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The Bearer of the Gaze in Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*

Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* has provoked more heated controversy than any film in the past year. It has been condemned by both men and women—for its male-bashing on the one hand (all the men in the film are hazardous to women one way or another), and for its betrayal of the feminist agenda on the other (the film is just a male buddy-movie in female clothing, a male fantasy of life on the road). It has been called “small-hearted,” “toxic,” even “fascist” in its use of the transformative powers of violence. On the other hand, viewers have described it as ground-breaking, glorious, even transcendent. “I’ve talked with enough people,” writes a Seattle reviewer, “to be convinced that when men and women see *Thelma and Louise*, they see two different movies.”¹

The film contains not one but two strong female leads, neither of whom is a side-kick, or supporting player, two protagonists who share a generous equality between them. This is an unusual scenario, viewed against the backdrop of most traditional Hollywood cinema, where “what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero . . . who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.”²

In other words she becomes the object of the story, not its subject, the object of the male look or gaze. She becomes visually and narratively an image, a spectacle to be looked at, an object to be desired, pursued, *known* in all ways, and ultimately possessed. On the screen this objectification occurs through a system of looks or gazes created by the camera which always gives the narrative power to the one who owns the gaze. It is a system which highlights a woman’s “to-be-looked-at-ness,” a system which is always “cut to the measure of [male] desire.”³ Is the camera close up or distant? When men and women are shot in the same scene

women are usually framed in full close-up shots, men in medium or long range, whereas two men in the same scene are framed in like shots. That is, a close-up of one man is always repeated in a close-up of the other. Is the camera still or moving? Does the camera remain fixed or does it seem to survey the female form? Does it seem to travel over the female body? Whose point of view is privileged? Through whose eyes do we see the story? Who is doing the beholding and who is beheld?

The history of the cinema is the history of men looking at women, built as it is on the mechanism of voyeurism, the ritual of looking and being looked at. Voyeurism is basic to the very nature of the cinema with its darkened roomful of spectators who peer unseen through the window into the lighted rooms of strangers. The plots of early cinema foreground this basic cinematic quality in a way that is now so taken for granted the mechanism operates almost invisibly. These films, as do almost all traditional Hollywood films, contain plots which are structured around men looking at women, films in which the camera privileges the male point of view, films with such titles as: *Female Trapeze Act Disrobing*; *The Bride Retires*; *Pull Down the Curtain*; *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (a male clerk lifts the skirt of his female customer, and we see a close-up shot of her leg); *What Happened on 23rd Street* (an early version of Marilyn Monroe's billowing skirts in *The Seven Year Itch*); *Annabelle's Butterfly Dance*; *Annabelle's Serpentine Dance*; *Getting Evidence*; *A Female Crook and Her Victim* (a woman robs a man then hides the wallet under her dress, a plot structured around the glimpse of her leg as she lifts her skirt).⁴

A female character may accept and even return the gaze, but she must never initiate it. To do so risks certain, often fatal punishment. To look is to desire and so good girls are often blind, wear glasses or are in some way impeded from or refrain from looking. Only bad girls dare to look, and because they are obviously asking for it, they are invariably punished, as the great popularity of "slasher" films of the 70s and 80s so clearly shows. The female may own the gaze temporarily, but it carries no power. So despite the enormous emphasis in film on woman as spectacle, woman as subject is for the most part missing. In terms of the discourse of the film, her language carries no power, for since she does not own the gaze, her words are reduced to mere "prattling," contrasted as they invariably are, with the male prerogative to act. Her discourse is silenced; she goes unheard and unbelieved.

All film is a mix of spectacle and narrative, display and storytelling.

When a woman walks into the scene the narrative stops, much the way the narrative or plot comes to a halt in a musical when a musical number begins. Screen images of women are sexualized no matter what they are wearing, what they are doing, or what kind of plot they are entering, for women are always depicted in a way different from men. Because the look of the camera always assumes the spectator to be male, the image of the woman is always created to compliment him. The woman on the screen is created in the male eye—captured by the camera in close-up or in a travel shot or framed against the shimmer of backlighting. Women in cinema are mirrors, reflectors of the male gaze, or to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf, their function is to reflect back “the figure of man twice his natural size.”⁵ So when the male spectator looks at the male protagonist who is looking at the woman, he sees someone like himself, only larger, more heroic—different only by degree. The male protagonist bears the gaze which fuels the narrative, but also bears the gaze or represents the look or gaze of the audience.⁶

Where is the female spectator in all this? Does she identify against gender, with the male protagonist who drives the story if that is her only way to participate in the action? Or does she identify with the woman, the one who is acted upon? Whom do women see when they see the woman on the screen who is the object of the gaze? The pleasure for the female in the audience, then, must be in her identification with the female on the screen whose only pleasure resides in being looked at. But at what cost? Because that passive pleasure affords her no voice in the narrative, no mandate for action, it leads inevitably to her victimization.

Thelma and Louise is the story of female protagonists who reject their status as objects of the male gaze, and appropriate the power of the gaze for themselves, and by doing so enter into narratives of their own making; it is the story of what happens when female protagonists reject their status as objects of visual pleasure, whose presence freezes the flow of action, to enter the flow of action themselves.⁷

At the beginning of the film *Thelma and Louise* own neither the gaze, the narrative, or the landscape. By the end of the film they own all three. In the opening sequence both protagonists are seen in constricted inside space. Both are first seen in kitchens. The shots of Thelma's kitchen are so dark and narrow the setting looks more like a trailer than a house. The space is equally constricted for Louise, as she weaves her way between tables, customers, other waitresses like herself. The shots of enclosure, alternating as they do with shots of open spaces,

set up a pattern that defines the values of the film. Enclosed space is domestic space, where the female is subject to the male gaze, a setting which guarantees passivity, containment, and silence. Open space permits action, and discovery of voice.

What happens at the roadhouse, aptly named the Silver Bullet, centers around the concept of the male gaze. It shows what happens when a woman becomes the object of that gaze, for Thelma and Louise become objects of visual pleasure from the moment they enter the bar. Men turn on their barstools and follow them to their table with their eyes. The bar is loud, dark, and smoky, filled with bluesy country western and crowded with men. "What are two kewpie dolls like you doing in a place like this?" Harlan says, as he appears out of nowhere and stands, hovering above them. "I didn't mean to bother you but it's hard not to notice two such pretty ladies as yourself," he says as he sits down. The scene is saturated with menace, for Thelma has become the object of the gaze of the man who would rape her.⁸ "You'd better dance with me before you leave or I'll never forgive you," he says as he gets up from their table.

The scene highlights the screen image of woman as spectacle. Nowhere is this more easily seen than in the line dance sequence which is itself pure spectacle, and it plays like a scene out of a musical, which is the way the narrative always acts when a woman walks into the scene: the entrance of the woman onto the screen stops the narrative and freezes the action. What had begun as a prelude to the dance, a sequence of gazes and return gazes, a ritual ceremony of looking and being looked at, culminates in the invitation to the dance and everything that follows. The scene is framed from Harlan's point of view, and shows his proprietary claim on Thelma, with his arm draped over her shoulder, as he draws her into the dance. He spins her, twirls her round and round, for she has become the object of his pleasure held forever in his gaze. The camera claims her for him, and for every male spectator, as it is positioned just at the edge of his shoulder, showing us what he sees, a full camera close-up of Thelma's radiant face.

How do women see this scene? They must identify either with the male seducer or with the woman who is the victim of the seduction. The women in the audience must either identify with the males who do the looking or the object of their gaze, as she becomes increasingly imperiled.

What do women see watching Thelma and Harlan in the center of

the dance floor? The camera shows them close up from the man's perspective, but it also objectifies them with a long shot, showing what potential witnesses would see, and from the outside, it looks like a mutual seduction. But it is long past time to go and Louise, tired of waiting, goes to the bathroom, which is jampacked with a dozen females applying lipstick, mascara, backcombing their hair. We see her looking in the mirror, almost crowded out by a sea of younger faces, and her look is filled with self-scrutiny and unease. It is a scene achingly familiar to most women, and it emphasizes the diminishing and fragile status of women whose only value resides in their to-be-looked-at-ness.

But in the next scene the film takes what is clearly a right-angled turn into another dimension—and that dimension is allegory, and then finally myth. "I'm not gonna hurt you, okay? I'm only gonna kiss you," Harlan says to Thelma as he leads her into the parking lot. Then he hits her hard, and tells her again, "I *said* I'm not gonna hurt you." The gaze has turned deadly, although it has been dangerous all along, for the seduction turns to rape, until Louise wrenches the gaze from him and claims it for herself, transforming him into the object at the other end of the gun. "Let her go!" Louise tells him. But he doesn't—until Louise puts the gun to his neck. "You let her go or I'm gonna splatter your ugly face all over this nice car," Louise tells him, and then he finally does. Louise has clearly rescued Thelma. The danger is over and the way is open for their retreat. But Harlan must have the last word. "Bitch!" he shouts after her. "I should have gone ahead and fucked her." "What did you say?" Louise says, pauses for a fraction of a second and shoots him to death. It is the *verbal* assault, not the physical one, which prompts her to kill him—to obliterate the awesome silencing power of proprietary language. "You watch your mouth," Louise says to the corpse.

It is this pause between the real danger and the pulling of the trigger that makes the act so problematic. The scene is shocking because it defies the cultural stereotype of the female as nurturer and life-giver, and the belief that it is unnatural, even perverse, for females to be provoked to violence. And here it is violence committed not in defense of husband or child, as it was in *Fatal Attraction*, or at the behest of the law, as it was in *Silence of the Lambs*, but to avenge not only this outrage but all of the little rapes, the everyday usurpations of female autonomy that all women know. Viewed allegorically, the scene portrays a ritual re-enactment of cultural conflicts at the heart of women's everyday lives. The actual social world is magnified, symbolized, through this sequence

of crime and redress. It is like Flannery O'Connor's use of the grotesque: "to the hard of hearing you shout and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."⁹

The act of the shooting clearly sets Thelma and Louise outside the law, outside the bounds of culture and society and propels them into myth. Or, to put it another way, it ensures their liberation from domestic space and their entrance into the western landscape as real western heroes.

Whatever happened to Louise in Texas remains one of the silences of the film. Whatever happened is unspeakable, even to her best friend. It is thus with what has happened to them now. They feel they will have no voice in court. "A hundred goddamn people saw you dancin' with him. Who's gonna believe you?" Louise explains to Thelma. As objects of the male gaze, as spectacle, the women are powerless to do anything but reflect the male gaze; they have no voice and their language goes unheard. In the eyes of the law it becomes mere "prattle."

Once on the road, they run a gauntlet of male gazes. "What are *you* looking at?" Louise says to the men watching her walk by. Now there can be no denying where they are: in a male, western plot with a male landscape, which they navigate at their own peril—a landscape awash in waves of pumping testosterone: spouting steam, spraying planes, spilling hoses, pumping oil riggers, and men pumping iron and pumping gas. Ironically, though it is a masculine terrain the women travel through, the men are used in the film like props, as part of the scenery, seen mostly standing around doing nothing but looking.

Part of what happens next is a process of de-glamourization. By degrees the women give up the visual signs of their femininity—Louise trades her jewelry and watch for an old man's white hat, Thelma takes the trucker's cap. Part of the reason for this is that once they step outside the domestic arena they enter a male universe, and must dress the part. But also one sees the process of de-specularizing the screen image. After the rape, Thelma's first impulse is to comb her tangled, knotted hair. But later, just before the robbery, Louise checks her image in the mirror, a gesture from a former life, looks at her lipstick, which by now has become an anachronism, and throws it away. She will never again be the object of the gaze. She will instead become the gazer, the beholder herself. But in between one gesture and the other, the value of the mirror as reflection of the female image undergoes a radical transformation.

The mirror motif, established in the very first sequences of the film, comes to operate as the gathering metaphor for the gaze and its ownership. Accustomed only to their status as objects, the women use mirrors narcissistically, to beautify the object for the gazer. The look into the mirror is the look of one whose only perceived value is in being looked at. Out of habit, Louise double-checks her image in the mirror when she goes to the coffee shop bathroom to wash her hands, and with those haunted, haunting eyes scrutinizes herself in the mirror in a way which echoes the mirror scene at the Silver Bullet. But now she sees something beyond the mirror image, looks inward to her very soul it seems, sees also the droplet of blood on her cheek, and runs from the mirror. After this, cosmetic accoutrements become irrelevant, and the mirror becomes not a vehicle for narcissism, for preparing oneself to be looked at, but becomes a way of *looking* itself. Claiming control of the narrative and now the landscape, Thelma uses the mirror purposefully, watching out the side-view mirror for those down the road who would pursue them. Her gaze is watchful, alert, as it sweeps over the landscape and claims it, for the gaze is now tied to action.

But the process of de-glamourization can only go so far, because the selection of Davis and Sarandon, both of whom are beautiful no matter what they wear, precludes that. It is one concession to the box office that despite their masculinized dress, they remain objects of visual pleasure for the audience if not the male characters on the screen. Their tight-fitting jeans and tank tops create another kind of glamour, perhaps. Yet it must be remembered that screen images of women are always sexualized no matter what they are doing, no matter what they wear.

What is more important, however, is that their essential beauty undergoes a transformation corresponding to the transformation in the meaning of the mirror. The traditional, stereotypical images of female attractiveness—Thelma in the bar sequence, Thelma in the bikini, or in the bedroom, for example—are transformed by the camera to show a spiritualized quality of femininity, visible proof of their strength, goodness, and courage, which is beautiful because it is full of power and because it emerges before our very eyes.

When they assume masculine garb, it is in response to their entrance into the western plot, where the prerequisite is violence, one way or another. When females assume the gaze, social norms become shattered, and violence erupts, because this assumption of the male preroga-

tive will always be opposed. But the question remains: does this mean they must give up their most essential feminine nature in order to own the gaze?

The sequence with the cowboy J. D. is one of the film's most problematic episodes. Thelma and Louise have picked up a hitchhiker who manages to seduce the younger, more vulnerable of the two, and although the sexual experience in some way empowers Thelma it also diminishes her, for the seduction turns out to be just another kind of robbery. The difficulty with the script here is that it comes perilously close to validating the old cliché that all an unhappy woman needs is good sex to make everything all right. Yet Thelma is clearly punished for her efforts to own the gaze; her act of choosing the cowboy, her ownership of the gaze, results in the theft of the money, and all that is to follow.

But one wonders: What is the seduction scene for? Who is it for? Although most of the scene uses Thelma for specular appeal, several key shots privilege Thelma's point of view. That is, we see what *she* sees, we look *with* her, rather than *at* her. In fact the film's only travelling shot across the human form, the traditional erotic trigger, is given to Thelma's gaze up J. D.'s well-muscled belly. But it is a disturbing mix, for there are specular shots as well—several obligatory body shots, perhaps inevitable concessions to the box office, but coming so soon after the rape, they are disturbing nonetheless. Perhaps the most complex and troubling image in the whole film is the shot of Thelma's bruised knees, as she embraces the cowboy. Do women watch this scene in erotic fascination? Detached enjoyment? Or something else? Do women see the seduction or the bruised knees?

"The law is some tricky shit," Thelma says, after the robbery of the convenience store. There is no possibility now of ever going to the police because there is no longer any physical evidence, for the bruises have healed. The evidence, the text to be read by the courts, is a woman's body, and because it cannot now speak, it is silenced.

No longer a source of erotic attention, the women remain nonetheless objectified throughout the film by men who would investigate them, know them, contain them. "I almost feel like I *know* you, Louise," the detective says. "I know what happened to you in Texas." But Louise is quick to tell him, "You don't know me." His knowledge is dangerous because it is incomplete and because it is used to capture them. His

paternalism is disarming, for it comes with some degree of sympathy and understanding. But his job is to bring them back into domestic space, inside the boundaries of culture and society. And his ability to keep Louise on that phone leads, finally, to their punishment for driving the narrative, owning the gaze.

"She took a lot of stuff," the detective explains, after looking into Thelma's closets. "Looks like she was figuring on being gone a long time." But he cannot read her, for one of the running jokes of the film is that Thelma, not knowing what to pack, brings practically everything. Next the detectives are shown watching the video tape of Thelma robbing the convenience store, and the video camera becomes the metaphor for the male gaze, and the video tape the metaphor for their objectification and silence before that gaze.

The sequence with the trucker, perhaps the most famous sequence in the film, echoes the scene in the parking lot of the Silver Bullet in two ways: the importance of verbal control and the ritualistic, symbolic nature of the act. "Watch your mouth," Louise says to the corpse. It is the same in this scene. "Hey baby! You ready for this?" the trucker shouts and makes an obscene gesture. "You girls ready to get serious?" "Follow us," they say, and they begin the set-up for revenge. But what is significant is that the one thing Louise wants from the trucker is an apology—a verbal gesture for his verbal assaults. "I don't think he's gonna apologize," she says, pauses for a moment, then blows up the rig. It is the emphasis on the controlling nature of male language that she wants to obliterate, all of the use of names that would seal their objectification as providers of male visual pleasure: *beavers*, *peaches*, *keowie dolls*. She wants verbal control, a verbal acknowledgement of her own voice, acknowledgment that this objectification is damaging to the human spirit. Ironically, while in this male world, the women must learn a new kind of silence, must learn to quiet the natural inclination to openness. Louise tells Thelma, "Stop talkin' to people. You gotta stop bein' so *open*."

Here, like the scene in the parking lot of the Silver Bullet, the sequence unfolds ritualistically in the pause between thought and action, action which plays out symbolically as sweet revenge for a lifetime of affronts, verbal and otherwise. It is representative, social drama enacted outside domestic space on a public stage, in action more symbolic than real, whose end effect is the exhilaration in the power of owning the gaze. The camera is positioned to establish the commanding point

of view of the two women, perched on top of their car, firmly establishing their domination of the landscape and the trucker, who is last seen on his knees against the backdrop of the exploding truck.

One of the loveliest moments of the film occurs when the two drive through the desert, and stop the car to watch the sun come up. Marianne Faithfull is singing in the background, "At the age of 37 she realized she'd never ride through Paris in a sportscar with the warm wind in her hair," and we realize that Louise will never get there either, will never make it to Mexico. The two women are framed against the backdrop of a classic frontier landscape, framed against but also at one with the ascetic, unyielding beauty of the desert. The contrast between this sense of expansiveness and wonder, even transcendence, and the closed, domestic space of the film's opening which had required their passivity and their silence is nothing less than stunning. Now they have "crossed over," owned the gaze which has given voice to desire, claimed the unthinkable, and will not be put back. Now a vast canvas, a western landscape, is needed to tell their story, for they have become as wide as myth.¹⁰

The landscape offers redemption and the experience of regeneration in which everything becomes intensified. "I feel awake, really awake," Thelma says. "Everything looks different." Throughout the film Thelma has been seen by men as contested landscape or property—owned by Darryl her husband, borrowed by J. D. her onetime lover, stolen by Harlan who would rape her, and now pursued by the long arm of the law. But she has "crossed over" and will no longer be contained, no longer landscape to be claimed but claiming the landscape herself, filling it, becoming worthy of it.

Throughout the film the relationship between the two women reveals a working reciprocity of feeling and action. There is no power struggle between them, no sense of competition, for men or otherwise; they share a friendship between equals. By the end of the film, the protagonists have moved beyond the male narrative, driving through to something altogether different—for this film is about friendship as much as anything. They have not betrayed their essential nature, but fully realized it—female but with a power that has not corrupted the most essential elements of their nature, which is expressed in terms of each's relationship with the other.¹¹

But the open road becomes the end of the road as the two protagonists run out of time, and the land which had offered them redemption

now entraps them, for there is nowhere left to run. They have fled right up to the edge of the Grand Canyon. "I believe it's the goddamn Grand Canyon. Isn't it beautiful?" Louise says. Everything opens up again. Suddenly and as menacingly as some giant insect, a police helicopter rises up from the bottom of the Canyon. They look behind them and see what must seem like a hundred police cars stretched out across the landscape. "All this for us?" Louise says. Her look is as incredulous as Hal's, the detective who has tried to bring them safely in. "These women are *armed*," the FBI agent explains. But the detective tries one last time to save them. "How many times must these women get fucked over?" he shouts into the roar of the helicopter. Then the camera closes in on shots of hands jamming bullets into position, fingers on the trigger, and the squint into the scope of the gun. The women are captured at last in the male gaze, objects so objectified they are seen in a long shot through the cross-hairs of the gun; it is the final sighting. But instead of restoring or recuperating the women for the existing social order, the men are powerless to prevent their drive through the male narrative and beyond it. It is in this that the film takes another right-angled turn. Confronted with the last act of the Western, the women put down the gun, reject the shootout, and reaffirm their own solidarity, preferring death to incarceration in domestic space of any kind. Indeed, perhaps the most controversial thing about this film is not the male-bashing or the protagonists' tendency toward violence, but their vow to forsake all others, to forsake patriarchy, and to go whither thou goest, even unto death.

The last scene of the film is framed so that the gaze becomes a reciprocal gaze; each becomes both the gazer and the gazed upon, the beholder and the beheld. The structuring of the gaze as cued by the rhetoric of the camera is thus altered, and the effect is radical and transforming, for it elevates the friendship between women to the status of heterosexual romance, the end toward which everything is always working in a traditional Hollywood film. This is seen most clearly in the framing of the end sequence: the shot/reverse shot pattern which privileges both points of view, cross-cuts between close-ups of one woman and then the other in a way that transfigures the women rather than fetishizes them, the close-up of their raised handclasp, the final kiss, and the freeze-frame drive into everlasting space.

The camera angle in the last scene is a low angle shot which frames the soaring car against the sky, rather than a high-angle shot of the car framed against the bottom of the Canyon. This suggests how we are to

interpret the ending, and with it the entire film: as allegory, or as a dream—a narrative enacted on a mythic road to a mythic place where in the end, everyone owns the gaze.

NOTES

1. See especially John Leo's review, "Toxic Feminism on the Big Screen" in *US News & World Report*, June 10, 1991, p. 20, and Margaret Carlson's review, "Is This What Feminism is All About?" in *Time Magazine*, June 24, 1991, p. 57. Also see Jean Gonick's essay, "Warning: Thelma & Louise on Board," *Seattle Times/Seattle Post-Intelligencer Sunday Edition*, September 8, 1991, pp. 25-27.

2. Budd Boetticher, director of cult Westerns quoted in Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18. Much of the development of feminist film theory has grown out of reaction to this ground-breaking essay.

3. Mulvey, pp. 6-18.

4. Source for these film titles is Judith Mayne, "'Primitive' Narration," in *Woman at the Keyhole*, (Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 157-183. The apotheosis of this union of form and content is Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*, which illustrates the mechanism of voyeurism brilliantly, as do almost all of his films.

5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957) p.35.

6. The concept of the look or gaze is articulated in Mulvey, pp. 6-18.

7. *Thelma and Louise* is a striking departure not only from the traditional woman's film with its emphasis on women's sacrifice for others at the expense of self; their fortitude in bearing their pain; competition with other women for the males at hand; but also the male buddy film, though it utilizes conventions from both as context from which to depart.

8. He wisely passes over more experienced Louise for Thelma's obvious naivete.

9. Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," reprinted in *What is the Short Story? Studies in the Development of a Literary Form*, ed. Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1973) pp. 133-136.

10. Again one senses the sweet irony in the use of the Western genre which has traditionally afforded women no role at all.

11. Their complementarity and reciprocity is visually cued by the way they wear their hair, up or down, and who is doing the driving. Traditionally, women's relationships in film have been portrayed as competitive, mean-spirited or trivial, their relationships with women secondary to those with men. Many films about women's relationships are motivated by the gap or absence of the male, and the complications this arouses, including competition for the males at hand. In contrast, Thelma and Louise learn to do without men altogether, finding in each other the nurturance and support they never found with men. Despite the violence, perhaps this is the film's most controversial feature.