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'Til Death Do Us Part: Impossible Spaces in *Thelma and Louise*

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UNLIKE THE TYPICAL male heroes of road movies, Thelma and Louise do not die in the proverbial blaze of glory as they triumphantly shoot it out with the enemy. In the final freeze-frame of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), perhaps the paradigmatic “buddy” film, the two heroes die running *toward* the camera, an image Cynthia J. Fuchs has characterized as “disastrous ejaculatory excess.”¹ *Thelma and Louise* (1991), by contrast, ends in a dream-like sequence, the camera’s eye caressing the women as their Thunderbird gently floats above the canyon, then is arrested in mid-air, forever poised to penetrate the space that they are visually barred from entering. Their deaths are thus rendered as virtual but unrepresentable. This iconic ending might be read as the apotheosis of these uniquely female outlaws—together forever, forever unbound. It may also, however, function as a metonymic representation of the way in which the female “outsider” is already *inside* the circle of phallographic desire.

In conjunction with the slow-motion movement of the final sequence, this scene could appeal to the common dream experience of falling without touching the ground, inviting a spectatorial identification that crosses over any number of specific sociohistorical positionalities. On the other hand, there is nothing more pervasive and hetero-sex-gendered as the scene of a

This essay is excerpted from my forthcoming book, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton, NJ, 1994). An earlier version was presented as part of a seminar at the American Society for Theater Research conference, Providence, RI, 1992. I wish to thank Janelle Reinelt for organizing that seminar and the participants in that group for their commentaries. I would also like to thank Peggy Phelan, Amy Robinson, Cindy Fuchs, and Chris Straayer for their counsel.

¹Cynthia J. Fuchs, “The Buddy Politic,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York, 1993), p. 195.

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male subject in pursuit of a female object. *Thelma and Louise* run away from the camera, not toward it, and they are pursued by the “good cop” (Harvey Keitel) who is also filmed in slow motion as he makes one last attempt to rescue them. While it is somewhat unusual in mainstream cinema for the male subject to fail to attain his female object, it is almost unheard of for the female object(s) of his quest to elude him by choosing to depart *together*. Although *Thelma and Louise*’s suicide pact is a familiar device for recapturing and containing the woman who strays too far from the law of the fathers, by bracketing this diegetic containment, we could also read the final sequence of this film as a commentary on the Lacanian subject’s impossible relationship to the object of his desire.

Famous for some, infamous for others, Jacques Lacan’s contention that the “sexual relation is impossible” formulates a theory of desire that presumes desire’s aim is to reproduce desire, not attain its object.² The detective running after the car in slow motion continuously approaches an object (the women) that maintains a constant distance. Shot in slow motion, this sequence is suggestive of a fantasy space where the satisfaction of desire is impossible because it is an activity that never reaches an endpoint. Furthermore, these final moments are metonymic in that they recapitulate the film’s narrative in its entirety: a chase in which the male detectives pursue the “lost objects” that continually elude them, always maintaining a certain distance that expands just as they seem to be about to overtake them. In the dialectic of this film’s desire, we can thus read the familiar trajectory of the woman as object-cause of man’s desire. The Woman who must be constantly produced *as* elusive in order to reproduce masculine desire is certainly a master narrative in Western phallographic libidinal economies. When *Thelma* says, “Let’s not get caught,” indicating to *Louise* to drive over the cliff, her remark could be an ironic compliance with this tradition. And yet, it may be possible to rescue something of *Thelma and Louise* from the containment that threatens to overtake any subversion in poststructuralist readings of popular culture’s representations. If, as Mary Ann Doane has argued, the desire *to* desire was the operative mode in “the woman’s film” of the 1940s,³ this “women’s” film may subtly critique phallographic desire as the desire *for* desire. Ending with a sequence that makes visible

²Jacques Lacan makes this case most forcefully in “God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman,” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York, 1982), pp. 138–48. For a lucid introduction to Lacan, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York, 1990), especially pp. 137–40.

³Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, IN, 1987). Doane argues that “the representations of the cinema and the representations provided by psychoanalysis of female subjectivity coincide. For each system specifies that the woman’s relation to desire is difficult if not impossible. Paradoxically, her only access is to the

the economy of masculine desire as adamantly reproductive but nongenerative, *Thelma and Louise* comments on masculine desire's aim to reproduce *itself* as its own object(ive).

With the exception of the ending, *Thelma and Louise* inverts point for point the formula for the classic road movie or buddy film, as Robin Wood has outlined it.⁴ *Thelma and Louise* marginalizes and grossly caricatures men, focusing instead on the female/female relationship as the emotional center of the film. Furthermore, what Wood isolates as the ideological heart of the buddy film, the absence of home signifying the security of "normality" and the death of the protagonists as the most effective impediment to consummation of the same-sex relationship, is integral to *Thelma and Louise*. The only element missing according to Wood's paradigm is the presence of a recognizable homosexual character who stands in sharp contrast to the male heroes and thus functions as a disclaimer. However, the heroines' heterosexuality is guaranteed by the production of male lovers even in the most unlikely circumstances. Wood's structural analysis of the buddy film's repressed homoeroticism is seconded by Tania Modleski, who comments on these films' insistent, sometimes explicit but more often latent, "censored subtext" of homosexuality that makes her wonder how audiences could ignore this dimension.⁵

Since *Thelma and Louise* seems to do little more than substitute female characters in the conventional male roles, it might be argued that the censored subtext of the film is lesbian desire, which thereby opens up the possibility of subverting the conception of desire as a masculine pursuit and production of a lost female object. Wood's point that the buddy films are

desire to desire" (p. 9). According to Lacan, however, it is not as if "man" has unproblematic access to "his" desire. If woman's desire is the "envy of desire," and castration releases man into desire by affording him its signifier in the phallus (see Doane, p. 12), he is still unable to attain the *object* of his desire: "Short of something which says no to the phallic function, man has no chance of enjoying the body of the woman, in other words, of making love" and "what he takes on is the cause of his desire . . . the *objet a*" (Lacan, "God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman," p. 143). It would seem to me that Lacan's "hysteric," whose desire is "the desire for an unsatisfied desire," would pertain more to masculine than feminine desire (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York, 1977], p. 257). In either case, it seems a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea: to be bereft of desire or to have desire with no possibility of its satisfaction.

⁴Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York, 1986), pp. 222–45. Wood's point that it is the "insistence of the disclaimers" that offers the strongest support for reading the buddy film as a "surreptitious gay text" (p. 229) could be understood as Freudian *negation*—often the first sign of the lifting of repression.

⁵Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York, 1991), p. 145.

structured as journeys that have either no goals or illusory ones is a crucial concern in *Thelma and Louise*.

STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS

Reviewers have not missed the preponderance of phallic images in the landscape of director Ridley Scott's imagination. The middle of this film traces the trajectory of Thelma and Louise's attempted escape from a symbolic order that is rife with images of the phallus. The women's origin and endpoint, however, are characterized by absent spaces that resist symbolization. The originary absence that sets the narrative in motion is Louise's "trauma," a space that she refuses to fill up with content. She exteriorizes this space, however, by giving it a local habitation and a name—Texas. This refusal to disclose the content of her traumatic past has troubled reviewers on both sides of the debate—those who find it a feminist manifesto and those who declare it a male-bashing exposé. Alice Cross, for example, argues that the keeping of this secret ruins spectators' ability to empathize: "Everything that happens in the movie is a consequence of [Louise's] earlier experience, but because it is a hole, a blank, we are left detached where we ought to be most moved, angered, sympathetic."⁶ Similarly, Richard Schickel suggests that Louise's "cold-blooded" murder of the rapist might be more palatable if that "something dark, something that the film never fully explains in her past" had been articulated.⁷

The inarticulation of Louise's trauma is associated with consternation about the film's incoherent geography. Thus one critic faults the director for desiring to make "pretty pictures" at the expense of working out a realistic geography,⁸ and another finds the women's escape plans to be the film's "running joke."⁹

Just as Louise refuses to articulate the particulars of her past, she literally attempts to avoid traversing that history. Handing Thelma the map, she asks her to find all the secondary roads to Mexico from Oklahoma City. Thelma suggests taking Route 81 through Dallas, but Louise refuses to go that way:

Thelma. We're running for our lives. I mean, can't you make an exception? Look at this map, the only thing between Oklahoma and Mexico is Texas. Look.

⁶Alice Cross, "The Bimbo and the Mystery Woman," in "Should We Go Along for the Ride? A Critical Symposium on *Thelma and Louise*," special issue of *Cineaste* 18, no. 4 (1991): 33.

⁷Richard Schickel, "A Postcard from the Edge," *Time*, May 27, 1991, p. 64.

⁸David Denby, "Road Warriors," *New York*, June 10, 1991, p. 56.

⁹Margaret Carlson, "Is This What Feminism Is All About?" *Time*, June 24, 1991, p. 57.

Louise. I'm not going to talk about this. Now you either find another way or give me the goddam map and I will!

What Louise needs is an imaginary landscape, a map with a route to follow other than the one preordained for her in the symbolic order. Thelma has to learn that reality is a ruse, a lure. But Louise already knows that "we don't live in that kind of world," that what passes for reality contains within it the void of the Real, that traumatic space that resists symbolization.¹⁰ Filling in the empty space of her trauma might facilitate her reintegration into the symbolic order, but Louise is not disposed to collaborate with "justice"; she will not become an accomplice to the detective because she knows that the rescue is a trap.

Sarah Kofman's distinction between the criminal and the hysteric is apropos of Louise's dilemma. Kofman's "criminal" is the woman who knows her own secret and refuses to share it, because she is, or thinks she is, self-sufficient. By submitting to the "cure," the hysteric, on the other hand, becomes complicit with the analyst's desire.¹¹ That is, the transference constitutes the analyst as the subject-presumed-to-know. By resisting divulging her secret, Louise becomes the "criminal," and it is thus just as much what she refuses to *say* as what she has *done* that criminalizes her.

If there is one thing that narratives and their consumers cannot tolerate, it is a woman with a secret. Women are supposed to be secrets, not to have them. Shoshana Felman neatly describes Freud's question of desire as the desire *for* a question. Since women are the objects of desire, they in effect "*are* the question" and hence "cannot *enunciate* the question."¹² So it is that women are the enigma, the place where the secret is embodied, not the agents who withhold it. In this reproductive libidinal economy, questions produce questions, desire produces desire. The enigma of woman is not a riddle with an answer to be found or a truth to be told, but the placeholder of a lack that is necessary to reproduce man.

The woman *with* a secret menaces this reproductive economy, and the aim of narrative is to render her fully exposed. Figured within the narrative as an interiorized space, a memory that Louise will not narrate, "Texas" could be read as a hysterical symptom demanding the intervention of a

¹⁰Slavoj Žižek defines Lacan's Real as "the lack around which the symbolic order is structured . . . the void, the emptiness created, encircled by the symbolic structure" (Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* [London, 1989], p. 170). Catherine Clément points out that since the Real is a concept that cannot exist without the barrier of the Symbolic, when the Real "really does rear its head, the subject is terrified" (Catherine Clément, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer [New York, 1983], p. 168).

¹¹Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY, 1985), p. 66.

¹²Shoshana Felman, "Rereading Femininity," *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 19, 21.

subject-presumed-to-know, an analyst, to read. But unlike the hysteric, Louise does not try to overcome her resistances and allow the sympathetic detective, who in fact does know her history, to “save” her. On the contrary, she thoroughly mistrusts the mechanisms that would reintegrate her into the symbolic order. Louise constantly has to educate Thelma about the way this order operates. Thelma naively believes that simply telling the “truth” will exonerate them. Louise has to teach her that the symbolic order is a masculine imaginary.

Louise’s journey has obvious affinities with Oedipus, most clearly in her attempt to circumvent the trauma rather than traverse it. Had she been willing to go through Texas, that direct route might have allowed the women to make it to Mexico. Thus, like Oedipus, her journey is inscribed as a circle that repeats the wound in the effort to elude it. As the refrain from the film’s theme song, “Part of me, Part of you,” repeats, Louise and Thelma are “standing at the crossroads,” evoking the mythical topos where the hero makes his fated, fatal move. For Oedipus, however, the lyrics that follow would have to say, “from this day on you’ll *always* walk alone.” For Thelma and Louise, the crossroads motif signals each juncture in their deepening commitment to each other—“from this day on you’ll *never* walk alone.”

But *Thelma and Louise* is an oedipal narrative by virtue of its structure alone. Teresa de Lauretis has brilliantly demonstrated that all narrative is governed by an oedipal logic in which each reader “—male or female—is constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other.”¹³ Perhaps there is no narrative more transparently oedipal than the conventional buddy film in which the female obstacles have already been eliminated before the action begins. An exclusively masculine domain until recently, what the buddy films might show us is the already achieved homosocial order that underpins a purportedly heterosexual economy. By skipping the step of rendering the bonds between men that are hidden behind the pursuit by the male subject of a female object, male road movies might either radically subvert dominant ideologies or powerfully substantiate them. Whether they are hetero-subversive, homoerotic, or disruptive of the distinction, the form has been presumed to be inherently masculine.

Developing Roland Barthes’s hunch that pleasure and narrative move along the triple track of language, narrative, and the Oedipus, de Lauretis shows how this movement is one of masculine desire. Barthes writes: “The pleasure of the text is . . . an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to

¹³Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, 1984), p. 121.

learn the origin and the end).”¹⁴ But the fulfillment of that desire is not guaranteed, for as de Lauretis points out, unlike reproduction—the “aim of biology”—which “may be accomplished independently of women’s consent, the aim of desire (heterosexual male desire, that is) may not. In other words, women *must either* consent or be seduced into consenting to femininity,”¹⁵ so that they come to represent the endpoint of the male journey.

Louise not only resists that oedipal pleasure by refusing to disclose her “mystery,” but also the journey of both women is figured as precisely a *flight* from femininity. As they move through the phallic landscapes of the film’s scenography, we watch them discarding the external trappings of their prescribed gender and appropriating the cultural markings of masculinity: Louise exchanges her engagement ring for a man’s hat; Thelma dons the cap of the driver whose truck they blow up; Louise trades sunglasses with the state trooper whom they lock in the trunk of his car; their long, flowing hair is tucked up under the hats; they stop carrying purses and strap on guns and ammunition. In one particularly pointed scene, Louise exchanges looks with two elderly women who are watching her quizzically as she waits for Thelma, who is robbing a store. When she sees the women watching her, she throws her lipstick out of the car. The most striking instance of this appropriation is Thelma’s imitation of J.D.’s style of committing armed robbery. Her husband and the detectives later are shown watching this incident on videotape; and this is the moment when they recognize the women as unrecuperable. As Louise jokes to Thelma, “There’s no such thing as *justifiable* armed robbery.” So there is no turning back. Thelma and Louise, from this moment on, have crossed the boundary that represents women’s space in the symbolic order. They are no longer simply women in trouble, but full-fledged outlaws.

We can then understand the “incoherent geography” of this film as an enactment of the oxymoronic logic of a narrative that sets out to show the “impossible”—two women together outside the confines of the patriarchal symbolic. Theoretically, as women, Thelma and Louise are excessive to the representation. And indeed reviewers’ responses indicate that women cannot be seen as women within the buddy-film conventions. So, for example, one reviewer says that Thelma and Louise are “free to behave like—well, men.”¹⁶ Or, at best, the “good ol’ boys are gals” who become “parodies of men.”¹⁷ The semantic awkwardness that refers to the film as a “female buddy film” points to the conceptual inability to think of the film in terms

¹⁴Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1975), p. 10.

¹⁵De Lauretis, p. 134.

¹⁶Carlson, p. 57.

¹⁷Richard A. Blake, “The Deadlier of the Species,” *America*, June 29, 1991, p. 683.

other than that of substitution. The dilemma is posed by David Denby: "In some ways, I suppose, we've seen all of this before. . . . But in crucial ways, we've never seen it before."¹⁸ Of course we have seen the plot structure of two heroes on the lam many times before; what we have not seen is simply two women occupying the same topography. The issue is whether this substitution constitutes difference, sameness, or the same difference. *Thelma and Louise* thus engages us directly in the problems and paradoxes of the sameness/difference binary.

For these female buddies, hemmed in by spaces they cannot enter or will not pass through, Texas and the Grand Canyon become structural metonymies. In the phallographic libidinal economy, it is precisely the absent space that signifies "woman," the lack that is necessary to uphold the symbolic order, the "black hole" of the Real that resists symbolization. Theoretically, this is the space where they always already were and to which they will ineluctably return. And yet, *Thelma and Louise* stake out their territory in the middle ground, the place of the masculine hero. Ostensibly, it is their inhabitation of this landscape that has produced so much anxiety in response to this film, indicating that the reverse discourse holds some promise for destabilizing the masculine/feminine dichotomy. However, the mechanism of reversal alone does not fully account for the cultural hysteria that this film has elicited. By examining the "logic" of the reception of *Thelma and Louise*, another possibility begins to emerge that is more subversive than appropriation of the "other's" territory.

First, spectators' responses to the film manifest the familiar denunciation, couched in aesthetic terms, of its lack of verisimilitude and, at the same time, the fear that its content is all too imitable. The *Time* magazine cover story sought out feminist scholars to reassure readers that the film was "not . . . a cultural representation but . . . a fairy tale," or "a dramatic piece," not a "[literal] description of what's going on in our society."¹⁹ The point here was to restore cultural confidence in *real* women's passivity. Then there is the need for reassurance that the women involved in the making of the film, as well as the fictional characters, do not hold any malice toward men. Thus we are told that the screenwriter, Callie Khouri, does not hate men.²⁰ Nor do *Thelma and Louise* really hate men, as one reviewer offers: they "basically like men, as most women do."²¹ Another tells us that Louise is really a "man's woman," who is forced by circumstances to take a "tougher attitude towards men than she started out with."²²

¹⁸Denby, p. 55.

¹⁹Richard Schickel, "Gender-Bender," *Time*, June 24, 1991, pp. 53–54.

²⁰Ibid., p. 55.

²¹Ruth Walker, "Why We Cheered *Thelma and Louise*," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 17, 1991, p. 18.

²²Denby, p. 55.

The last piece of this reception narrative is the representation of the real lives of the women in and behind the film. Thus we are taken behind the scenes to learn that Khouri is about to celebrate her one-year wedding anniversary, that Sarandon's boyfriend frequently visits her on the set, that Davis is recently divorced but has a long history of heterosexual romance.²³ If within the film we are reminded periodically that Thelma and Louise are attracted to men, so reporters seem to be concerned to emphasize that the women offscreen are heterosexual—as most women are?

In summary, then, real women would not act like Thelma and Louise. In case there is any doubt, we have feminist authorities to tell us that they are fairy-tale characters, so real women could not act like them anyway. By the rule of substitution, only men can act like Thelma and Louise. This representation is not really about women, it is about men. Now you see women, now you don't. Which is it? Both, neither, not either/or? What is it that we *are* seeing when we see women who are not *really* women but are perhaps "really men"? One answer would be the projection of male fantasies in which the woman's body is simply the screen, pace the psychoanalytic reading of the fetishized spectacle of woman. Without quarreling with this account, it is nonetheless important to recall a specific history to this woman's body-as-screen. The "woman" who is "really" a "man"—the woman, shall we say, "trapped" in a man's body—has a very specific historical materialization, not just a fantasized space in the masculine imaginary. When we speak of women who are somehow "really men," we conjure the specter of the invert. If Thelma and Louise are circling around the absent spaces where "woman" is located in the discourse of men's desire, response to this film is hovering anxiously around the threat of the lesbian as the unspeakable sign.

²³In the *Time* cover story (June 24, 1991), Khouri says, "I certainly don't hate men"—and to confirm it we are told in the same sentence that she "celebrates her first year of marriage to writer and producer David Warfield this month" (Schickel, "Gender-Bender," p. 55). In Carl Wayne Arrington's "Lost in America" (*Premiere*, April 1991, pp. 104–8), he tells us that Davis recently filed for divorce, but that "Sarandon's companion, Tim Robbins, visits frequently, as do their son and daughter" (p. 108). Davis is profiled in a *People* cover story by Jim Jerome (June 24, 1991), which occupies much space filling in the details of Davis's divorce from Jeff Goldblum as well as of her prior marriage and heterosexual romances. Of course it is common for actresses' private lives to be profiled in these ways (although not usually screenwriters'). Nevertheless, there is an unusual emphasis on the women's heterosexuality in the coverage of this film that I think can be attributed to accusations that *Thelma and Louise* is a "man-hating" movie. The cultural equation of "man-hater" and "lesbian" has been a powerful ideological strategy for discouraging women from expressing anger. The effort to keep these usually conflated terms *distinct* in the review media produces a provocative paradox. On the one hand, defenders of the film assert the women's heterosexuality in order to allay the public's discrediting of it; on the other hand, relinquishing this displacement makes women's aggression more threatening since it can no longer be contained within the "man-hating lesbian."

“Something’s crossed over in me” [*Thelma*]

Until recently, D. A. Miller writes, “Homosexuality offered not just the most prominent—it offered the only subject matter whose representation . . . appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation, where insinuations could be at once developed and denied.”²⁴ Consigned to the realm of connotation, homosexuality is thus constitutively dubious. Roland Barthes reminds us that the persistent illusion that denotation and connotation are two different systems “enables the text to operate like a game,” one that affords the classic text the ideological advantage of “innocence.”²⁵ According to the game, denotation gets to play the part of the original, although ultimately it is “no more than the *last* of the connotations.”²⁶ Returning to Miller’s point, if the referent we are seeking can only be located in the province of connotation, support for its existence can never be proven but only made more or less probable. Keeping in mind this constitutive dubiety of sighting a lesbian “subtext” in *Thelma and Louise*, I want nonetheless to propose that what sets this film apart from the numerous other recent productions that indiscriminately have been marked as “killer women” films is *not* the content of *Thelma and Louise*’s actions, but the form of their appearance—the representation of them *together*.

The violence in *Thelma and Louise* is patently understated when compared to the gruesome conventions borrowed from the “slasher” tradition that characterizes other films in this purportedly newly emerging genre. While critics are squabbling over which of these representations are the most violent, they are overlooking what sets this film apart from *Sleeping with the Enemy*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *La Femme Nikita*, or *Terminator II*, to mention just a few of the recent “killer women” films.²⁷ None of these other outlaw women has generated as much controversy in the name of *feminism* as has *Thelma and Louise*. And none of them has generated so

²⁴D. A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” in *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York, 1991), p. 125.

²⁵Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974), p. 9.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Featuring actress Linda Hamilton (of *Terminator II*) on the cover of *New York* (July 29, 1991), Julie Baumgold’s article, “Killer Women: Here Come the Hardbodies,” carries this headline: “What is important is that these warrior women, created from male fantasies, have been released” (p. 28). Feminist critics will surely respond that how these representations are operating ideologically is more important. In addition, we need to use a more subtle typology than “killer women.” One crucial distinction is between the woman who kills on behalf of, or in defense of, another woman and, as portrayed in the majority of these films, the woman who acts alone, often under the auspices of a patriarchal institution such as the FBI in *Silence of the Lambs* or the intelligence agency that turns the heroine of *La Femme Nikita* into a killing machine.

much reassuring rhetoric about the women's "normality." Critical responses to *Thelma and Louise* have evoked lesbianism as a haunting presence through denial and negation as well as through the rhetorical circumlocutions that supposedly merely cleverly describe the film. For example, *New York* magazine printed a photograph of Thelma and Louise sitting in their Thunderbird. The caption read "Girl Crazy."²⁸ The conceptual dyslexia produced by this idiomatic expression is apparent if we imagine the terms reversed and applied to advertise *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as "Boy Crazy." "Girl Crazy" is not meant to translate outside the terms of heterosexuality. The caption simultaneously connotes the women's desire for each other and reinstates the historical equation between homosexuality and pathology. The connotation of desire circulating between Louise and Thelma has only been hinted at through such "slips" or through negation, as evidenced by the reviewer for *Vogue*, who thought the film was riddled with cliché and found almost nothing positive about the film except for the *absence* of any overt lesbianism: "One of [the film's] admirable mercies is that . . . the women do not come on to each other," an omission that makes the "final scene all the more poignant and exhilarating."²⁹

In the film itself, we are reminded rather too insistently that the women are heterosexual, even though and perhaps especially because their heterosexuality is established from the beginning. As they go on the road, the film seems pressured to reinforce their sexual identities. A number of reviewers have pointed to Thelma's one-night stand with the hitchhiker J. D. as ideologically problematic.³⁰ That the film engages Thelma in a casual sexual encounter with a stranger just a day after she has been sexually assaulted by a man she met in a bar is improbable at best. When Louise's boyfriend, Jimmy, shows up in the Western Union office to deliver her money to her in person, we are as surprised as she. Given the way the film has characterized Jimmy up to this point, we would expect him to steal her life savings rather than fly across three states to deliver it to her. When this man who cannot make a commitment to Louise is, in addition, bearing an engagement ring, the film further stretches its credibility for a spectator. I think, however, that we can read the improbability of these episodes as more than issues of verisimilitude. For these romantic/sexual encounters allay any potential anxiety about the women's desire for men.

²⁸Denby (n. 8 above), p. 55.

²⁹Joan Juliet Buck, *Vogue*, May 1991, pp. 161–62.

³⁰Margaret Carlson (n. 9 above) notes that Thelma's sexual encounter with J. D. reinforces the myth that "the only thing an unhappy woman needs is good sex" (p. 57); Richard Schickel notes that "literalists criticize Thelma's erotic awakening because, they say, it could not happen so soon after the trauma of her near rape" ("Gender Bender" [n. 19 above], p. 55).

Summoned through negation in both the film's action and the critical responses is a history of identification between the female criminal and the lesbian. Given this history, the expectation for lesbianism between women who violate the law is so strong that the film works overtime to disavow it. If the lesbian has been constructed as the manifest figure of women's "latent" criminality, we can expect that representations of violent women will be haunted by her absent presence. This historical conflation is particularly problematic in the context of a film that focuses on women bonding together outside the law, since lesbianism has been used to maintain rivalry *between* women. Caroline Sheldon was one of the first film critics to show the way in which homosexuality operates within the heterosexual family unit as "the criminal element—both as a warning to those stepping out of line and a method of containment of anti-social (anti-heterosexual) tendencies."³¹ Sheldon's analysis shows that when lesbians do appear in cinematic representations, they are almost always portrayed as "castrating bitches and sadists."³² Given this history, it is likely that when women are represented as violent, predatory, and dangerous, the reverse would also be operative—the "castrating bitches" would carry the presumption of lesbianism.

Nevertheless, even though lesbianism is produced within this system as a necessary boundary to reign in and provide closure to the heterosexual imperative, this does not necessarily indicate a potential disruption to the system that produces it. It is not a matter of looking for the lesbian *behind* the content of the criminal woman. Rather, we need to understand how the lesbian functions as a structural dialectic of appearance/disappearance in the process of making women's aggression visible. These representations carry with them the weight of a culture that has made the lesbian and the female criminal synonymous by *displacing* women's aggression onto the sexually "deviant" woman.

Whereas there exists a well-documented history of representing lesbians *as* criminals in avant-garde, pornographic, and grade B films, the recent phenomenal production of films that depict and eroticize violence by and between women take excessive measures to heterosexualize the women.³³

³¹ Caroline Sheldon, "Lesbians and Film: Some Thoughts," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (New York, 1977), p. 6.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³³ In box office hits such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and its derivatives such as *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), in which the eroticized spectacle features two women locked in deadly combat, it is notable that the one who is killed appears at first to be a "normal" woman but is revealed as "pathological." The "good" women in these films assume the cultural function of eliminating their deviant counterparts, ideologically reinforcing the division of women by displacing their aggression onto the woman whose sexuality is "deviant." The "father" of criminal anthropology, Caesar Lombroso, author of *The Female Offender* (1895), as Ann Jones points out, was riddled with anxiety that a "good woman" might unexpectedly

By reading these later representations in a historical context, one can see in them a sexualized voyeurism in which the spectacle of a woman assaulting or killing a man makes an unconscious appeal to lesbianism and thus perpetuates the ways in which the presence of lesbians has been used to facilitate the heterosexual pleasure of male spectators. When the two women in the representation work with rather than against each other, the potentiality for their aggression connoting lesbianism is almost unavoidable. The anxiety these films generate will be in proportion to the incoherencies in the narrative that permit some glimmer of this recognition.

If on the one hand the narrative of *Thelma and Louise* imitates a heterosexual chase, it also plots Louise's gradual winning of Thelma. As the older, wiser woman who seduces the flighty and inexperienced younger woman, Louise in her relationship with Thelma is not unlike the dominant butch, usually working-class, who preys on innocent, virginal femmes, a relationship that is commonplace outside the classic cinema and has served to reiterate the conflation of the lesbian and the criminal. From the opening of the film, Louise's dominance is established. When one of her coworkers takes the phone from her and flirts with Thelma, Louise wrests it away and says to him: "Not this weekend, honey, she's running away with me." It is also common for the predatory older woman to seduce through narcissistic identifications. This "bad influence" theme is exemplified in *Thelma and Louise* by Thelma's husband, Daryl, who assumes that Louise has led his wife astray. This is reinforced as we watch Thelma taking on Louise's "bad habits." As they drive away together in Louise's Thunderbird, Thelma, a nonsmoker, lights one of Louise's cigarettes. Louise laughs at her and asks what she is doing. "Smoking," Thelma answers. "I'm Louise."

Implications of erotic desire between them begin in the roadside bar where they stop for a drink. Thelma initiates by suggesting that Louise "tell Jimmy to get lost." Instead of responding to the question of her desire for Jimmy, Louise suggests an exchange: "Why don't you get rid of that no-good husband of yours?" This dialogue could be read as two women commiserating about the inadequacies of their heterosexual love lives; but it also unmistakably flirts with the potential for freeing themselves up for each other. This latter possibility is reinforced when Thelma then says, "Let's dance." Louise clearly takes this to mean that Thelma wants to dance with her. She follows Thelma to the dance floor, and then she realizes that Thelma is going to dance with Harlan. Louise makes a gesture indicating frustration and embarrassment and returns to her seat. Both women end up dancing with men, but this moment is excessive to the

turn out to be a criminal at any moment. In these films we see this fear resurrected and contained. See Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York, 1980).

narrative movement. It serves no formal function but connotes that Louise is in some sense already “woman-identified” while Thelma must be persuaded. When a few scenes later Harlan tries to rape Thelma in the parking lot, spectators might observe that Thelma chose the wrong dance partner.

The film titillates spectators with the possibility of desire between the women and then recuperates it by introducing male lovers in heightened moments. Structurally, this is the same convention used in pornographic films in which two women are presented together amorously, only to have a man then enter the scene as “the real thing.” This procedure is particularly clear when the hitchhiker J. D. is introduced in the film. Thelma has just told her husband to “go fuck [himself],” a statement that marks her unwavering commitment to Louise. Thelma joins Louise in the car and says, “So how long before we’re in goddam Mexico?” Until this moment Thelma has hesitated, responding evasively to Louise’s questions about “whether she’s up for this”: “I don’t know, I don’t know what you’re asking.” When Thelma indicates that she is prepared to go to the end of the line with Louise, the women exchange a glance of complicity with an erotic valence. But Thelma’s gaze is quickly refocused on J. D., who appears in the side and rear-view mirrors of the car. This overly cautious presentation of him at exactly the moment when Thelma has relinquished her allegiance to Daryl reinforces my reading of the film’s excessive repudiation of the very desire that it evokes through negation.

“Lesbian” is the aporia in this narrative. Functioning as a placeholder for the reproduction of masculine desire, it is both necessary and disruptive. Subtle suggestions of its possibility lend the film an erotic charge, but if it were overtly represented the mainstream audiences targeted by this film would almost surely lose all sympathy for the characters. In fact, it is important to recognize that this display of women’s aggression could only be produced by guaranteeing a certain innocuousness, which is accomplished not only by manipulating the sexual politics of the film but also the racial politics. It is striking that the men in the film are so little threatened by the menace of a woman aiming a gun at them that they respond to her warnings with additional provocations. Harlan says “Suck my cock” when Louise is holding the gun on him. When Louise demands that the truck-driver apologize, he answers, “Fuck that.” We could understand these curious responses as confirmation of H el ene Cixous’s point that “men need femininity to be associated with death; it’s the jitters that give them a hard-on!”³⁴ But I do not think we need to theorize what turns men on sexually to see that what is operating in this film is the historical alignment of women with passivity, which has been ideologically enforced so powerfully

³⁴H el ene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York, 1981), p. 255.

that even when the women are presenting a clear danger they are not perceived as capable of carrying out aggressive action. This alignment, however, is grounded on the usually unspoken assumption that the women in question are white, usually middle-class, and conventionally attractive. Women who deviate from these prescriptions would certainly not appear as sympathetic or as nonthreatening. Could we imagine black women in these roles, or women whose physical appearances signified lesbian? Louise's working-class toughness alone does not overcome the images that Davis and Sarandon command as glamorous white actresses. Thus the representation of these characters' aggression depends on the cultural displacement of "real" violence onto others who are more "othered" than two white, attractive, straight women.

These subversions, however, are constantly at risk for recuperation by the narrative form. For the referent for these transgressions cannot but be the dominant racist and heterosexist ideologies against which they strain. Thus the film holds the most promise in what it fails to show and tell. To borrow Valerie Traub's expression, it is what *Thelma and Louise* "(dis)articulates"³⁵ that holds the most potential for undoing the hegemony of white heterosexist patriarchy.

"Better not look down, if you want to keep on flying" [B. B. King]

If *Thelma and Louise*'s origin is the traumatic space signified by Texas, their endpoint is another locus of absence—the Grand Canyon. Hovering over this death-space, the hood of their Thunderbird points downward as if to signify a forever-deferred penetration. They linger above it out of time, suspended, waiting. On its edge, they can marvel at the splendor, the sublimity of its enormous absence. "Isn't it beautiful?" *Thelma* says as they catch their breath. Moments later, surrounded by artillery, *Thelma* suggests that they drive into it. *Louise* at first has difficulty understanding *Thelma*'s desire to "go," to "hit it," but when her recognition comes, she kisses *Thelma* on the lips. The camera is positioned behind *Sarandon*'s head, so that we do not actually see the women's lips meet, but the kiss is too prolonged for "friendship," and the camera's angle reminds us of *Louise*'s earlier parting kiss with *Jimmy*. *Louise* then hits the gas pedal, the car hurtles forward, the camera zooms in on the women's hands interlocking, then the film stops them in mid-air. Desiring it from a distance, even one so close as the very edge of the precipice, is permissible. Disappearing into it is not.

³⁵Valerie Traub, "The Ambiguities of 'Lesbian' Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis)articulations of *Black Widow*," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York, 1992).

It is tempting to read the canyon as a feminine space, a utero-vaginal anomaly in the midst of the excessive phallic images that surround the women at this moment. But the canyon is much more interestingly ambiguous than that. What makes the canyon a sublime object is its vast emptiness. The contemplation of its nothingness is only made possible by looking at the contours of the frame that surrounds it. The canyon is thus a perfect anamorphic object, a nothing to be seen that is nonetheless visible by virtue of the boundaries that encircle it. Only the background is visible, but it is the black hole of the center that constitutes the canyon as such. Its presence is a blank. In this sense, the canyon is the very image of the relationship between Lacan's Real and reality. If the Real is that which resists symbolization, the unseen impossible that is necessary to maintain the consistency of the Symbolic, reality is the ideological order that depends on the relegation of the Real to the status of a central lack.³⁶

It is scarcely necessary to rehearse once again how this relationship is gendered so that "woman" is constructed as this lack. The Real is thus the zone that must be excluded, represented only as nonrepresentable in order to constitute the fiction of the phallographic symbolic as truth. It may be impossible for *Thelma and Louise* to break through this boundary, just as it is impossible for the film to represent their desire as lesbian. For in the phallographic economy of desire, on the other side of that boundary there is only madness. *Thelma and Louise* cannot tell a truly different story, but it points to this narrative as just one story among many. And in this sense it historicizes it, setting it in motion and indicating that it is susceptible to transformation.

Thelma and Louise are not criminals because they shoot a rapist, rob a store, or blow up a truck. They are criminals because they are *together*, seeking escape from the masculine circuit of desire. At the beginning of their journey, Louise holds a camera at arm's length and takes a photograph of them together. As they drive out over the canyon, the camera zooms in to show us this photograph flying out of the backseat of the car. The picture they have taken of themselves disappears into the offscreen space, and we are left with the static image of them hurtling to their deaths. If the canyon is the absent space that signifies "woman" in the semiotics of the narrative, *Thelma and Louise* cannot enter it because it is where they always already were. There is no place for them to go except the place

³⁶ Žižek offers Kasimir Malevich's painting *The Naked Unframed Icon of My Time*, a black square inside a white background, to exemplify this relationship. The white background, "the open space in which objects can appear, maintains its consistency only by means of the 'black hole' in its center (the Lacanian *das Ding*, the Thing that gives body to the substance of enjoyment), i.e., by the exclusion of the real, by the change of the status of the real into that of a central lack" (Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* [Cambridge, MA, 1991], p. 19).

designated for them in the masculine symbolic. But the photograph's disappearance allows us to imagine an elsewhere that resists representation. If we look at the map of the film from Louise's perspective, we might fix our gaze on the unseen real of her desire, exit from the endless circuit of masculine desire, and enter her imaginary landscape.