section of this chapter, *Thelma and Louise*'s representation of rape as pervasive and rape law as ineffectual may take it further than most contemporary postfeminist rape narratives that individualize rape and then show women as empowered when they overcome that individual rape. Nevertheless, I see the film as supporting many other aspects of postfeminist representations of rape, in particular the centrality of whiteness and an obsession with rape as inevitably linked to women's independence.

Overall, then, I argue that *Thelma and Louise* illuminates, tests, *and* reinscribes the limits of postfeminism to varying degrees in at least three contexts: the film itself, the popular reception, and the scholarly response. My particular approach to feminist criticism here has been neither to claim the film as feminist nor to reject it as non- or antifeminist. Rather, my goals have been to look at the multiple ways the film—as both text and media event—interacts with feminism and to examine the roles rape plays in those various interactions. By offering a sustained analysis of rape and its relationship to feminism in this film-as-media-event, I hope to have simultaneously highlighted the ways *Thelma and Louise* challenges postfeminism and cautioned against a feminist critical celebration of the film that does not take into account the role rape plays in enabling that celebration.