

Gender roles resistance and response in *Thelma Louise*

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Ridley Scott's progressive 1991 road movie, *Thelma & Louise*, shines an accusatory spotlight on female oppression. Regrettably not left behind in the '90s along with frosted blue eyeshadow, this maltreatment is unfortunately still very much present in today's society. By highlighting repressive gender roles and the lead characters' ultimately futile efforts to resist them, the revolutionary film launched a nationwide conversation, and spurred a cult following of women feeling seen for the first time in their lives.

The film opens with a subtle, but very symbolic shot. Set to haunting rock music, a black and white view of a valley pans to a dirt road leading directly to a majestic mountain on the horizon with wide-open skies. As the camera cranes up, the image transitions to full, vivid color. The shot freezes and then darkens over into black. This simple opening foreshadows everything that is to come: a bleak outset, a journey toward freedom, and the short-lived actualization of that wondrous freedom before it all comes crashing down to a devastating end. Without necessarily realizing it, the viewer already knows all they'll need to – an attempt to break free will inevitably end in disaster.

The audience is then introduced to Louise (Susan Sarandon) and Thelma (Geena Davis), and their respective lives of routine and domesticity. Louise works in a diner, subservient to an endless influx of customers. Thelma, whom Louise teasingly refers to as “little housewife”, is stuck in a submissive role under a controlling husband. The spaces they inhabit are very telling. Louise wears a uniform and operates in a cramped, loud environment. All day long she offers choices to everyone else, while she herself has no choice in anything. Her surroundings reflect how she feels stifled by society, holding

no control over her own life. Thelma is a mess living in mess. Her apartment is small, dark, and chaotic. Her hair isn't done, she isn't dressed, and there's a feeling of entrapment due to the cacophony of noise resulting from the TV playing, the phone ringing, and her yelling to get the attention of husband Darryl (Christopher McDonald). The clippings of dream kitchens she has hung on the wall show her yearning for a different life, a better life. Louise's kitchen, on the other hand, is shown to be the total opposite of Thelma's with the sink housing only one dirty cup to be washed. The simple, spotless space feels cold with no sign of life or living.

The women start out occupying pretty traditional gender roles for the movie's early 1990s setting. The '80s had seen a real rise in acceptance toward women in the workplace – the percentage of working women had reached 71% by 1985 (Guilder) – but it hadn't yet become fully commonplace in the minds of all Americans. Chauvinistic Darryl stands as the perfect example of the resistance to the women's liberation movement. He cruelly belittles his wife by waving his title of regional manager over her, in a sense asserting she has no power (over him, or otherwise) because she doesn't hold a “” respect-worthy”” position in society. When Thelma hesitates to ask Darryl for permission to go on a girl's trip, Louise sums up the troubling dynamic perfectly when she accusatorially asks Thelma if he is her husband or father. Darryl sees his wife as inferior rather than as an equal partner, and by so strongly enforcing his views, he keeps her from reaching to achieve her full potential.

Less overt is Louise's imprisonment in the gender framework, but it's just as present. She goes through life with a hard outer shell, which we learn later on is a protective mechanism adopted in response to a traumatic experience from her past. She keeps walls up because every time she lets them down a little, she (or someone close to her) gets burned. On the phone with physically and emotionally absent boyfriend Jimmy (Michael Madsen), she asks if he loves her, and, sensing hesitation on the other end, immediately regrets opening herself up. It's better to be closed off and alone, than exposed and hurt. She chastises and blames herself for letting her guard down and having a little fun at the country bar instead of vigilantly protecting her vulnerable friend. The internalized guilt over Thelma's almost attack drives her actions for the remainder of the movie. Louise takes this burden of self-repression on herself because she feels that's the only way to survive in a world set up the way it is. No one messes with a strong-willed woman, so she stuffs her desires and emotions down to continue to portray and inhabit this cold exterior.

The women decide to head out on the open road for a short retreat from their stifling realities, but it ends up leading them somewhere they could never have imagined. The road movie is a central American narrative structure revolving around freedom in which the characters' physical journey is paralleled by a spiritual journey. As utilized in other iconic cult films such as *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, the format can easily lend itself to a critique of American society. The open road is a space representative of unlimited potential, the exact opposite of the spaces

Thelma and Louise occupied at home. As the women take to the road to physically run from their past lives, destructive significant others, and the law hot on their trail, they establish a metaphysical destination of freedom, and decide to follow the path wherever it may take them.

In their in-depth book, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*, Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton dive into the theme of violence in cult films. They start generally by explaining that many cult films use instances of violence to oppose mainstream modes of representation. Diving deeper, they discuss how in classical Hollywood cult films, it's typical to have violence associated with "" frontier liminality"", or the character's inability to cross the frontier marking the edge of civilization. Unable to function in civilization or in wilderness, the "" frontier hero"" finds himself stuck in limbo. This conflict sets the stage for violence. Mathijs and Sexton go on to specify that adventures and westerns are the genres that most often lend themselves to this type of story, as their entire narratives exist in this "" frontier zone, where violence becomes a mode of existence rather than a functional tool"" (Violence).

Thelma & Louise fits perfectly into this explanation of violence in cult films, but the film goes one step further by adding gender into the mix. Our leading ladies made the choice to leave their lives of domesticity behind them, but find themselves stuck in limbo when they come face to face with the edge of civilization. In defending Thelma against Harlan's rape attempt, Louise commits an irrevocable act, and the women are flung into a situation where they're forced to come to their own defense against an unrelenting legal

system. Even with a sympathetic detective leading the search for them, there's no lawful option they can take that won't strip them of their freedoms. They're victims of a world that holds women down, and, by choosing not to give in, are fighting back against the oppressive patriarchy.

There's no scene that better depicts frontier liminality than the iconic closer of *Thelma & Louise*. The women's joint decision to commit suicide is in direct response to the limited set of choices they were faced with. Trapped and cornered, they pick the only path that would keep them in control of their own destiny. Since leaving their homes in Arkansas, they had experienced their first taste of freedom, and they weren't going to give that up by surrendering to the system of oppression that had restrained them for so long.

Driving off the cliff was the ultimate rejection of male domination, but it's important to see the decision in context as but the conclusion in a series of acts of resistance. Throughout their journey, Thelma and Louise gradually shed their feminine image in a subversion of restrictive gender norms. Gone are the flowy, printed outfits and piles of accessories, as distressed tank tops and denim jeans become the new uniform for these accidental fugitives. Literally tossing the lipstick out of the car, the women trade makeup and curled hair for dirty faces and messy buns. They're no longer living their lives for anyone but themselves, and their outward metamorphosis is reflective of this shift.

In a cool reversal, Thelma, once a prisoner in her home, becomes the cause for Darryl's turn at feeling powerless in his own space. The FBI moves in and converts his house into the base of operations in the search for his wanted wife, and he finally feels what it's like to have no control. His football game is out-voted and all he can do is sulk in the corner. On the phone, Thelma calls him out and puts him in his place as her husband, not father. He's caught off guard when he realizes he's lost his hold over her now that she has asserted herself, and he reverts to blaming Louise for empowering (and therefore perverting) his once-subservient wife. On the contrary, Louise led the way for Thelma to take the reins back in her life, and this takedown of Darryl is just one more way in which they set themselves free of their past and took another step forward toward independence.

In a strong push back against male oppression, the women take down two men who attempted to forcefully assert their dominance. Multiple times on the trip, they encounter a certain truck driver who doubles as the human embodiment of toxic masculinity. After ignoring him didn't work, they muster up their newfound boldness and confront him. They quickly and masterfully turn the dynamic around, transferring the feelings of vulnerability and helplessness onto him, before wrapping up the interaction by blowing up his oil tanker. When the friends get pulled over for speeding, instead of giving in to the lawman, they kick into survival mode and overpower him. The state trooper had started out stern and tough, but is reduced to a crying, shaking mess the moment Thelma pulls a gun on him. The women take his gun, ammo, and sunglasses as they lead him into his own trunk with words of

advice to be sweet to his wife so she doesn't turn out like they did. By stripping a truck driver of his truck and a state trooper of his gun, they emasculated two men who never expected to have their dominance checked. It's a powerful thing for the female audience to see women pushing back against the men who once stood over them, in effect flipping the script and using these men to get to a place where they are no longer dependent on men.

In a 2016 reunion interview in celebration of the film's 25th anniversary, lead actresses Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis discussed the reaction at the time of the movie's release. Neither of them had expected any sort of big return, so when the film was met with such an immediate and massive response, they were shocked. Davis incredulously exclaimed, "" We were on the cover of Time Magazine in, like, 5 seconds!"" (Davis). Pieces like the one in Time tried to dissect why the movie was making such a splash, but the answer was deceptively simple: the audience found the characters relatable. Thelma and Louise were two ordinary women dealing with the same problems all women go through, so it was exhilarating watching them respond in ways one could never get away with in real life. The movie is so much more than a female take on a buddy film; it's a story of female empowerment operating on the "" rules of male-escapist fantasy"" (Cult Now). Thelma and Louise were the strong, liberated role models audiences had long been waiting for.

With such an encouraging reception, it seemed in all likelihood a shift toward gender equality in the entertainment industry would naturally follow. It's

clear from recent headlines, however, that that never occurred. The film was able to start the conversation, but that wasn't enough to effect any real change in the straight, white, boys' club of Hollywood. The women behind *Thelma & Louise* took it upon themselves to step up and continue the work their movie began.

Davis in particular was enlightened and inspired by the "" eye-opening"" reactions (Davis), and followed through by starting the "" Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media"", which researches the gender depiction disparity present in media. With shocking statistics such as the ratio of male to female characters not changing at all since 1946 (Davis), she's putting up a challenge to those who feel the problem is solved and behind us. To continue pushing things in the right direction, she launched her own film festival that shines a spotlight on works from women and diverse creators.

Sarandon came at the issue from a different angle when she stepped up as a leader in the recent Times Up movement, "" an initiative launched by hundreds of Hollywood women to advocate better workplace conditions and the end of sexual harassment"" (Nyren). She attended the 2018 Golden Globes with a Times Up activist to raise awareness for the cause, and, fittingly, that same night saw a *Thelma & Louise* reunion as the two leads co-presented an award. Their appearance was met with roaring applause from the crowd, to which Davis sarcastically quipped, "" Susan, they love that we fixed everything!"" Sarandon responded, "" Um, yeah, I don't think we fixed quite everything actually..."" before lauding the women of Hollywood for

doing their part in the fight to stand up for women everywhere (76th Golden Globe Awards).

Rounding out the trio of women at the center of *Thelma & Louise*, Oscar Award-winning screenwriter of the film, Callie Khouri, has also expressed her disappointment with the current state of affairs for women in film. With studios systematically rejecting female-centric projects, Khouri made the transition over to TV, which she feels is “” a world in which you have a lot more freedom in terms of telling stories with women at the center”” (Tartaglione). The first television show she created was the highly successful musical drama series, *Nashville*, which just so happens to center around two strong female characters.

Although it didn't necessarily shake up the industry in the way many had hoped it would, *Thelma & Louise* has continued to remain relevant to today's culture in part due to its passionate fans. This continued excitement is a hallmark of cult blockbusters, as “” excessive investment [is] disproportionate to...films' status as throwaway products of popular culture”” (Cult Now). A “” kind of epochal film”” (Mainstream Cult Fans?), *Thelma & Louise* is significant in that it provided an example that inspired so many women to see themselves as worthy of standing up for at a time when that wasn't the norm. The fact that it continues to provide this empowerment for women of the following generations now streaming the movie for the first time shows the mark of a powerful, timeless film.

Thelma & Louise is a movie that still feels fresh today, but in this case that's not such a good thing. It's disheartening that a depiction of women being forced into a life on the run as the only way they could experience some freedom isn't too far from realistic. The liberal film started the long overdue conversation on gender in equality, but it's now on us to pick up the ball and run with it. Until the day women can freely experience full autonomy without major drawbacks, the movie remains a goal; as Louise so eloquently put it, "" we don't live in that kind of world"" (Khouri).

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