

**RETHINKING CRITICAL STRATEGIES  
IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM**

**by Aspasia Kotsopoulos  
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**Author:**

(signature)

Aspasia Kotsopoulos

(name)

April 1/96

(date)

## APPROVAL

Name: Aspasia Kotsopoulos

Degree: Master of Arts

Title of thesis: Rethinking critical strategies in feminist film theory and criticism

Examining committee:

Meredith Kimball, Chair

Jacqueline Levitin  
Senior Supervisor  
Associate Professor of Women's Studies and Contemporary Arts  
Simon Fraser University

Richard Gruneau  
Supervisor  
Professor of Communications  
Simon Fraser University

Lianne McLarty  
External Examiner  
Assistant Professor of History in Art and Director of the Film Program  
University of Victoria

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore strategies for textual analysis used within feminist film criticism in the interest of assessing their strengths and limitations. Of particular concern is each critical approach's theorization of the relationship between female audiences, popular films, ideology, and the social formation, and the implications of each approach for feminist politics. Psychoanalysis and "reading against the grain," the dominant approaches to feminist film criticism, are found to inadequately theorize the above relationships since their theoretical assumptions do not account for the popular film's historical specificity at the moment of production, nor the historical or contextual determinants that figure in female spectatorship and popular fantasy, nor the contingent and contradictory relationship between popular films, ideological struggles, and women as agents existing in history. I then consider critical strategies that overcome the limitations of these dominant approaches.

Other approaches to feminist film criticism are found to theorize the relationship between ideology and the social formation as more dialectical and contingent than allowed for in the psychoanalytic or reading-against-the-grain approaches. To that end, I examine Gramscian approaches to textual analysis, which maintain that popular films must be understood as contradictory and heterogeneous. Popular films are complex negotiations of ideological tensions existing within a social formation, and embody competing voices and collective struggles. In this way, popular films are "polysemic" or "multidiscursive", containing contradictory and even resistant and oppositional ideologies. As such, popular films do not, unproblematically, reproduce the dominant ideology, but rather, function as manifestations of ideological conflicts occurring at a particular juncture in time and space. Yet popular films are not the simple transposition of such conflicts from the realm of the social onto that of the cinematic because hegemony is at work,

managing for specific ends the ideological tensions that gave rise to the representation in the first place.

To demonstrate the method of textual analysis I outline, I analyze the film *THELMA AND LOUISE* (1991). Most discussions of *THELMA AND LOUISE* have emphasized its reception. In contrast, I attempt to hold the text itself accountable, at least in some measure, for the diametrically opposed readings it has produced. *THELMA AND LOUISE* attempts to engage with each of the ideological agendas (the progressive and the reactionary, the feminist and the anti-feminist) that various critics have imparted to it. The result is that *THELMA AND LOUISE* presents us with a layered, polysemic essay on contemporary gender relations. This film also works within ideological and generic parameters that limit its engagement with contemporary issues in particular ways, generating meanings that are, in some cases, contradictory, and in others, clearly hegemonic. My analysis considers both the ways in which the film itself generates diverse interpretations and the ideological implications of this polysemy for feminism. It is in the interests of feminist film criticism to account for the political or ideological stakes involved in producing polysemy, as an analysis of *THELMA AND LOUISE* aptly demonstrates.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1993, I worked on an article about *THE CRYING GAME* (1992) with my friend and peer Josephine Mills, which was subsequently published in *Jump Cut* (1994), a socialist-feminist journal of film and media criticism. Between the article's writing and its publication, I began to do serious work on my thesis and immersed myself in a survey of feminist film and cultural theory, which has led to my present position and has indicated to me some of the shortcomings in our *CRYING GAME* article.

In retrospect, I would say that our analysis would have been strengthened by a more explicit consideration of the ways in which the film's textual strategies and the intertextual and extratextual discourses around it enabled viewers and critics to produce a range of interpretations, from counter-hegemonic and queer-positive to hegemonic and heterosexist. Although we encountered a number of interpretations, most of the readings were significantly constrained by certain recurring strategies for interpreting. One of these, which stood out from the rest in terms of its frequency and its hegemonic role, stressed the film's universality as a way of diffusing the threat of Otherness posed by the gay transvestite character Dil/Jaye Davidson. Study of this popular discourse around the film revealed to us the ideological work entailed in attracting a wide and diverse audience. In the end, the range of readings we encountered, even amongst our feminist friends, pointed to my need to understand my own reading strategy as a feminist critic as a way of participating in the cultural construction of meaning.

A film like *THE CRYING GAME* demonstrates a contemporary crisis in the cultural construction of gender. As this crisis is characterized by a neo-conservative backlash,<sup>1</sup> critical attention to popular culture<sup>2</sup> as a site of ideological struggle over

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<sup>1</sup>Despite the election of a centrist Liberal government in 1993, Canadians face economic and domestic policies that continue to be dominated by neo-conservative/corporate ruling-class interests. Moreover, in both Canada

gender identities is politically imperative for feminism.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the way meaning is ideologically produced both within popular films and in their reception is useful to a feminist critical practice that seeks not only to explicate social processes but to intervene in ideological struggle on the terrain of the popular. My purpose in this thesis is to continue and to expand that practice by identifying theoretical tools that are appropriate to the contemporary social situation and to my work inside and outside academia. My work for the past five years in the small press as an editor, publisher and contributor has a direct bearing on the concerns of my thesis. The publications I have worked on, and those that I am currently involved with, have strong ties to progressive politics and a commitment to cultural writing that is accessible to a wide and diverse audience. The questions which engage in this thesis have implications for this work, as well as my future academic work. I am not just critiquing a body of literature but a social practice that has political implications.

The goal of my thesis is to explore feminist strategies for discussing the relationship between popular film, ideology and the social formation. In order to achieve

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and the United States, gains made by the women's movement in the '70s have been consistently under attack since the '80s. Currently, this attack finds voice in the right-wing rhetoric around 'family values' that advocates a nostalgic return to the traditional patriarchal family as a way of saving society from the detrimental and immoral effects of feminists, single mothers, and gays and lesbians. This backlash against feminism has also manifested itself in violent attacks against women's reproductive rights and against those who support those rights (cf. Faludi 1991 and Harrison 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Stuart Hall (1981) outlines the difficulties in defining 'popular culture' and then offers a definition that will be useful for the purposes of this thesis. According to Hall, popular culture is the "ground" on which transformations are worked (228). By "transformations", Hall is referring to the process by which cultural traditions and activities persist from period to period but at the same time are actively reworked so that they bear a different relation to the real material conditions of existence than before. Hall explains that popular culture has been understood in two ways, either pessimistically as the imposition of the dominant classes' views through cultural forms, or romantically as the popular traditions of working-class resistance. Alternatively, Hall posits popular culture as a constantly changing field that struggles between these two poles of domination and resistance. Therefore, says Hall, cultural analysis must always begin "with the double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it" (228). Moreover, Hall addresses the commercial or market meaning of 'popular', e.g., Hollywood films are 'popular' because masses of people consume and enjoy them. He suggests that the market definition need not be entirely abandoned even if it is unsatisfactory because it is true that "vast numbers of people do consume and even indeed enjoy the cultural products of our modern cultural industry...", and that this phenomenon cannot simply be explained in terms of "false consciousness" (232), thus necessitating a more complex and dynamic understanding of popular culture as struggle, transformation and process.

<sup>3</sup>I use the term "feminism" as an umbrella term for feminisms.

this goal, I began my research with the assumption that I had to venture beyond the confines of feminist film theory. My assumption that feminist film theory had confines pointed to my narrow, monolithic understanding of this body of work. This restricted view resulted from my experiences as an undergraduate student in film studies, where I struggled against the overwhelming current of psychoanalysis within feminist film theory. However, as research on my MA thesis progressed, I discovered that feminist film theory was not the homogeneous discourse I had believed it to be but a number of competing approaches to the ideological analysis of popular cinema. I discovered, happily, that my confinement to the shores of feminist film theory was not as constricting as I had originally perceived, and that I did not have to venture far beyond its view in order to arrive at the point of departure I was seeking.

### **Text, context(s) and the production of meaning**

My search is for a method of feminist film criticism that can account for the ideological production of meaning at the levels of both text and context(s). Amongst film and cultural critics, the text/context debate occurs over two competing, though not necessarily contradictory, ways of conducting textual analysis. Key to each is the degree of determination ascribed to the text in the production of meaning. Text-based approaches analyze the text's structural features, that is, the semiotic or aesthetic codes and conventions it employs, as a way of examining how the text works to secure meaning. Here, 'the text itself' is the sole preserve of meaning. Meanwhile, context-based approaches consider the text's historical specificity, examining contexts of production and reception as a way of analyzing possible meanings. Here, the text is not treated as a vacuum-sealed object of study but as one that interacts with viewers, ideologies and social practices in the historically-variable and historically-situated production of meanings. This latter version of textual analysis retains an interest in the text's semiotic codes without accepting the structural determinism of text-based approaches.

Looking at various approaches to textual analysis within feminist film theory, I evaluate how the relationship between the popular film and the context of its production has been conceptualized. I discuss concepts that point to ways of conducting textual analysis that can account for the text's historical specificity – that is, its status as a social object that enacts and attempts to resolve the ideological tensions and contradictions of the society in which it is produced, using forms and practices that are historically located. Only an approach that addresses aspects of both text and context, can attempt to explain the intricate, dynamic relationship between films, ideologies and the social formation. Indeed, to study text without context undermines one's ability to grasp the meaning of popular films in society.

### **Towards a 'both-and' of feminist film criticism**

I draw on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to theorize ideology as fluid, complex and contradictory.<sup>4</sup> Such a conception of ideology necessitates a particular conception of the popular film, one that argues the text is neither the personal expression of individual genius, nor the simple reflection of the dominant ideology, nor the monolithic reproduction of subject positions. Along with feminist film critics such as Christine Gledhill (1988) and Mary Beth Haralovich (1990), I maintain that popular films must be understood as contradictory and heterogeneous. Popular films represent complex negotiations of ideological tensions existing within a social formation, and embody competing voices and collective struggles. In this way, popular films are polysemic or multidiscursive, containing contradictory and even resistant and oppositional ideologies. As such, popular films do not, unproblematically, reproduce the dominant ideology, but rather, function as manifestations of ideological conflicts occurring at a particular juncture in time and space. Yet popular films are not the simple transposition of such conflicts from the realm of the social onto that of the cinematic because hegemony is at

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<sup>4</sup>I elaborate on Gramsci's theory of hegemony in Chapter Two.

work, managing for specific ends the ideological tensions that gave rise to the representation in the first place. Consequently, the feminist film critic must pay particular attention to the voices or ideologies a popular film legitimates or, conversely, discredits, and to the mechanisms by which this occurs.

A discussion of hegemony will enable me to examine the mechanisms by which popular films and other cultural products accommodate female desires, fantasies and pleasures at the same time that they help maintain popular consent for a social order that denies women agency. Along similar lines, Fredric Jameson ([1979] 1992; 1981) has argued that popular texts contain Utopian impulses, which he defines as the expression of a fantasy of collective solidarity, social harmony and classlessness that is both an imagined alternative to and a faint criticism of the existing social order. For Jameson (1992: 29), a text's Utopian impulses represent a given collectivity's hopes, desires and fears, and at the same time, function as a kind of "fantasy bribe," which, hegemonically speaking, secures the collectivity's consent to the status quo, resulting in a kind of solidarity. He (1981: 287) explains that implicit in traditional Marxist critiques of mass culture<sup>5</sup> is the notion of

... a process of compensatory exchange ... in which the henceforth manipulated viewer is offered specific gratifications in return for his or her consent to passivity. In other words, if the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are "managed" and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses – the real material upon which the process works – are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them.

In traditional Marxist critiques, the media are a passive mirror that reflects and is determined by the economic base of society. The mirror, moreover, is a distorted one

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Jameson uses the term "mass culture", but for the purposes of this thesis, I prefer the notion of "popular culture" as defined by Hall (1981). See note 2.

since it manipulates and disguises the real conditions of existence, thus producing "false consciousness," that is, consciousness of a reality that in fact does not really exist. The implication is that there is a more real reality separate from signification (cf. Bennett 1982). Georg Lukacs ([1922] 1971) used the term "false consciousness" to explain the ideological processes that work to disguise the real conditions of existence and impress upon the working class an inauthentic understanding of the world. The effect is to divert the working class from class consciousness. Instead of apprehending this process as other Marxists such as Lukacs have, Jameson (1981: 287) seeks to grasp it as "a complex strategy of rhetorical persuasion in which substantial incentives are offered for ideological adherence. ... [S]uch incentives, as well as impulses to be managed by the mass cultural text, are necessarily Utopian in nature."

Since its inception in the early '70s, feminist film critics have been concerned with the relationship between popular cinema and women's fantasies, theorized primarily from a Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. One of the aims of this thesis is to redirect discussion of popular cinema and women's fantasies towards Jameson's notion of the text's Utopian impulse and towards a Gramscian understanding of ideology. What Utopian pleasures or fantasies are offered up in popular cinema in exchange for, or as compensation for women's consent to a social order that privileges masculine identity? In short, why do women go to the movies?

According to Jameson (1981: 286-92), a "negative hermeneutic" only sees the evils of mass cultural texts and fails to recognize their Utopian potential. Rather than going for the other extreme and opting for a celebratory "positive hermeneutic," Jameson proposes a dual hermeneutic, a 'both-and' of criticism that, he says, goes "beyond good and evil." In other words, popular films must be studied in terms of their ability to express Utopian fantasies while simultaneously affirming hegemony. According to this formulation, the purpose of a specifically feminist analysis of cinema becomes twofold: the first step is to demystify the textual mechanisms by which hegemony reasserts itself;

and the second is to address the ways in which the popular film incorporates Utopian elements in its attempt to gain female spectators' consent for the representation and the ideological assumptions inherent within it (cf. Jameson 1981: 291-2).

### **The struggle over the sign Woman**

Stuart Hall (1982), elaborating from Althusser, Gramsci, Marx and Volosinov, defines ideology as a system of rules that governs the organization and representation of reality. These rules, frames of reference, or assumptions are employed unconsciously because they are taken for granted, rendered natural. For example, if the logic of capitalism comprises a social formation's dominant assumptions, then statements about capitalism will implicitly carry the view that this is 'how things are' or 'how things ought to be.' This is known as the "reality effect" – to argue against such naturalizing statements is to argue against reality, against what is generally perceived as common sense. Ideology succeeds because of its ability to render the premises upon which it is constructed as "already known facts" (74-6). Furthermore, says Hall, "[ideology] represses any recognition of the contingency of the historical conditions on which all social relations depend. It represents them, instead, as outside of history: unchangeable, inevitable and natural" (76).

Hall stresses that 'reality' must be understood as an effect or result of signification and not as truth. In this process, language and reality are rendered equivalent, and any other possible meanings or readings of reality are contained or delegitimized. Some views of reality become privileged over others, winning legitimacy, while marginalizing alternative interpretations. Therefore, Hall argues, ideological power lies in "the power to signify events in a particular way" (69). Since signification is the terrain upon which "collective social understandings" are constructed and consent for particular ways of perceiving events is solicited, the power to signify cannot be viewed as neutral (70). The link between power and signification necessitates a rethinking of ideology, according to



Hall. Far from being passive or abstract, ideology is real and material: "Ideology, according to this perspective, has not only become a 'material force,' to use an old expression – real because it is 'real' in its effect. It has also become a site of struggle (between competing definitions) and a stake – a prize to be won – in the conduct of particular struggles" (70).

The notion of Woman as a site of struggle, as a prize to be won, is enjoying increasing currency today amongst feminist film critics using concepts from British cultural studies (e.g., *Camera Obscura* 1990, Gledhill 1988, Byars 1991). Teresa de Lauretis (1984: 5-6, 15) explains that 'Woman' refers to patriarchal notions of femininity that come to be viewed as natural and eternal. Patriarchy defines 'Woman' in ahistorical terms, as mysterious and sphinx-like, for instance. De Lauretis maintains that this view of Woman is an ideological construct capable of responding to historical change. In the struggle over the sign Woman, then, popular film becomes one of the contested terrains upon which hegemony seeks to negotiate consent for definitions of gender. In this on-going process, the repetition of certain narratives that play out female fantasies of resistance suggests an absence of consent for what women's roles ought to be. The sign Woman remains multi-accentual. V.N. Volosinov (1973:23) used the term "multi-accentuality" to describe the sign's ability to signify different meanings, depending on the way in which it is ideologically inflected at the moment of reception. Every sign, including Woman, is intersected by opposing and conflicting social interests. These interests compete over the sign's meaning in order to win consent for their particular reading, thus marginalizing other interpretive possibilities. The purpose is to render the sign uni-accentual, or having one hegemonic meaning.

The concept of multi-accentuality helps to explain the multiple and contradictory images of Woman within Western culture in general and within popular culture in particular. Moreover, it can function as a kind of barometer, helping to measure 'atmospheric pressure' exerted on definitions of gender, racial, sexual and other identities

within hegemony at a given historical conjuncture. I use the notion of multi-accentuality implicitly throughout my thesis as a measurement of the degree of contestation over what Woman ought to signify. Examining the implications of multi-accentuality and interpretation, and exhibiting a self-consciousness of one's own interpretive practices enables the feminist film critic to better indicate something of the struggle that is going on in contemporary Western society over competing definitions of gender.

### **Notes on organization**

Although feminist-psychoanalytic theory has never been the only approach to academic film criticism, it has still been, since the late '70s, the dominant influence in feminist film theory. Consequently, it continues to act as the departure point for any discussion of feminist film theory, including my own. Thus, in Chapter One, a discussion of feminist film theory's psychoanalytic legacy sets the parameters for my evaluation of feminist critical strategies. Also in Chapter One, I consider the implications of feminist film critics' use of 'reading against the grain.'

In Chapter Two, I address the work of feminist film critics who, borrowing from disciplines outside film studies, specifically British Cultural Studies, have developed interpretive strategies that address some of the limitations of psychoanalysis and reading against the grain. The purpose of this chapter is to consider those theories that, together with feminist film criticism, constitute a method of investigation that addresses meaning as the product of a dynamic interaction between films and contexts.

In Chapter Three, I apply the method of textual analysis I outline to an analysis of *THELMA AND LOUISE* (1991), a recent example of the woman's film that engages with contemporary feminist discourses around male violence against women. I consider the ways in which this popular film attempts to address recent struggles over notions of gender while working within particular ideological and generic constraints.

**CHAPTER ONE:**  
**EVALUATING THE LEGACY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS**  
**AND READING AGAINST THE GRAIN**

Since the late '70s, psychoanalysis has served as the dominant paradigm of feminist film theory, and continues to elicit criticisms and responses from feminist film critics, thus forming the foundation upon which subsequent feminist film theory has been built. The psychoanalytic work of early feminist film critics is revolutionary in its historical context, providing a powerful, radical alternative to sociological approaches at the time. In sociological approaches, feminist film critics judge films according to the degree to which images reflect the reality of women's lives and experiences (e.g., Rosen 1973). Elizabeth Cowie (1979, 1980), in her analysis of *COMA* (1978), illustrates the problems with the sociological, 'images of women' approach. Under this approach, Cowie explains, *COMA* can be read as a positive representation of women because the protagonist Susan Wheeler is a strong, independent woman. However, Cowie shows that the operations of the film, that is, the conventions of narrative, genre and *mise-en-scène* that *COMA* employs in the production of meaning, work to strategically undercut Susan's positive image, specifically, her effectiveness in solving the narrative enigma. As Cowie (1979: 78) puts it, "[T]o extrapolate just this element [i.e., the character of Susan Wheeler] from the narrative now becomes a willful denial of the film's work." In contrast to the sociological approach, which takes reality as a given that images may reflect or distort, the psychoanalytic approach investigates reality as a construction that cultural texts work to produce and re-produce. In a review essay, Christine Gledhill ([1978] 1984: 19) recognizes the historical significance of this shift to analyzing "textual production", at the same time that she is critical of the analytical methods employed, particularly psychoanalysis. As Gledhill explains, feminist film critics' initial interest in

psychoanalysis, as well as semiotics and structuralism, represented a "critical shift from interpretation of meaning to an investigation of the means of its production."<sup>6</sup>

In the next section, I briefly outline some of the key theoretical assumptions underlying psychoanalysis, particularly those which have been important to feminist film theory. As a way of introducing the concerns that structure this thesis, I focus primarily on those assumptions that I identify as problematic to a feminist strategy for discussing the relationship between cinema, ideology and the social formation. While I argue that these assumptions lead to a dead end for feminism, critically and politically, I do not advocate a complete abandonment of psychoanalysis but rather a shift from the focus on psychic fantasies as they relate to the Oedipal family romance,<sup>7</sup> to hegemonic fantasies, a concept I elaborate in Chapter Two. Following this investigation, I move on to a consideration of reading against the grain, and conclude the chapter with a discussion of the role of the feminist film critic in interpretation, as a way of introducing issues considered in Chapter Two.

### **Psychoanalysis as an approach to feminist film criticism**

Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) is the departure point for any discussion of feminist film theory since it is the first to consider cinematic spectatorship and apparatus theory within the context of feminism, calling for

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<sup>6</sup> Within feminist film theory and criticism, Gledhill remains one of the strongest voices against psychoanalysis. I further discuss her work in Chapter Two.

<sup>7</sup>Freudian critics speak of three original psychic fantasies, centring around the Oedipal family romance, that are compulsively re-staged and are universal. These fantasies have to do with the question of the subject's origins and include the primal scene (the origin of the individual), seduction (the origin of sexuality), and castration (the origin of the difference between the sexes) (Laplanche and Pontalis [1968] 1986: 27). The notion of three original fantasies that can be applied to any popular narrative posits a narrow, ahistorical understanding of popular fantasy and neglects to recognize the complexity of fantasy's relationship to audiences and social contexts. This has sometimes led to rather absurd analyses of Hollywood cinema. For example, feminist film critic Constance Penley (1989), who has been one of the main advocates of this approach, has discussed *THE TERMINATOR* (1984) as a primal-scene fantasy-narrative in which John Conner, an adult in the future, searches for the answer to the questions of his origins by staging a fantasy in which he chooses a father to send into the past to impregnate his mother, Sarah Conner. Constrained by this limited view of the relationship between popular narrative and fantasy, Penley's analysis consequently overlooks the film's social and historical context. This is why I argue that popular fantasies must be understood in relation to a theory of hegemony.

the destruction of visual pleasure as a radical, feminist weapon against patriarchy (7-8). The term 'apparatus theory' refers to the work of French theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry ([1970] 1986; [1975] 1986) and Christian Metz (1975, trans. 1982) who, drawing on psychoanalytic and semiotic theories of language, ideology and subjectivity, discuss cinema as an institutional apparatus, that is, as a standardizing machine whose main function is to reproduce the dominant ideology via structures of fantasy, dream and desire, which the mechanics of cinematic representation (e.g., the immobile spectator, the dream-like screen, etc.), it is argued, are particularly adept at rendering.

In her article, Mulvey draws on Althusserian, Freudian and Lacanian currents in contemporary French film theory, currents that were simultaneously influencing other British feminist film critics such as Pam Cook and Claire Johnston. Broadly speaking, feminist appropriations of French film theory operate under the assumption that the child's psychological development is equivalent to the child's ideological positioning in culture and that this culture is fundamentally a patriarchal one. Moreover, language, as a signifying system pre-existing the child, is the main culprit in positioning the child, ideologically, within patriarchy. Language orders and constructs our experience of the world, and acts as the interpretive framework through which we experience reality. In addition, language, as a social phenomenon into which we are born, escapes individual will and is responsible for constructing us as subjects. Hence, we are the products of language not its producers.

To make the link between cinema, language and ideology, French theorists of the apparatus draw on the work of semioticians and linguists, among them Benveniste, Pierce and Saussure, to argue that cinematic enunciation has a specificity of its own: cinema is a language. Furthermore, since the function of language, according to Lacan, is to position us within patriarchy,<sup>8</sup> and since language, according to Althusser, is a manifestation of

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<sup>8</sup>My use of the term "patriarchy" is in the feminist spirit of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) essay, which employs Lacanian concepts. Lacan himself does not use "patriarchy" but the phrase "the Law of the Father", which, he argues, governs the Symbolic Order, that is, culture or the realm of language and representation

ideology, then cinema as a language is the incarnation of patriarchal ideology – or better still – of the patriarchal unconscious. In the end, these analogies and metaphors, while descriptively useful, came to be used literally. The four editors (E. Buscombe, C. Gledhill, A. Lovell and C. Williams) who departed from the editorial board of *Screen*, back in 1975, because they had objected to that journal's uncritical use of psychoanalytic film theory,<sup>9</sup> are quite possibly the first to have pointed out the problem of metaphor and analogy in apparatus theory, specifically its "loose metaphorical use of language" (1975/6: 125). To illustrate, Judith Mayne (1993: 21, 47) points out that the tendency in '70s film theory to draw an analogy between cinema language and the language of dreams has resulted in a "mechanistic equation" in which films become the direct transfer of unconscious, psychic material onto the screen.

Indeed, Mulvey (1975: 7) had argued that the classical Hollywood cinema offers a transparent revelation of patriarchy's unconscious mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> Thus, within psychoanalytic-feminist film theory, the primary function of cinema, and specifically, classical Hollywood cinema,<sup>11</sup> is to transhistorically reproduce sexual difference. In cinema, argues Mulvey, the image of Woman plays a key role, acting as the vehicle through which sexual difference is reinforced. Woman functions as 'object-to-be-looked-

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(cf. Lacan 1977). Feminists have discussed the merits and the pitfalls of Lacan's theorization of "the Law of the Father," and it is not within the scope of this thesis to enter into that complex debate (cf. Grosz 1990: 115-126, 147-187).

<sup>9</sup> From the beginning, not everyone embraced the psychoanalytic approach to academic film criticism; indeed film theory has never been homogeneous and has included several different interpretive strategies.

<sup>10</sup> Mulvey is specifically addressing the work of patriarchal ideology in classical Hollywood cinema yet the specificity of her assumption tends to get lost in later work which applies Mulvey's theory. One tendency, as Mayne (1990: 5) points out, is to collapse classical Hollywood cinema and all of cinema. In her analysis, Mulvey uses examples of films by von Sternberg and Hitchcock to draw her conclusions. Critics later generalize the specificity of her conclusions, applying them to all of cinema.

<sup>11</sup> According to Mulvey (1975: 7-8), cinema as "an advanced representation system" poses "questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking." Mulvey defines classical Hollywood cinema as "the monolithic system based on large capital investment exemplified at its best by Hollywood in the 1930s, '40s and '50s." Furthermore, Mulvey argues that this cinema, no matter how "self-conscious and ironic" it attempts to be is always constrained by a formal *mise-en-scène* that reflects "the dominant ideological concept of the cinema." For Mulvey, "[t]he magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order."

at,' an image made to the measure of male desire through voyeuristic or fetishizing mechanisms that reduce or contain the threat of Otherness her lack of a penis poses to the male spectator. The cinematic reproduction of sexual difference works on behalf of the assumed, universal, male spectator, making him the subject of the voyeuristic or fetishizing look that has sadistic mastery over the object Woman (Mulvey 1975: 11-14). In the introduction to the anthology *Feminist Film Theory* (which reprints some of the most important psychoanalytic investigations of cinema by theorists such as Janet Bergstrom, Raymond Bellour, Mary Anne Doane and Jacqueline Suter), the editor Constance Penley (1988: 3), at that time an advocate of this approach, aptly sums up theoretical activity in the '70s and early '80s: "Cinema, as a sort of microcosm, provided a model for the construction of subject positions in ideology, while its highly Oedipalized narratives lent themselves to a reading of the unconscious mechanisms of sexual difference in our culture."

Challenges to Mulvey's assertions in particular, and to the use of psychoanalysis within feminist film theory in general, have come from many critics including Mulvey herself (1981).<sup>12</sup> Mulvey had been criticized, specifically, for leaving the female spectator out of her discussion. Limited by a psychoanalytic framework, Mulvey could only speak of the active, desiring spectator as male. Writing on *DUEL IN THE SUN* (1946), Mulvey attempts to address the issue of female spectatorship. Yet still constrained by a psychoanalytic reading strategy, Mulvey can speak of an active female spectator only in masculine terms, as "restless in [her] transvestite clothes," thus once again closing down the possibility of female agency and female desire, and positing masochism as the quintessentially *female* subject-position *vis-à-vis* spectatorship (1981: 15). Explicitly condemning the pessimistic Mulveyesque position on female spectatorship at the time, Lucie Arbuthnot's and Gail Seneca's article (1982) on *GENTLEMEN PREFER*

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<sup>12</sup>Other feminist film critics who, in the late '70s and early '80s, express criticism of Mulvey's position, as well as the use of Lacanian psychoanalysis, include Christine Gledhill, Julia Lesage and Linda Williams, each of whose work I later discuss.

BLONDES (1953) can be singled out as one of the first to consider active female pleasure and active female desire both within the film and amongst female viewers. Furthermore, Jane Gaines ([1984] 1990: 84) maintains that lesbian studies have consistently placed more emphasis on the female spectator's active role in interpretation than allowed for in the dominant feminist-psychoanalytic approach.

Criticisms such as those above expose at least three of the limitations of a psychoanalytic approach to feminist film criticism. The first limitation arises from the assumption that the Hollywood film can only work in one way, monolithically and homogeneously reproducing a historically-non-specific patriarchal ideology, acculturating spectators to the dominant worldview, and precluding the possibility of opposition, contradiction or variation from the so-called norm. In the context of my concerns about the implications of psychoanalysis for feminist film criticism, what becomes clear from this first point is that certain ways of discussing cinema become closed down for the feminist film critic. These include the ability to discuss the specificity of cinema as a social practice, that is, as a practice distinct from, though not necessarily unrelated to, dominant ideologies or the unconscious. The capacity to consider the complexity of cinema's interactions with various contexts (e.g., diverse viewing situations or intertextual practices such as publicity); and the ability to address the historical specificity of individual popular films which are themselves products of a changing and contingent social formation. In other words, psychoanalytic discussions of meaning production within cinema are severely constrained by the notion of an eternal return of the Oedipal repressed or "a master plot of male Oedipal desire," as Mayne (1993: 58) terms it.

Second, psychoanalytic film theory assumes sexual difference is a textually inscribed subject-position that determines the spectator's experience of the popular film in a smooth, one-way transfer of meaning. Consequently, in this approach, the female spectator can only be discussed as a hypothetical abstract entity, an ideal reader and not a human agent existing in – nor indeed possessing a – history. This theorization of the text-



spectator relationship has serious implications for feminist film criticism and its special concern with the female spectator. To begin with, the theoretical elaboration of the female spectator as a constant – as unchanging and unaffected by history – makes questions of historical address inconceivable and even renders social change impossible. In other words, the textual determinism of this theoretical model cannot acknowledge the role context plays in female spectatorship, not only in terms of differing historical contexts but differences in viewing contexts derived from experiences of race, sexual orientation, class, etc. For feminist film criticism, this has resulted in scant attention being paid to the relationship between popular films and the real material conditions of women's lives. Moreover, contextual determinants on meaning and spectatorship have been so absent from psychoanalytic discussions, as to prompt feminist film critics, such as Jacqueline Bobo (1990: 101-2), Jane Gaines ([1986] 1988: 12-7) and Judith Mayne (1990: 234), to rightly describe the female spectator of psychoanalytic film theory as white, heterosexual and middle-class. In addition, feminist art critics Martha Gevers and Nathalie Magnan (1986: 32-3) make the point that the attention to sexual difference in feminist-psychoanalytic theory only addresses heterosexual difference due to its focus on masculine/feminine binaries. Feminist film critics have also made this observation, including the editors of *Jump Cut's* special issue on lesbians and film (1981: 17), as well as Mayne (1991: 126), who states succinctly that "the preferred term 'sexual difference' in feminist film theory slides from the tension between masculinity and femininity into a crude determinism whereby there is no representation without heterosexuality."

The third limitation the psychoanalytic approach poses to feminist film criticism results from its assumptions regarding female subjectivity. Because of its Althusserian, Freudian and Lacanian roots, the subject of feminist-psychoanalytic theory can be no more than an effect of the text, pre-determined by language. As a result, there is no way to speak of the subject's potential for agency or self-reflection, and this is especially the case for the female subject whose access to language is theorized as restricted, placing her

outside culture in a position of perpetual silence.<sup>13</sup> Since psychoanalysis poses a subject that is always male, it is literally impossible to speak of a female spectator or of female desire: women cannot be subjects since they are positioned as objects by a language that always pre-exists them and constructs them as not-male, that is, as lack and Other. Many feminists, academic and non-academic alike, have previously argued that psychoanalysis' inability to theorize female agency, as well as historical change and social struggle, makes it incompatible with feminism. In the face of a seamless and unyielding patriarchal ideology, psychoanalysis can offer no hope for women nor indeed for a feminist future.

In terms of the concerns of this thesis, my purpose is to seek out those interpretive strategies that will overcome the limitations I have identified above. To summarize, I am seeking strategies that will account for the popular film's historical specificity at the moment of production; the historical or contextual determinants that figure in female spectatorship and female popular fantasy; and the dynamic relationship between ideological struggles, popular films and women as historical subjects. In order to achieve my goals, I pay particular attention to approaches to feminist film criticism that theorize the relationship between ideology and the social formation as more complex, dialectical and contingent than allowed for in the psychoanalytic approach. Societies and subjectivities are made up of more than pre-determined languages, and include heterogeneous and contradictory social forces that extend beyond – though do not necessarily exclude – the psychic and the familial. Taking the above notions as their primary assumptions, Britain's Christine Gledhill and the United States' Julia Lesage (each of whose work I discuss in Chapter Two) incorporate aspects of Gramscian theory into their feminist film criticism in order to, first, account for historical and ideological struggles within the social formation, thus presenting the possibility of social change; and second, address the interaction between popular fantasies and the historical conditions of women's lives. Before considering these points, however, I turn my attention to reading

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<sup>13</sup>For an overview of feminist critiques of Lacanian psychoanalysis, see Elizabeth Grosz (1990: 140-187).

against the grain, which, like psychoanalysis, has had implications for subsequent feminist film criticism and theory.

### **Reading against the grain as an approach to feminist film criticism**

*Cahier du cinéma's* 1969 analysis of *YOUNG MR. LINCOLN* (1939), reprinted in *Screen* in 1972 in its first English translation, introduced symptomatic reading to British feminist film critics such as Cook and Johnston. Louis Althusser (1968, trans. 1970: 28-9) coined the term "symptomatic reading" which refers to an interpretive strategy that searches not only for the structural dominants in a text but most importantly, for absences and omissions that are an indication of what the dominant ideology seeks to repress, contain or marginalize. Cook (1975) and Johnston (1975) are the first to employ symptomatic reading within the context of feminism, to read against the grain the films of Dorothy Arzner, one of the only female directors of the classical Hollywood period. Feminist film critics reading against the grain reject apparatus theory's monolithic, male-spectator-oriented understanding of the workings of film and ideology, and seek to explain the female spectator's relationship to cinema in a way that does not exclude or marginalize her experience. Reading against the grain operates under the assumption that the text comprises a hierarchy of discourses in which one discourse – patriarchal ideology – asserts its dominance over others. Nevertheless, tensions between the dominant ideology and subordinate discourses produce ideological contradictions that the popular film cannot mask nor reconcile, try as it might.

Cook and Johnston investigate Arzner's films for dislocations between "the discourse of the woman" and patriarchal ideology (Johnston 1975: 4). These dislocations work to denaturalize objects, relationships and behaviours that patriarchal ideology seeks to naturalize. The moments of fissure that appear, as a result of the tension between the above competing discourses, means that the film, though it reinforces the patriarchal status quo in the end, still contains the seeds of its own criticism – when read

symptomatically – and consequently, is open to counter-hegemonic interpretations, that is, to readings conducted against the grain. To put it another way, Arzner's films fall into the category of the 'progressive text,' defined by Jean Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni (1971: 27-36) as films "which at first sight seem to belong firmly within the [dominant] ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner." While such films follow the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, which, Comolli and Narboni argue, are responsible for perpetuating bourgeois ideology, these films nonetheless possess "[a]n internal criticism... which cracks the film apart at the seams," exposing the dominant ideology's weak points from within. Within the context of feminist readings against the grain, such films render the work of patriarchal ideology visible and refuse easy closure, thus leaving the films 'open'.

Barthes' aesthetic distinction between open or "writerly" texts and closed or "readerly" texts (1970, trans. 1974: 4-6)<sup>14</sup> has been influential to feminist film theory and is related to the notion of polysemy. According to Barthes, the open text is not governed by rules of coherence, linearity or closure, and consequently, has a greater capacity for the expression of polysemy or multiple meanings. The closed text, on the other hand, is constrained by specifically Western rules of narrative, causality and closure. Thus, the closed text shuts down the possibility of polysemy, placing structural limits on meaning. In a formalist aesthetic hierarchy, textual openness becomes a sign of ideologically progressive high art since it allows multiple interpretations, as well as viewer interaction. In fact, the viewer, it is argued, completes or produces the text through the act of viewing. Conversely, closure is a sign of ideologically complicit low art because only one meaning – the one that serves the dominant ideology – is passed on to unwitting viewers who have no role in producing the text.

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<sup>14</sup>While Barthes used the terms "writerly" and "readerly", I will be using the terms "open" and "closed" to denote the same concepts since the latter are generally employed in discussions of popular culture.

Moreover, in the high art/low art dualism, texts considered high art must work to distance the spectator, using self-reflexive, anti-illusionist, Brechtian strategies to foreground the filmmaking process, thus clueing in the spectator to the work of fiction. The concept of distanciation comes from Bertolt Brecht's views on epic theatre (1964: 33-42), which had a significant influence on '70s film theory, specifically on the discussion of spectatorship, as it relates to the theorization of an avant-garde, revolutionary counter-cinema. Distanciation, according to Brecht, is achieved through strategies that insist on artifice in opposition to the dominant aesthetic of naturalism. These formal strategies, which may include direct audience-address or the foregrounding of the means of production (e.g., the display of lighting equipment), distance spectators from the fiction, thus placing them in a position of detachment and enabling them to contemplate, critically, the subject of the drama, in order to actively decide their attitude towards the conflict portrayed. The argument is that only a self-reflexive, anti-illusionist cinema can free the spectator from ideological manipulation.

Following these theoretical assumptions derived from Althusser, Barthes and Brecht, reading against the grain maintains that deviations from the so-called ideological norm can exist, and that even Hollywood is occasionally capable of producing progressive texts, though these are exceptional. Thus, reading against the grain arguably has a view of the dominant ideology and of classical Hollywood cinema that is not as monolithic and homogenizing as in psychoanalytic film theory's.

Despite these claims, which do indeed counter some of the limitations of the psychoanalytic approach, certain troubling assumptions adhere in reading against the grain. Some critics point out that ideological fissures or contradictions are not exceptional nor even exclusive to progressive texts since these in fact constitute a necessary part of narrative. Janet Bergstrom ([1979] 1988: 83-5), in her evaluation of Johnston's work, explains that narrative ruptures or gaps are the rule rather than the exception, and are an indispensable part of the narrative's movement as a whole not isolated instances of

progressive rebellion. Bergstrom rightly takes issue with the way in which both Cook and Johnston, using what she calls "the rupture thesis", are able to abstract progressive moments from the text, ignoring how these instances relate to the ideological work of the entire film and narrative. For as Bergstrom puts it, "[T]hese moments only take on their meanings from their value relative to the rest of the narrative" (84).

In arguing that narrative ruptures are exceptional moments in classical Hollywood cinema, the reading against the grain approach reveals its rigid understanding of cinema and its relationship to ideology. The labeling of some films as progressive or open because they contain so-called fissures operates under the assumption that ideology is, for the most part, a homogeneous, monolithic, impervious entity that can only be cracked now and then, never dismantled. As a result of this view, Hollywood cinema, as ideology's handmaiden, is characterized as structurally and ideologically coherent. In other words, there must be 'a grain' to read against. Reiterating an observation she first made in 1985, Mayne (1990: 233) observes that this reading strategy "can serve to affirm, rather than complicate, a one-dimensional view of the cinematic apparatus, precisely by defining itself as marginal and thereby affirming the dominion of readings 'with' the grain."

These criticisms of reading against the grain can be traced to its formalist legacy. For instance, Charlotte Brunsdon (1990: 110-11) makes the point that reading against the grain re-makes what seem to be "organic, coherent" Hollywood films into "incoherent, fractured, plurivocal" – that is, high art – texts. Thus, says Brunsdon, reading against the grain, while helping to draw much-needed critical attention to so-called low arts such as Hollywood cinema, still paradoxically maintains an "aesthetic hierarchy". Indeed, the rendering of popular films as fractured or plurivocal works to lend legitimacy to the study of popular cinema, a legitimacy otherwise denied by a high art/low art dualism based on formalist principles.

In addition to the maintenance of an aesthetic hierarchy, reading against the grain also has the dangerous tendency to characterize those eruptions that slip through the cracks of patriarchal ideology as essentially feminine, as Johnston's use of the term "the discourse of the woman" suggests (1975: 4). This tendency lingers in examples of reading against the grain that borrow aspects of psychoanalytic theory, in particular, the idea that the pre-Oedipal is the site of an unrepressed femininity. The pre-Oedipal constitutes a domain in the child's development that precedes the child's entry into patriarchal culture. Here, free from the laws of patriarchy, in a state prior to its Oedipal subjugation, femininity exists in its true and essential form. While some examples of this work continues to be informed by traditional psychoanalytic approaches coming from Freud and Lacan, other work incorporates the psychoanalytic views of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, as a way of theorizing the specificity of female subjectivity and female experience. In either case, however, feminist film critics, reading against the grain for femininity's disruptive presence, risk the same mystification and homogenization of the feminine as in Mulvey's application of apparatus theory. Florence Jacobowitz (1986: 27) puts it succinctly when she states that "[t]he claim that the pre-Oedipal is exclusively feminine is a patriarchal view." Indeed, the idea of a transgressive feminine that escapes the law perpetuates patriarchal notions of femininity as "an eternal and naturally subversive element," to quote Penley (1988: 5), and many feminist film critics have rightly questioned the political value of ascribing to such a concept (Gledhill [1978] 1984: 42).

Moreover, the ideological opposition set up between patriarchy and femininity posits an ahistorical understanding of the relationship between text and context, and of women's struggle as a diverse social group existing in history. Following the logic of the above opposition, history and texts would consist of the eternally unfolding struggle between patriarchal law and the forces of femininity. Moreover, historical women's relationships to ideological struggle and to the material conditions of existence would

consist of the battle between essences that remain constant throughout time. Feminist film historian Sumiko Higashi (1990: 179-80) raises similar points when she criticizes Tania Modleski's work on Hitchcock. Modleski (1988: 8-9) analyzes the director's films for "patriarchy's weak points" and argues for the transgressiveness of the pre-Oedipal for the female spectator. Higashi says that although Modleski studies the films

... in chronological order... only once does she interpret texts in relation to historical developments: that of the women's movement as the context for the extreme misogyny expressed in *FRENZY*... [A]re we to assume that the construct of the female spectator functions as a constant through several decades?

In a more recent example of this problematic tendency in feminist film criticism, Jackie Byars' investigates 1950s melodrama (1991: 19-20) in order to, as she puts it, "recuperate" Hollywood cinema for its "feminine voices that resist patriarchal dominance." Byars incorporates many aspects of British Cultural Studies, specifically a Gramscian theory of ideology, as a way of discussing issues of historical specificity and historical struggle, which, she rightly argues, have been neglected by the dominant approaches to feminist film criticism. In addition, her goal of recuperating popular culture has been an important strategy for feminist film and cultural critics who wish to challenge elitist notions of high art that dismiss popular cultural practices as lowly, feminine and manipulative (cf. Huyssen 1986; Jacobowitz 1990; Modleski 1991). Nevertheless, Byars negates any historical specificity she claims to be working towards through her references to "feminine voices". Her book, thus, also raises questions as to the way in which some feminist film and cultural critics have applied Gramsci's theory of hegemony to the study of women and popular culture.



### **Notions of distance and identification and their implications**

I want to come back to Higashi's comment regarding the female spectator as a "constant". Within reading against the grain, the theorization of the female spectator's relationship to the popular film requires further consideration because one of the most significant contributions of feminist film critics who read against the grain is their tendency to be critical of the text-spectator relationship conceptualized in the work of Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey.

Psychoanalytic-feminist film theorists such as Doane (1982, 1987) and Mulvey (1975, 1981) inadvertently perpetuate what Patrice Petro (1987: 123) calls "clichés about gendered spectatorship." In their theorization of male and female spectatorship, Doane and Mulvey define distance as masculine and identification as feminine, with distance serving as the preferred term, connoting mastery over the fiction. Distance is valorized as the spectatorial position of choice. To be distanced from the text implies that one has attained mastery over it, escaping the grasp of its ideological manipulations. In response to criticism of Mulvey's position that the spectator can only ever be male, Doane using psychoanalysis, attempts to theorize the female spectator's experience of cinema as having a specificity different from the male spectator's. However, Doane's final analysis is just as pessimistic as Mulvey's, merely adding feminine masquerade to the female spectator's already-existing repertoire of masochistic identification and masculine transvestitism suggested initially by Mulvey. The argument, according to Doane (1982: 87), is as follows: because the female spectator over-identifies with the image of Woman – "she is the image" – she cannot achieve the critical distance necessary to a fetishizing or voyeuristic male look, and is doomed to a masochistic spectator-position (unless, of course, she becomes distanced from her own image by wearing her femininity as a masquerade). Unfortunately, this equation of mass-cultural consumption with a self-absorbed femininity has been an all-too-pervasive feature of contemporary social theory, as Andreas Huyssen (1986) and Tania Modleski (1991) have shown. Moreover,

Jacobowitz rightly questions film theory's emphasis on distance, in order to suggest the critical potential of empathy and identification. Jacobowitz (1990: 6) explains that

The fear of admitting to an intensely felt emotion, one that may even elicit tears, is gendered. The more closely experienced art forms like the opera or melodrama are debased in part, as a form of denial. They threaten masculine codes of emotional repression. The intensity of feeling need not undermine the possibility of critical distance and observation, however, one rarely is committed to issues being dramatized in a completely 'detached' manner, if one identifies with oppression and entrapment.

Jacobowitz maintains that the denigration of identification as feminine and passive is necessary in order to maintain sexist theories of the spectating subject, as well as of the popular arts, specifically so-called low forms like melodramas that are popular among female audiences and are associated with femininity.

The work of feminist film critics such as Florence Jacobowitz and Linda Williams suggests that the valorization of distance comes at a high cost, particularly to the female spectator. Through her essay on *STELLA DALLAS* (1937), Williams ([1984] 1987) shifts the preferred terms of spectatorship to argue for the potentially critical value of empathy and identification. Her article also illustrates the ways in which reading against the grain as an interpretive strategy is linked specifically to the idea of a privileged female spectating position (a contested notion in feminist film theory meriting further consideration in the next section).

*STELLA DALLAS* is an example of the woman's film, defined as a subgenre of the melodrama that is specifically addressed to female audiences, and features fantasy scenarios of resistance in which the female protagonist, usually played by a well-known star, is in the process of enacting a wish, one which is socially prohibited to her on the basis of her gender. More often than not, it is the protagonist's very possession of desire (for knowledge, for sex, for 'something else') that is forbidden to her, regardless of whether she acts on it or not, because to be desiring goes against patriarchal constructions

of a self-abnegating femininity. *STELLA DALLAS* is the story of a working-class woman, Stella, who has a loving, devoted relationship with her daughter Laurel, whom she has raised alone. In the end, Stella gives up Laurel so that her daughter may live with her upper-class father, Stephen, and his new wife, Helen, who form the perfect bourgeois family. The film sets up a contrast between Stella, the improper, garish and fun-loving mother, and Helen, the ideal mother, cool, calm and self-effacing.

Williams' analysis of *STELLA DALLAS* and the *Cinema Journal* debates around it foreground some of the major theoretical conundrums of feminist film theory. The main issue of contention in the *STELLA DALLAS* debates is how to theorize the text-spectator relationship. Williams had written her article to offer an alternative view of the film to, what she terms, the "monolithic position" taken by E. Ann Kaplan who discusses the female spectator of *STELLA DALLAS* as an effect of the text, unable to escape patriarchy's mechanisms. Kaplan (1983: 83) argues that *STELLA DALLAS* continually works to

... [wrench] Stella's point of view from the audience, forcing us to look at Stella through Stephen's eyes ... By implicating us – the cinema spectator – in this process of rejection [of Stella as good mother], we are made to accede to the 'rightness' of Stella's renunciation of her daughter, and thus made to agree with Stella's position as absent Mother (83).

According to Kaplan, the film delegitimizes Stella's perspective, in order to place us, the audience, in line with the patriarchal point of view represented by the ex-husband Stephen. Although we may feel "sadness" at Stella's sacrifice, says Kaplan, we nonetheless "accede to the necessity" of this sacrifice because the film structures us to do so (1983: 84). In a later response to Williams' essay, Kaplan (1985: 42) further notes that the female spectator "cannot simply identify differently than the male spectator in relation to the camera's look... I do not see how the individual spectator can prevent being structured by the film's mechanisms."

While Williams also discusses the female spectator as a hypothetical textual construct, she does, at the same time, open up the possibility of multiple and even resistant readings, as Carol Flinn and Patrice Petro (1985: 51) point out. In this way, Williams counters the position represented by Kaplan, a position that argues there is only one point of view in cinema (i.e., one grain), that of the male spectator placed in a position of ultimate mastery.

Drawing on the work of Nancy Chodorow, Williams insists that since women are socialized differently from men and are situated in a difficult and subordinate position in patriarchy, they will experience certain kinds of conflict and contradiction more acutely than men. As a result, the female spectator will have a relationship to popular film that is different from her male counterpart, especially in films and other cultural practices (e.g., soap operas and sentimental novels) that claim to "address female audiences about issues of primary concern to women" (1987: 305). According to Williams, cultural products like the maternal melodrama "have reading positions structured into their texts that demand a female reading competence" derived from "the different way women take on their identities under patriarchy," and this is "a direct result of the social fact of female mothering" (305). She concludes that the female spectator has the ability to identify with contradiction, with the conflicting and multiple viewpoints brought on by the tension between her desires as a woman – as a desiring subject, that is – and patriarchy's demands on her to sacrifice her desires in the name of maternity. The female spectator thus experiences empathy for Stella in recognition of the same contradictory demands both she and Stella experience as women under patriarchy. Working with these assumptions, Williams questions the extent to which the female spectator perceives Stella's sacrifice as just or even necessary (315).

When read from the position of contradiction that Williams describes, the apprehension of a female voice in the popular film is possible. This is a voice that struggles with patriarchal ideology rather than being completely negated by it, which,

conversely, is what Kaplan argues for. As Patricia Erens (1990: 97) importantly points out, Williams, in allowing for identification, does not advocate distance as a prerequisite for critical film viewing. In fact, Williams rejects the 'either-or' options set up by Doane and Mulvey in which the female spectator must adopt either masculine distance (via voyeurism or masquerade) or feminine, masochistic over-identification. In both cases, cinematic spectatorship is reduced to an exercise in passive complicity with the dominant ideology. Instead, Williams argues that the experience of both distance and identification are necessary to critical and active female spectatorship. As Williams (1987: 317) says, "[R]ather than adopting either the distance and mastery of the masculine voyeur or the over-identification of Doane's woman who loses herself in the image, the female spectator is in a constant state of juggling all positions at once." Consequently, the volleying back and forth between multiple and conflicting viewpoints enables "the divided female spectator," as Williams calls her, to experience empathy for Stella's sacrifice, while at the same time recognizing the ideological contradictions that led to the character's predicament (320). Williams thus maintains that the female spectator is indeed capable of critical, self-reflective activity.

Williams' considerations are important for four reasons. First, they raise the issue of how cultural practices relate to the lived, social experiences of women and how women as social subjects may relate to those same practices. In this way both textual address and the reception context figure importantly in her argument – the one does not necessitate exclusion of the other. Second, to argue that empathy and identification need not be dismissed as regressive opens up popular cultural practices for a more complex and engaged study than high art discourse allows for. Breaking down the formalist aesthetic hierarchy that places distance above identification, Williams' essay points to the need to understand the popularity of certain films for women in a way that engages with women's fantasies and women's social situations. The movement beyond the notion of female spectators as masochistic dupes enables the feminist film critic to consider why some

popular films appeal to women more than others and what aspect of women's lives and fantasies these films address. Third, in a far cry from apparatus theory's position, exemplified by Kaplan, in which the spectator is constructed completely by the text, Williams recognizes that social experience is indeed a context for interpretation. In this way, Williams considers meaning as the product of the two-way interaction between an active spectator, possessing a history, and a film-text (although she does this in a problematic fashion, a point I consider below). Finally, the reading strategy Williams describes operates under the assumption that the dominant ideology is not all-powerful. There are problems and contradictions that cannot be masked, and it is possible to apprehend these in order to produce a feminist critique of society.

For that is what Williams's essay describes – a reading strategy that is specific to feminist critical activity rather than to the female spectator.<sup>15</sup> While theorizing the female spectator as a construct applying universally to all women, some readings against the grain simultaneously conceptualize the female spectator as a viewer possessing feminist consciousness. Diane Waldman (1988: 80-1) critically sums up this type of feminist interpretive activity:

While I applaud the movement toward an emphasis on interaction between text and spectator, the dethroning of the unexamined assumption that the male analyst's reading and response is a universal one, and the subsequent attempt to reinsert the female spectator into the picture, I am disturbed by one recent trend in feminist film criticism which attempts to specify the responses of male and/or female spectators to a given text or film genre, and which tends to attribute the

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<sup>15</sup>Modleski (1982, 1988) has made many of the same observations as Williams regarding the female spectator's ability to identify with contradiction, with the contradictory and multiple viewpoints produced by the struggle between female desire and patriarchal demands for feminine self-sacrifice. In earlier examples of her work, Modleski, like Waldman, demonstrates the ease with which some feminist film critics have conflated 'female' and 'feminist'. For example, in her introduction to her book (1988) on female spectatorship and Hitchcock, she states that "[a]n analysis of voyeurism and sexual difference is only one of the ways in which a book taking a specifically *feminist approach* can provide a much needed perspective on Hitchcock's films. Indeed, there are many questions that I think begin to look very different *when seen by a woman*" (14, my emphasis). While this is a problematic tendency, Modleski's earlier work still provides many relevant insights to discussing the relationship between popular cultural practices and women's social experiences, which is why I return to Modleski in a positive light in Chapter Two.

hypothesized differences in reading solely to differences in the construction of sexual difference or gender identity. Representatives of this type of criticism also tend to conflate the 'female' and the 'feminist' spectator.

Waldman indicates the important contribution of reading against the grain to feminist film criticism, precisely, the shift in emphasis from the male spectator to the female spectator. However, she rightly expresses concern with the use of sexual difference as the sole determinant in the spectator's experience of popular film. While feminist examples of reading against the grain importantly attempt to include female social experience as a context for interpretation, the focus on sexual difference repeats the same problems as psychoanalytic film criticism, neglecting differences in female social experience deriving from race, class, etc. The social dimension of spectatorship is thus constrained by the category of sexual difference, more particularly heterosexual difference. Moreover, the activity of the feminist critic, as Waldman observes, is misrepresented as belonging to the female spectator. Mayne (1988: 28) reiterates Waldman's position, stating that

However obvious it may be, it is worth recalling that 'feminist' and 'female' are not the same thing, and if feminist critics can undermine the ideology of the classical cinema, this hardly means that women viewers throughout film history have resisted the ideology of film spectacle simply by virtue of being female.

Feminism as a context for interpretation is in danger of disappearing in the reading against the grain approach, creating a serious dilemma for the feminist film critic, one which merits further consideration.

### **“Doubled vision” as an approach to feminist film criticism**

Through the exchanges that appear in *Cinema Journal* regarding Kaplan's and Williams's positions, two points emerge that have set the parameters for feminist film studies today. In a revision of her earlier position, Kaplan (1984: 41; 1985: 52) observes that one of these points is the need to distinguish between address and reception, that is,

between the discursive female spectator constructed through the film's strategies and the historical female viewer existing in a particular reading formation in time and space.<sup>16</sup> The second, on which I focus here, is the political necessity of recognizing that the female spectator and the feminist critic are not one in the same, for the conflation of female and feminist in the reading-against-the-grain approach threatens to obliterate feminism as a radical critical tool. As Waldman (1988: 89) explains, this practice

... runs the risk of making feminism invisible, not just 'feminist film theory' but feminism as a social and political movement... And in an era when it has become fashionable to talk about 'post-feminism' and when there are real threats to the feminist accomplishments of the last fifteen years, collapsing 'feminist' into 'female' has practical as well as theoretical consequences.

In order to counter the tendencies she describes, Waldman suggests that a self-consciousness of critical practice, on the part of feminist critics, is necessary for the survival of feminism. We have to acknowledge the power of feminism to challenge and alter dominant ways of seeing. Waldman rightly urges feminist film critics to be wary of any theory that "allows us to ignore the discursive strategies of the text, to minimize the impact of feminism as theory and practice, or to a-historicize and de-politicize our own acts of reading and interpretation" (90). Hence, the acknowledgment of one's own reading practice becomes an important political strategy for the feminist film critic.

Julia Lesage (1974) is perhaps the first feminist film critic to have discussed this strategy's significance. She explains that we have to identify ourselves in our writing as feminists in order to dispel "once and for all the idea that the media just provides entertainment or that we have to take what we are offered" (12). Furthermore, according

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<sup>16</sup>In 1984, Christine Gledhill and Annette Kuhn had also observed the necessity of distinguishing between address and reception. Kuhn argues that we need to discern between the theoretical spectator and the social audience ([1984] 1987: 343), while Gledhill (1984: 40) remarks upon "the need to conceptualize the triple relation subject/reader/audience." This is also a popular refrain in the *Camera Obscura* special issue "The Spectatrix" (1990) on the female spectator.



to Lesage, the feminist film critic must "make her own basic assumptions perfectly clear so that the reader's response may also be lucid" (16). The goal of feminist film criticism, therefore, is to politicize the reading process, making it an act that is never without ramifications, no matter how common-sensical an interpretation may appear. In this way, feminist film criticism alerts people to the presence of alternative and oppositional ways of interpreting, and thus encourages people to be conscious of the reading practices they employ, rather than taking these for granted. Indeed, Lesage (1978: 94) later comments that, as a critic, "[she has] to provide some way of making people see that anyone's subjective interpretation has a place within a range of subjective interpretations and that they should see their subjective interpretations historically."

In those cases where the reading-against-the-grain approach collapses female and feminist, the process of politicizing and historicizing readings is undermined. Some critics, writing about feminist film theory, have suggested that the two terms need not be exclusive, though a recognition of the differences between female and feminist is of political necessity. Mayne (1985: 92), for instance, makes the same observation as Waldman, that the female spectator and the feminist critic are not the same, but, rather than arguing for a split between the two, she suggests that the feminist film critic keep "female" and "feminist" in tension as "connected, yet different. Some feminist critics thus write in a divided voice that calls on that difference." As an example, Mayne cites Lesage's article ([1981] 1987) on *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* (1919) as film criticism that simultaneously "speaks in the voice of feminism" and "as a woman viewer, certainly not in opposition to the feminist, but with a different frame of reference."

In this article, Lesage discusses *BROKEN BLOSSOMS*'s ambiguous treatment of racism, sexuality, child abuse and incest. She also addresses her own ambiguous responses, describing herself as "a woman viewer both drawn to and distressed by this film" (239). Lesage explains that while her pathos is elicited by the helplessness of the abused girl Lucy, the film also makes her and all viewers participate in Lucy's rape.

Lesage explains that patriarchy's eroticization of male violence and female victimization has an effect on her attraction to the film as a woman viewer, although, as a feminist critic, she finds this attraction disturbing and perverse, viewing it as "a gauge of [her] own colonised mind" (251). In this way, her article self-consciously addresses the tension in her responses between Lesage-as-feminist-critic, possessing a knowledge of the relationship between sexual politics and representation, and Lesage-as-woman-viewer, socialized to accept her feminine role under patriarchy.

In the feminist viewing position Lesage and Mayne describe, the feminist film critic can never be fully outside the text's or hegemony's influence. Working with this assumption, feminist film criticism is theorized as a complex process of negotiation. 'Negotiation' is a term frequently employed in discussions of reception and is generally associated with Hall's article "Encoding/Decoding" (1980) in which he argues that all readings are negotiated to some degree rather than simply passed on, by the text, to passive-receptive viewers. He describes three types of readings a viewer may actively construct from a mainstream or hegemonic text. These include a dominant (hegemonic or preferred) reading, a negotiated reading and an oppositional reading.

According to Hall, a dominant reading accepts the text's worldview without question, while a negotiated reading consents to the worldview informing the text at the same time that it questions some of the text's ideological assumptions. As a result, says Hall, negotiated readings are often "shot through with contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility." Finally, an oppositional reading begins from an "alternative framework of reference" that fundamentally rejects the text's ideological assumptions since they prop up a system the viewer opposes (136-8).

I refer to 'negotiation' here specifically in terms of its oppositional potential, that is, as it relates to feminist critical activity, for while all readings may be negotiated to some degree, not all readings are oppositional. By discussing feminist critical activity in this way, I hope to better understand how negotiated readings may become oppositional.

In the case of feminism, critics such as de Lauretis, Lesage and Mayne argue that the exposure of ideological contradiction results in an oppositional, feminist stance. To return to Hall's terminology, the purpose of a feminist reading strategy is to anticipate negotiated readings precisely because they are fraught with ideological contradictions, and then, bring those contradictions to "full visibility" by interpreting them through an "alternative framework of reference" (in this case, feminism) that is fundamentally opposed to the dominant-hegemonic one.

Feminist film criticism theorized as negotiation posits an internal struggle that occurs within a feminist critic who battles against oppressive discourses found both inside and outside popular films, and who is also a female spectator implicated in hegemonic, yet not always unpleasurable, constructions of femininity and desire. Hence, the feminist film critic's relationship to the popular film is one that is based on both displeasure and pleasure, both distance and identification. The consequence of this dual relationship is a 'both-and' of criticism whereby the feminist film critic is both female and feminist, both complicit and resisting, both a textually addressed subject and a viewer situated in a particular social and political context.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the interpretation that results from this 'both-and' position animates the film's contradictions, and may indicate something of the contradictory responses viewers may bring to it (cf. Mayne 1985: 92). Williams' discussion of *STELLA DALLAS* makes similar claims to Lesage and Mayne, arguing that a critically engaged spectatorship involves the constant movement between both distance and identification which, as a by-product, produces the ability to read contradiction. Williams, however, argues that this ability is a skill belonging to all female spectators, unlike Lesage and Mayne whose work importantly maintains that the reading of contradiction is a specifically feminist intervention in interpretation. It is worth pointing out that, in the 'either-or' spectatorial positions Doane and Mulvey establish, the feminist

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<sup>17</sup>For the purposes of this thesis, I have no intention of entering into the thorny debate of whether or not only women can be feminists. I will, nevertheless, make clear my own assumptions: I am assuming that all feminists are women, and I am assuming that men can be pro-feminist.

critic, who one must remember is also a female spectator, may choose *either* masculine voyeuristic distance *or* feminine masochistic identification, both positions involving a passive viewer who willingly acquiesces to the fiction and its ideology. Therefore, according to the kind of argument Doane and Mulvey represent, feminism, as a viewing position itself, is not even possible.

The notion that I can write as both a feminist critic and a female spectator is worth exploring in some detail, as it very much opens up *my* capacity to consider the contradictions of popular cinema, particularly its ability to attract me and repulse me at the same time. Mayne has consistently maintained this view of feminist film criticism throughout her work, as has Teresa de Lauretis, on whose theorizing Mayne's position draws (see Mayne 1990: 6-7; 1993: 71-6). Using cinema as an example, de Lauretis (1984: 15) explains women's paradoxical relationship to dominant representations:

... [W]oman is constituted as the ground of representation, the looking-glass held up to man. But, as historical individual, the female viewer is also positioned in the films of classical cinema as spectator-subject; she is thus doubly bound to that very representation which calls on her directly, engages her desire, elicits her pleasure, frames her identification, and makes her complicit in the production of (her) woman-ness.

On the one hand, argues de Lauretis, dominant representations include women – they engage women's desires and pleasures because patriarchal power is dependent upon women's participation in the reproduction of Woman. On the other hand, women are also excluded from dominant discourses because, constructed as the ground for the exercise of patriarchal power, women are denied agency and subjectivity. Thus women's double bind comes from their contradictory relationship to the image Woman – contradictory because the image causes both pleasure and displeasure. This 'both-and', says de Lauretis, necessitates negotiation to either resolve, conceal or, for women possessing feminist consciousness, *expose* the contradiction between Woman and women. Throughout her

work, de Lauretis has written from the position that "a feminist theory must start from and centrally engage" what she terms "the paradox of woman" (1990: 115; see also 1987: 1-30). Indeed, for de Lauretis (1984: 36), the goal of feminist criticism is to "enact the contradiction" between Woman as a historically-specific patriarchal construct and women as historically-constituted social agents, in order to demonstrate their "non-coincidence". Not only is this the purpose of feminist criticism, de Lauretis argues (1987: 10) but it is the "very condition of its possibility."

The argument here, as in Lesage's article on *BROKEN BLOSSOMS*, is that the tension produced by this contradictory relationship to dominant representations has particular effects on the feminist viewer, resulting in the experience of both pleasure and displeasure at mainstream, hegemonic culture and in the apprehension of "doubled vision", to use a term from de Lauretis (1987: 10). She uses the term to define the way in which feminist critics experience hegemonic culture. Feminist critics possess "doubled vision", says de Lauretis because, as both Woman and women, as both female and feminist, they are conscious of "that twofold pull" that constitutes their simultaneous pleasure and displeasure at, inclusion and exclusion by dominant discourses. In other words, the feminist critic is "the divided female spectator" of which Williams ([1984] 1987: 320) speaks.

Significantly, lesbian-feminist film critics, de Lauretis and Mayne among them, have long discussed lesbian spectatorship in exactly these terms. I would like to briefly explore these terms because I think they have implications for feminist film theory and criticism in general. Lesbian feminist critics, seeking ways to discuss female viewing pleasure and an active and desiring female subject, have defined lesbian viewers' experience of mainstream, hegemonic culture as the tension between pleasure and displeasure, engagement and distance. As Chris Straayer (1984: 42) explains, this contradictory relationship is the result of lesbians "pass[ing] back and forth between [at least] two worlds" – one patriarchal and heterosexist, the other she calls "lesbian-created".

Moreover, says Straayer, lesbians find themselves positioned in the first world as both included ("by the fact of their humanness and the assumption of their heterosexuality") and excluded (by their lesbianism and their concomitant challenge to patriarchy).

I see approaching feminist film criticism with the kind of doubled vision these critics describe as a particularly productive way to discuss popular films. For one thing, this approach to analysis enables the feminist film critic to use contradiction strategically for oppositional purposes, exploiting its disruptive potential in the act of interpretation. Second, the 'both-and' of distance and identification inherent in doubled vision works to dismantle the valorization of a distanced critic capable of remaining in a state of ideological purity, outside the popular film's mechanisms. Accordingly, a 'both-and' approach to criticism must acknowledge the critic's investment, involvement and pleasure in the popular film. Third, and consequently, this way of discussing cinema challenges the high art/low art dualism by seriously engaging with questions of pleasure and of the popular, rather than simply dismissing Hollywood cinema as manipulative and ideologically suspect. Fourth, when viewed from the position of doubled vision, the notion of one immanent meaning found in the popular film is challenged. Seeing popular cinema in this way cannot but acknowledge and indeed point to the diverse contradictory experiences viewers may have of Hollywood films. Finally, this approach to feminist film criticism encourages the feminist film critic to be aware of her role in interpretation, for doubled vision demands the feminist film critic's vigilance in ascertaining her position *vis-à-vis* the films she is critiquing and the broader social formation in which she lives. Moreover, this vigilance requires the feminist film critic to analyze her own responses to the films, especially the contradictory determinants (based on social experiences derived from her gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.) that may figure in those responses. As Waldman (1990: 311) states, "[B]ehind every hypothetical female spectator is a real or empirical spectator, the feminist critic."

In an indirect way, my discussion of the role of the feminist film critic in interpretation addresses the continuing significance of reading against the grain for feminist film criticism and for this thesis. The significance of ideological contradiction, articulated within the reading-against-the-grain approach, remains an important component in a feminist reading strategy, as critics such as de Lauretis, Lesage and Mayne show. While some feminist readings against the grain have the tendency to ascribe this reading strategy to *all* women, de Lauretis, Lesage and Mayne rightly consider it a specifically feminist intervention in textual politics. Reading against the grain continues to have resonance for feminist film criticism today since it has presented the feminist film critic with a valuable guide to 'what to look for' in a film. The significance of multiple and competing discourses, the importance of ideological contradiction, the relevance of the study of popular cinema as it relates to the lived realities of female audiences – these remain worthy aspects of investigation for the feminist film critic.

However, just how these aspects of cinema have been interpreted within reading-against-the-grain approaches has been problematic. Reading against the grain is a text-based approach to feminist film criticism that claims to address issues of context via a consideration of gendered spectatorship. But this context is theorized in far too general terms to be useful on its own. Reading against the grain can have the tendency to essentialize ideological struggle; a film's competing discourses are interpreted in terms of the eternally unfolding battle between patriarchal law and a naturally disruptive feminine essence. Contradiction is also essentialized and even fetishized so that, once it has been abstracted from the ideological work of the popular film, it can be interpreted as progressive. Moreover, the discussion of female audiences' relationships to popular films is limited to the notion of the hypothetical female spectator, and to heterosexual difference as one of the primary determinants in meaning production, leaving out intertextual practices or diverse viewing situations that can have an impact on meaning. Indeed, the emphasis on a kind of textual address that speaks to women only and in the

same way is cause for concern, as is the notion of a privileged female spectator, who can, willy-nilly, apprehend contradiction. If that is the case, what happens to feminism as an oppositional reading strategy?

In summary, I have taken issue primarily with the way in which reading against the grain interprets the textual phenomena that this approach has rightly identified as being significant to the ideological analysis of popular cinema. In the next chapter, I consider theories that seek to historicize reading against the grain. How to read the conflict between multiple and competing discourses, how to read ideological contradiction and how to read the relationship between popular films and women will form the basis of my discussion and will necessitate a re-thinking of the popular film and of its relationship to ideology and the social formation. My main concern in the next chapter will be to offer theoretical suggestions as to how this re-thinking can be accomplished, using examples from the work of feminist film and cultural critics.



## **CHAPTER TWO: TOWARDS A REVISED TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

In this chapter, I seek out a method of textual analysis that will historicize reading against the grain. With this goal, I hope to retain those elements of reading against the grain still useful to feminist film criticism, in particular, the concerns with the popular film's multidiscursivity, its ideological contradictions and its relationship to female audiences. At the same time, however, I wish to find theoretical strategies that will overcome reading against the grain's limitations. The limitations I have identified include the conflation of the hypothetical female spectator with both the feminist critic and the historical female viewer; the treatment of ideological struggle as an ahistorical contest between patriarchy and femininity; and the fetishization of ideological contradiction as inherently progressive.

To redress the above limitations, I consider the work of feminist film critics who have re-evaluated the popular film's relationship to ideology and the social formation via concepts associated with British Cultural Studies. In this context, I discuss Gramsci's theory of hegemony as applied to the notion of the popular film as negotiation. Subsequent to that discussion, I evaluate one of the thornier implications for feminist film criticism of the approach to textual analysis I outline, and that is, the argument that the popular film's multidiscursive, contradictory qualities results in ideological ambiguity. After providing this general discussion, I move on to the specific to consider the ways in which Gramscian concepts may be applicable to discussing women's popular cultural practices as hegemonic fantasies. Here, I focus on the woman's film as a way of providing relevant theoretical background to my third chapter, which considers *THELMA AND LOUISE*, a recent example of the woman's film that attempts to engage with contemporary feminist discourses.

### **Approaching the popular film as negotiation**

One of the key points foregrounded in the STELLA DALLAS debates is the need to distinguish between the hypothetical female spectator, constructed via mechanisms of textual address, and the historical female viewer, existing in a particular reception context. By making this important distinction between address and reception, feminist film critics have been able to continue to pursue textual analysis, and to, therefore, intervene in the cultural construction of meaning without essentializing women's experience of cinema as universal or based exclusively on sexual difference.

Questions about address are not new as they are centred around the long-standing, feminist critical interest in women's genres, that is, popular fantasies that are produced for, and generally consumed by, women.<sup>18</sup> So-called women's genres include domestic fiction, the sentimental novel, the gothic romance, soap opera and the woman's film. Generally, texts identified as women's genres bear a strong association with melodrama as they are concerned with private feelings and personal relationships within the domestic sphere (cf. Gledhill 1987). Feminist film and cultural critics examine popular fictions geared towards female audiences as a way of investigating the ideological construction of femininity across varying social and historical contexts. While psychoanalytic discussions of address tend to construct the female spectator as a constant across time and space, more

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<sup>18</sup>By arguing for a relationship between female spectatorship, women's genres and the material conditions of women's lives, I diverge from a psychoanalytic view of fantasy that discusses the bisexuality of the spectator-subject to whom are available multiple positions of cross-gender identification (e.g., Bergstrom [1979] 1988; Cowie 1984). Jacqueline Rose (1990: 275) observes that "while we undoubtedly need to recognise the instability of unconscious fantasy and the range of identifications offered by any one spectator of film, this can easily lead to an idealization of psychic processes and cinema at one and the same time (something for everyone both in the unconscious and on the screen)."

Moreover, Mayne (1991: 158) has referred to the concept of a universal bisexual subject within film theory as "wishy-washy" because "such a subject-position carries very little political impact in our present society." The desire to counter the determinism of Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory has led to a situation in which there is 'necessarily no correspondence' between spectatorship and the social construction of gender. Commenting on the movement from determinism to no determinations at all, Mayne (1993: 90) states, "[W]hile it may be a matter of indifference in psychoanalytic terms whether the spectator encouraged or enabled to adopt a variety of positions is male or female, it is of crucial importance within the context of spectatorship, to the extent that spectatorship involves a spectator who always brings with her or him a history, and whose experiences of spectatorship is determined in part by the ways in which spectatorship is defined outside of the movie theatre."

recent feminist work in film studies displays a desire to historicize textual address.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, an examination of women's genres becomes a way of investigating ideological claims about femininity at different times and in different places, as well as suggesting the relationship between popular cultural practices and the lived realities of female audiences. Within this theoretical context, "the point of a feminist reading," says Gledhill (1988: 187), "is to pull the symbolic enactments of popular fictions into frameworks which interpret the psychic, emotional and social forces at work in women's lives."

A significant goal of feminist textual analysis is to identify and understand the various determinations operating in women's lives, in specific social and historical contexts. Psychoanalysis and reading against the grain as approaches to feminist film criticism have not been able to adequately fulfill this goal since the theoretical assumptions upon which they operate do not address the popular film's historical specificity at the moment of production, nor do they address the historical or contextual determinants that figure in female spectatorship and popular fantasy, nor the contingent and contradictory relationship between ideological struggle, popular films and women as agents existing in history. Feminist film critics such as Gledhill, who have been critical of the above theoretical frameworks, have turned to theories from British Cultural Studies as a way of redressing limitations in the practice of feminist film criticism. Indeed, in the 1990 special issue of *Camera Obscura*, which conducted a review of feminist film studies, it was apparent that many feminist film critics are increasingly looking towards British Cultural Studies, although psychoanalysis still remains as a dominant theoretical framework.

The key concept feminist film critics such as Gledhill employ is Gramsci's theory of hegemony,<sup>20</sup> a theory that provides a historically grounded understanding of ideology

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<sup>19</sup>For examples of feminist work that historicizes textual address, see Mary Beth Haralovich (1990), Marcia Landy (1994: 99-122), Patrice Petro (1989), Michael Renov (1988, 1989), and Linda Williams (1988).

<sup>20</sup>See Gramsci 1971: 12-13; 55-60; 160-161; 181-182; 210, 275-276.

as contradictory and contingent rather than as uniform and fixed. The appeal of this theory comes from its ability to theorize resistance, agency and social change, countering psychoanalytic-feminist film theory's ahistorical, pessimistic view of an immovable and monolithic dominant ideology.

Gramsci had originated the concept of hegemony to describe the way in which dominant groups form an allied power bloc to achieve control in a society not through overt coercion, but through the exercise of cultural leadership. For Gramsci, one of the battlegrounds for achieving consensus is the terrain of popular culture where definitions of reality, of the taken-for-granted, of the commonsensical are constructed and contested. On this terrain, the allied power bloc secures hegemony, winning consent for a representation of reality that supports its interests while simultaneously accommodating, in some measure, the interests of subaltern and opposing groups in order to solidify consent. The power bloc thus achieves cultural leadership (a necessary precursor to political leadership), winning subaltern groups' consent for a definition of reality that serves the dominant groups' interests. To further secure hegemony, this power bloc must have a monopoly on the state's coercive power which, writes Gramsci (1971: 12-13), "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively." In cases where consensus breaks down, the power bloc may resort to state violence to protect its interests.

With consensus, though, the concerns of the dominant groups come to represent concerns that are 'in everyone's interest.' Achieving this consensus on so-called universal concerns hinges upon a complex process of negotiation, whereby the values of subaltern groups are in some way accommodated within hegemony, in order to maintain social stability. Hence, Gramsci argues, hegemony is never total and never uniform since it embodies the voices of competing interests and beliefs, in a constant, give-and-take struggle over definitions of reality. Moreover, and importantly, consent for a particular definition of reality may be lost, and power blocs may shift, forming alliances with new

groups while breaking faith with others. Theorizing ideology in this dialectical way, Gramsci left open the possibility of resistance, agency and historical change, yet did not abandon the crucial consideration of power for hegemony's very purpose is to maintain the stability of the status quo through popular consent. However, although hegemony is in a constant state of transformation via mechanisms of accommodation and consensus-building, it does not follow that hegemony as a process represents a movement towards an egalitarian society. On the contrary, while hegemony can make room for oppositional ideologies, the purpose of this accommodation is to defuse, rechannel and contain threats to the status quo. In summary, the theory of hegemony posits that the management of ideological conflict works to procure a particular end – popular consent for the existing social order.<sup>21</sup>

The use of Gramsci's theory of hegemony (via Hall's work) within feminist film studies or indeed within film studies in general has been marginal by comparison to its use within British Cultural Studies, although there has been a shift more recently as film studies increasingly looks towards cultural studies. In terms of feminist film theory, two articles stand out as explicit appeals for feminist appropriations of Gramsci's theory of hegemony – one by Gledhill (1988), the other by Lesage (1982) – while there are several that employ the concept implicitly, as in Mary Beth Haralovich's and Leah Jacobs's

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<sup>21</sup>Marcia Landy (1994: 43-72) discusses liberal critics' misappropriation of Gramsci's theory of hegemony. She explains that liberals focus particularly on the idea of consensus-building as a way to legitimate Western-capitalist social systems and to delegitimize radical oppositional practices. To clarify, the idea here is that Western capitalism is democratic because of its consensus-building quality, which renders radical politics unnecessary.

Critics of Gramscian cultural studies focus on such misuses of Gramsci's theories. David Harris (1992: 95), for instance, is critical of the celebratory aspects of Gramscianism, that is, the tendency towards a naive valorization of struggle for the sake of struggle in certain analyses of popular cultural texts. For example, as I mentioned earlier, feminist film critic Jackie Byars (1991: 19-20) uses Gramsci's theory of hegemony as a way to locate and recuperate the struggle of "strong, feminine, resisting voices" within and against a patriarchal hegemony. Such a discussion, I would argue, works to not only valorize but essentialize and fetishize struggle, offering no understanding of its functioning within hegemony and within its specific historical context (which is contrary to Gramsci's call for historically situated, conjunctural analyses). Moreover, although the location of struggle is indeed important in theorizing social change, hence countering the determinism of certain theoretical frameworks, nonetheless, the across-the-board valorization of struggle abandons crucial considerations of power and containment.

analyses of '30s Hollywood cinema and Andrew Britton's discussion (1992) of *NOW, VOYAGER* (1942).

Gledhill applies Gramsci's concept of negotiation to a theory of the text and presents us with a particularly useful method for analyzing meaning production. While Gledhill also discusses reception as negotiation, I focus on her discussion of textual and institutional negotiations occurring at the point of production. Theorizing her method of textual analysis, Gledhill posits that the popular film is the site of institutional (e.g., pressures from advertisers, audience demands, etc.) and textual negotiations (e.g., generic demands, aesthetic constraints, contemporary discourses, etc.), where competing social, economic and cultural interests struggle to be articulated (67-70). The assumption underpinning this model of the text is Gramsci's argument that the social formation itself comprises a network of tensions, in the form of opposing social, economic and cultural interests and beliefs. Popular films mediate and negotiate between such interests and beliefs, and as a result, embody the conflicting voices and ideological contradictions of a given social formation at the point of production – that is, the context in which the text was originally produced. The purpose of textual analysis, then, is to investigate the ways in which these tensions and contradictions are circulated through and negotiated by popular films, and to suggest meanings available at the moment of production.

To illustrate, examples of an implicitly Gramscian approach to textual analysis may be found in the work of Haralovich (1990) and Jacobs (1987, 1988 and 1989). In their concern to understand a film's meaning as historically situated, Haralovich's and Jacobs's analyses represent a departure from previous feminist work on the woman's film, as well as a challenge to the assumption of a homogeneous patriarchal ideology inscribed in a uniform text, found in both psychoanalytic readings and readings against the grain. Their work relies upon the theoretical assumption that the popular film mediates a heterogeneous and contingent social formation, and consequently, is as contradictory as the social formation out of which it emerged. Haralovich and Jacobs pursue the above

assumption in their examination of the effects of the Production Code on 1930s Hollywood cinema and on the address to female audiences of the time. Both feminist film critics show the ways in which films manage and accommodate various conflicting discourses – from Christian fundamentalists' demands for a morally conservative portrayal of femininity to studios' capitalist drive to attract a paying female audience, whose desires are framed by the contemporary discourses of the time (e.g., consumerism, romance and female sexual autonomy). Haralovich's and Jacobs's analyses thus bring out the complex tensions manifested in popular films of this period – tensions between the conservative pressure for censorship, the studios' desire to maintain certain entertainment values, the narrative and stylistic demands of the classical system, and the historical address to American women of the '30s (Haralovich 1990: 174).

The presence of competing aims such as those Haralovich and Jacobs outline means that it is impossible for a popular film to ever be firmly in line with the oppressive ideologies of either patriarchy or capitalism, for oppositional voices and Utopian desires will necessarily be present in the popular film, constituting a large part of its appeal, and contributing to "the production of contradictions and to the potential for resistances to patriarchal ideologies within popular entertainment," says Haralovich (1990: 175). In a Gramscian discussion of the British soap opera *Coronation Street*, Terry Lovell (1981: 47-52) makes similar claims to Haralovich. Lovell defines the Utopian or oppositional elements of popular culture as "those elements which express the hopes, fears, wishes and simple refusals of the dominated." For Lovell, our pleasure in popular culture comes from the very expression of wishes and desires otherwise constrained under patriarchal, capitalist hegemony. In fact, these pleasurable expressions form the "defining elements" of popular culture, as they are "essential to the whole meaning and appeal of popular entertainment." In other words, in order for a cultural commodity to be attractive and, by implication, profitable, it must in some way appeal to or connect up with the lived realities, concerns, fears, wishes of its audience. Thus, Lovell explains, popular cultural

production operates under two constraints – the capitalist drive for profit and domination versus popular entertainment's Utopian, wish-fulfilling function. The ability to produce a cultural commodity that "meets the ideological requirements of capitalism" is consequently limited, according to Lovell, and instead, produces a cultural product that is ideologically contradictory, available for "different mobilisations and articulations."

When the method of textual analysis I outline here is given feminist application, analyses of popular films carry general insights as to the ideological, psychic and social pressures at work in women's lives at a particular historical conjuncture, as Haralovich and Jacobs show us through their discussion of the 1930s Hollywood woman's film. Analyses such as theirs posit that the popular cultural terrain is a site of struggle over notions of gender, and also reveal that achieving consensus on a definition of femininity is a precarious process, subject to constant negotiation between conflicting and diverse economic, cultural and social interests. Hence, a popular film that is geared towards female audiences, and as a capitalist commodity is under pressure to make a profit, may accommodate the concerns of Christian fundamentalists over un-Christian portrayals of femininity. At the same time, such a film may, for the same reasons, seek to connect up with the lived realities of American women, whose contemporary concerns may contradict Christian fundamentalist interests. In the end, the drive to accommodate divergent ideologies and diverse experiences becomes a way to maintain and perpetuate capitalist hegemony, while the presence of contradictions and ambiguities that are the result of that pressure to accommodate suggests the very tenuousness of the social order in general, and of definitions of femininity in particular. Furthermore, if, as Lovell argues, the ideological effect of hegemonic accommodation is to produce an ambiguous, polysemic text that is available for different mobilisations,<sup>22</sup> then how does the feminist

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<sup>22</sup>The term 'polysemy', which refers to the notion that the text has multiple meanings, has been used in two ways, causing some confusion. In the first usage of polysemy, the text's reception context activates its polysemy. The text is not inherently polysemic: it is its interaction with various reception contexts that produces multiple meanings. In the second usage, the text's production context generates its polysemy. Here, the text is inherently polysemic since it mediates a contingent social formation that comprises contradictory and competing ideological tensions. According to



film critic approach the question of meaning production without landing herself in the postmodern limbo of limitless readings? After all, as Gledhill (1988: 75) remarks, "[T]he feminist critic is ... interested in some readings more than others."

### **Reading the popular film's polysemy**

An important implication of the above consideration of the popular film's negotiating role is the notion of the text as potentially contradictory and ambiguous, at times even incoherent, in its drive to accommodate ideological interests at odds with each other. Jacobs (1989: 13) has argued this concept in relation to classical Hollywood cinema and the Production Code, stating that "the treatment of potentially offensive material shifted in the direction of greater ambiguity," resulting in an "instability of meaning" in the years after 1934.<sup>23</sup> Many critics have discussed contemporary Hollywood cinema in this way. For example, Annette Kuhn ([1982] 1994: 274-5) and Robin Wood (1986: 202-21) have analyzed the New Woman's Film of the '70s, examining the ways in which these films conduct some fancy ideological footwork in their attempts to accommodate aspects of a burgeoning feminist consciousness without posing a threat to the status quo. Because they are ideologically incoherent, these Hollywood films, says Kuhn ([1982] 1994), possess "openness", i.e., they are open to a variety of interpretations. Wood (1980/1: 24) maintains that this is the sign of "works that do not know what they want to say."

However, feminist film critics such as Christine Holmlund, Julia Lesage and Chris Straayer argue that such openness or polysemy is in fact the mark of films that, in their drive to attract a wide and diverse audience, want to say everything. They maintain that it

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this definition, reception exploits the text's polysemic qualities (cf. Hall 1980: 134). For the purposes of this thesis, I employ the concept of polysemy in its second usage, as a property of the text, to maintain my argument for the continuing relevance of textual analysis to feminist film criticism.

<sup>23</sup>Critics often use the terms 'polysemy', 'ambiguity' and 'contradiction' interchangeably. As a result, I wish to offer the following clarification in case I risk the same conflation of terms: although polysemy, ambiguity and contradiction may share a measure of responsibility in producing each other, they are not the same thing. Thus ambiguity may produce polysemy but polysemy and ambiguity are not synonyms for each other. Similarly, contradiction may lend itself to the production of ambiguity, but ambiguity and contradiction are not synonymous terms.

is part of the strategy of Hollywood films to incorporate conflicting ideological viewpoints so as to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Lesage (1978: 91) notes that "[i]n Hollywood films, there is a deliberate, industrially structured, response to ideological complexities. The industry wants to let everybody have their ideological cake and eat it, too." Lesage illustrates her point using *SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER* (1977) as an example. She argues that the film weaves opposing attitudes towards race into its fabric so that a racist could read the film as reinforcing discriminatory views on Latinos, while Latinos could see the film as a positive depiction of their experiences. Popular films that are purposefully polysemic incorporate a variety of ideological responses, thus allowing for a multiplicity of readings. In turn, this broadens a film's audience appeal, augmenting its chances of financial success.

Along these lines, Holmlund (1991) and Straayer (1984, 1990) have discussed the "mainstream femme film", a subgenre of the woman's film. Holmlund uses the above term to refer to films which are widely distributed, receive favourable critical responses from both mainstream and alternative presses, and most significantly, incorporate various strategies to foster ambiguity in the representation of lesbianism. These strategies include a femme for a female lead, thus allowing for lesbian and straight identification; an exchange of ambiguous female looks which could be read as erotic or "just friendly"; and allusive references to "what may or may not be lesbianism and/or lesbianism lifestyles" (145). Similarly, Straayer has discussed "audience stress" management mechanisms in her analysis of *PERSONAL BEST* (1982). Some of these mechanisms include the use of humour as a strategy for containment and the treatment of lesbianism as merely "a stage" young women go through. For both Holmlund and Straayer, the implications of "the mainstreaming of lesbianism" (to use Holmlund's wording) in popular cinema are threefold: first, the 'air-brushing' of images of lesbians to appeal to as wide an audience as possible renders the mainstream femme film titillating/reassuring/non-threatening for dominant heterosexist audiences; second, the degree of ambiguity, which allows for

straight and/or heterosexist responses, also allows for lesbian readings, thus opening up the mainstream femme film's appeal to a lesbian market yet to be fully tapped; and third, this ability to be, ideologically speaking, all things to all people places greater importance on the viewer's role in reception, one of the key points in Holmlund's and Straayer's discussions.<sup>24</sup> The ambiguous ideological messages of films like *PERSONAL BEST* and, significantly, their ability to generate an ideologically diverse array of responses attests to the need to address both the reception context, and for the purposes of this thesis, the mechanisms by which popular films may help to generate diverse readings. Importantly, the attention to reception in Holmlund's and Straayer's work does not preclude their consideration of the text.

To consider the popular film's potential for polysemy raises some questions as to how the feminist film critic should view polysemy or textual openness. In my research in film studies, I have found two views on the subject: the first one suggests that polysemy is radical while the second one sees it as accommodative. According to the first view, critics such as Claire Johnston (1975) and Robin Wood (1980-1: 42) have argued that incoherence in a popular film is a sign of the dominant ideology's inability to resolve its own contradictions and thus attests to the film's progressive qualities. The valorization of openness or ambiguity belies the formalist tendencies of certain variations of film theory which maintain that the popular film provides ideological closure, reinforcing the dominant ideology and resolving all conflicts and contradictions. Viewed through formalist criteria, popular films become closed texts that can do nothing but oppress in their service of the dominant ideology. By contrast, the open or ambiguous text is democratic since it liberates readers from textual dominance, providing space for oppositional and resistant readings rather than putting forth a single preferred or

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<sup>24</sup>See also Lu Vickers' article (1994) on *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES* (1991). Vickers uses Holmlund's discussion of the mainstream femme film and the strategies it employs as the framework for her analysis of *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES*. Vickers examines the film's narrative strategies, as well as critical reception and the publicity surrounding the making and release of the film, to come to many of the same conclusions as Holmlund and Straayer regarding the representation of lesbians in popular cinema.

hegemonic reading. This view maintains that a film's formal features determine its political bent. Thus a film is progressive by virtue of its aesthetic and narrative codes.

However, other feminist film critics, Judith Mayne (1990: 24) and Lianne McLarty among them, caution that textual incoherence or openness is not a guarantee of the popular film's progressive attributes. McLarty has shown, for example, that contrary to Wood's discussion ([1979] 1985) of the American horror film, narrative openness does not automatically make a film progressive, especially when misogynist depictions of women continue to proliferate.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy (1982: 18), in an article written to investigate the ways in which *THE EYES OF LAURA MARS* (1978) could produce diametrically opposed readings, found that textual ambiguity or "eclecticism" could still veer a film "toward nostalgia and traditional sexist attitudes," reproducing all-too-familiar ways of seeing. Reiterating one of the points I made earlier regarding reading against the grain, the treatment of isolated instances of rupture or incoherence as revolutionary moments in themselves fails to address the relationship of such ruptures to the ideological work of the text as a whole.

In contrast to the first view, which sees polysemy as inherently positive or progressive, the second view argues that polysemy in the popular film should be approached with a degree of skepticism. Here, polysemy tends to be defined as an accommodative strategy, on the part of hegemony, to absorb and defuse opposing ideological viewpoints. The ideological work of such popular films is not to address the heterogeneity of the audience but to assimilate it. Popular films with a high degree of polysemy seem to display an ambivalent attitude toward their subject matter – they are neither for nor against. As I discussed above, the polysemic ambiguous film satisfies everyone because it poses a threat to no one, including the status quo – a most pertinent point for feminist and other social justice movements. In fact, some feminist film critics

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<sup>25</sup>From Lianne McLarty's course, WS 205-3 "Women and Popular Culture: Women and Horror," Summer 1991, Simon Fraser University.

such as Margaret Marshment and Julia Hallam (1994: 40-1) have recently argued *for* ideological coherence and closure as a political strategy in feminist filmmaking practice – this represents a considerable shift from earlier feminist film critics and their call for the destruction of closed texts. They explain that

Securing a [preferred or dominant] reading involves the production of a 'closed' text. Because closure has usually been analyzed in relation to how it functions to reproduce existing meanings and reinforce the ideological status quo, critics have privileged polysemy as the more radical, more democratic mode of representation. However, using closure is often an important and effective strategy in creating oppositional meanings.

Thus, critics like Holmlund, Lesage and Mayne are right to question the political value or radicalism of polysemy for its own sake, particularly when it becomes possible to see opposition and resistance everywhere, in every popular (read 'democratic') text. As Mayne (1990: 25) remarks, "[T]he affirmation of these disruptions and tensions can involve a romanticization of marginality, and the attendant assumption that alternative positions exist, within the classical Hollywood cinema, wherever one wishes them to."

A skeptical attitude toward polysemy and the open text might, on the one hand, consider accommodation as reactionary or as "a facile cover-up for patriarchal assumptions," says Mayne (1988: 36) who critically describes this position. I, on the other hand, would argue along with Mayne that the way to read ambiguity in the popular film is as neither necessarily progressive nor necessarily reactionary, in order to overcome the limitations of certain classic dualisms characteristic of film studies (e.g., realist versus anti-realist, closed versus open) and to allow for discussion of the popular film's complex and indeed contradictory ideological work. As Mayne (1988: 36) suggests, "[F]eminist criticism gets much more to the heart of the matter when we deal with and embrace the ambiguity for which such differing arguments [and readings] are a symptom, rather than declare films to be really progressive or reactionary, tentatively feminist or sexist to the

core." I agree with Mayne that it is more productive to a feminist critical enterprise to address ambiguity or polysemy in terms of their ideological work (i.e., the ability to make room for opposing and indeed oppositional interpretations), rather than labelling such openness as inherently progressive or inherently reactionary.

Nevertheless, I think it would be a dangerous mistake to regard the polysemic popular film as innocuous by virtue of its ambivalence, that is, its ability to allow for interpretations that both affirm and challenge the status quo. Following a Gramscian approach to textual analysis, multiple points of address represent the efforts of a hegemony seeking to build popular consent through negotiation and accommodation for a definition of reality that suits its interests. Thus, while mainstream femme films like *PERSONAL BEST* may, in some measure, address a lesbian audience, such accommodation does not necessarily signify the acceptance of diverse social experiences. Commenting on women's fashion magazines that capitalize on "a dual market strategy that packages gender ambiguity and speaks, at least indirectly, to the lesbian consumer market," Danae Clark (1991: 186, 192) makes the point that "this development can hardly be attributed to a growing acceptance of homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle. ... [C]apitalists welcome homosexuals as consuming subjects but not as social subjects."<sup>26</sup>

As Clark's comment implies, polysemy must be analyzed according to its ideological effects and the relationship of these effects to hegemony, whose purpose it is to accommodate and assimilate diverse experiences and conflicting viewpoints in order to maintain consent for the existing social system, in this case, patriarchal capitalism. While it may not be productive to label polysemy as either progressive or reactionary, it is also not in the interests of feminist film criticism to ignore the political or ideological stakes involved in the production of polysemy. On the one hand, the presence of polysemy does indicate that representations are struggled over and that the potential for resistances both in the popular film and in the audience do exist. On the other hand, a popular film's

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<sup>26</sup>For a useful discussion similar to Clark's, see Karen Stabiner (1982).

polysemy may also perform work on behalf of hegemony. This work is primarily accommodative, involving a process of negotiation whereby popular films often anticipate and incorporate conflicting ideological perspectives in order to secure as wide an audience as possible and to win popular consent for their representations of reality.

Approaching the issue of polysemy in this way, I hope to resist postmodern and liberal-pluralist accounts of popular culture that valorize polysemy and heterogeneity, perpetuating consumerist discourses on the freedom to choose among interpretations, 'something for everyone' in the marketplace of readings. Such discussions ignore not only the ways in which polysemy and heterogeneity are ideologically implicated in maintaining popular consent for the existing social order, but also the extent to which hegemonic readings have the power to delegitimize those oppositional readings that the popular film may make available.

The method of textual analysis I outline does not fully explain the cultural production of meaning. Studies of viewing situations and reading formations are necessary in order to understand the complexity of how meanings are produced. However, I still wish to resist the postmodern abandonment of text. There are indeed textual limits to meaning and to polysemy, especially if one works under the assumption, as this thesis does, that popular films function to manage tensions within a society for specific ideological ends. As Hall (1980: 134) argues, "Polysemy must not... be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are not equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social, cultural and political world."

Yet textual analysis in no way necessitates ignoring context since a popular film's features are the products of historically specific situations. Codes, signs and other textual features are historically and culturally located. They come to be understood precisely because they are recognizable cultural conventions and are necessary in order for communication to take place. Moreover, in order for this communication to occur,

commonly understood codes must work to limit readings and to guide the reader's interpretation. Only some meanings are possible. However, the degree of textual guidance that occurs will depend on viewing contexts and on individual films – that is, on how open or closed they are. To put it another way, while popular films are to be conceived of as polysemic, the degree of polysemy will vary, and closure will be relative according to individual films, highlighting the need for local studies that recognize specificity. In other words, not all popular films are polysemic to the same degree.

In this theoretical context, the purpose of textual analysis and of a discussion of polysemy is to analyze the popular film's logic of construction rather than its singular enunciation. To achieve this, the feminist film critic must, first, examine the textual conditions in place by which possible readings may be generated, and second, animate those possibilities rather than determining a single fixed reading. However, the animation of possible readings must involve a consideration of their political and ideological implications. To do otherwise is to risk ignoring the ideological work of polysemy as it manifests itself in popular films. Hence, when analyzing a popular film the feminist film critic must ask the following questions: Does this film accommodate different ideological responses? If so, what is its purpose in making multiple (but not unlimited) points of address available? What is at stake in this film's production of polysemy? And finally, who or what benefits?

### **Approaching the woman's film as "hegemonic female fantasy"**

My main concern in this section is to consider a Gramscian method of textual analysis in relation to existing feminist discussions of fantasy, particularly as these pertain to the woman's film. Lesage provides a particularly useful adaptation of Gramsci to an analysis of the woman's film, and coins the phrase "hegemonic female fantasy" to aptly describe this kind of film and its ideological work. After briefly considering Lesage's argument, I supplement her discussion with a recuperation of aspects of psychoanalysis,



which provide relevant tools for investigating the strategies by which the woman's film transforms transgressive female fantasies into daydreams safe enough for public consumption.

The method of textual analysis I investigate requires that the feminist film critic explore the complex negotiations the woman's film enters into as it tries to accommodate the diverse concerns of its (primarily female) audience. The implication is that securing consensus on a definition of Woman that incorporates heterogeneous points of address (e.g., non- and anti-feminist as well as feminist) is difficult and untenable, signalling that the woman's film is a contested terrain upon which competing ideological interests – each having a stake in the construction of femininity – struggle over notions of gender. Indeed, as Britton (1992: 37) has put it, "If general consent could unproblematically be won for the proposition that women ought to love and be defined by men, there would be no woman's film." Similarly, if general consent could be won for feminist counter-arguments to this proposition, "there would be no woman's film either." Moreover, this inability to achieve consensus, says Britton, demands "the constant re-enactment, re-description and resolution of the conflict as dramatic fantasy."

Discussing the woman's film as a specific type of dramatic fantasy, one that seeks to resolve ideological conflicts centred around notions of Woman, represents a particularly productive way for considering the textual negotiations into which these films enter. While some critics, such as Ien Ang (1990: 85-6), employ the concept of fantasy as a limitless, "unconstrained space" in which to engage with identities and desires forbidden in daily life, I maintain, along with Lesage, that there are limits to fantasy, just as there are limits to polysemy.

Lesage (1982) observes that while some fantasies are representable, there are many others within hegemonic culture that are not. Arguing along these lines, she applies Gramsci's theory of hegemony to her discussion of what she terms "the hegemonic female fantasy," defined as a safe daydream that "we women could muster up for ourselves, but...

that would be pretty socially acceptable." The term "hegemonic female fantasies" refers specifically to

...narrative arts that deal directly with the sphere institutionally and emotionally relegated to women: the domestic sphere. Out of each narrative a notion about women emerges. The [female] characters' desires and needs make up much of the content of their speeches and the 'stuff' that impel the action. But each narrative also has ways to contain and limit its consideration of women's desires and needs: through what is not allowed, through negative example characters, through the connotative manipulation of the *mise-en-scène*, or through a narrative progression that shows certain kinds of conflicts and resolutions as more important than others (84).

While hegemonic female fantasy allows for the expression of women's hopes and desires, and I would add, may even endure the faintly articulated criticism that women's lives need not be what they are, it simultaneously and significantly sets the parameters for that expression via the strategies Lesage lists above. Using these strategies, the hegemonic female fantasy is able to provide symbolic solutions to conflicts and contradictions women encounter in the social formation, at the same time that it limits those resolutions to ones that pose the least threat to hegemony. To give an example, while the hegemonic female fantasy might permit the criticism that women's relationships with men are not entirely satisfying, it would not suggest that the origins of women's dissatisfaction lie in patriarchal social relations nor would it offer, as a solution, alternatives to heterosexual monogamy such as lesbianism or non-monogamy.

Similarly, many feminist film and cultural critics, Lesage among them, have cited the contradictory 'both-and' logic of women's genres as one of the strategies used for transforming female fantasies into safe daydreams. This logic often manifests itself in the representation of the New Woman or independent woman stereotype – hegemony's nod to contemporary feminism. In cultural practices ranging from Harlequin romances to the

gothic,<sup>27</sup> and from the '70s New Woman's Film<sup>28</sup> to mid-'80s films explicitly about female fantasy (e.g., *ROMANCING THE STONE* [1984] and *AMERICAN DREAMER* [1984]),<sup>29</sup> the same contradictory scenario presents itself: women are encouraged to seek independence and even excitement – all in keeping with the popular feminist discourses of the day – as long as they find ultimate fulfillment in heterosexual romance.

Considering fantasy in terms of its 'both-and' function, as embodying positive and negative flip sides, presents the feminist film critic with an insightful approach to textual analysis. On the one hand, the feminist film critic must analyze a woman's film for the positive fantasy it comprises: after all, it uses as raw material the lived concerns of historical female audiences, and importantly, gives these concerns public acknowledgment. The positive fantasy accommodates women's dissatisfactions, and offers symbolic solutions, whether in the form of a fantasy of lawlessness and resistance or of ideal domesticity as a reward for suffering. On the other hand, the feminist film critic must also consider the woman's film as a negative fantasy which takes this expression of women's discontent, and rechannels it so that it cannot be directed at the social formation from which our dissatisfactions emerge.

In exchange for the positive fantasy, the negative fantasy requires that women ultimately give their consent to a social order that maintains oppressive, unequal gender relations. In this way, the hegemonic female fantasy compensates women with the positive fantasy in trade for their complicity in the negative fantasy. The feminist film critic's goal is to analyze the ways in which the flip sides of the hegemonic female fantasy simultaneously empower and oppress women. As Lesage (1982: 84) says, "If we can analyze hegemony... we can also analyze how our desires and emotions often lead us to choose or settle for commonly held ideas about what our life as women should be."

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<sup>27</sup>Cf. Tania Modleski (1982) and Janice Radway (1981).

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Charlotte Brunson (1982) and Julia Lesage (1982).

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Mimi White (1989).

The above concerns with female fantasy and female desire are certainly not new to feminist film theory but have been discussed since the early '70s using Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories. In considering the popular film as fantasy, some concepts from psychoanalysis when combined with Gramsci's theory of hegemony are useful. They help to construct a relationship between ideology and the unconscious that is historically and contextually grounded and open to a discussion of social change and agency, thus bypassing the problem of psychic determinism. Within feminist discussions of popular fantasies for women, two aspects of a psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy tend to be retained – usually explicitly, sometimes implicitly.<sup>30</sup> These are, first, the notion of fantasy as a part of reality rather than its binary opposite, and second, the concept of fantasy as serving a wish-fulfilling function.

Psychoanalysis has helped to break down the binary opposition between reality and fantasy to argue that fantasy is not separate from reality, but a part of it, bearing a distinct relationship to the real material conditions of existence (cf. Burgin *et al* 1986: 1-4). Fantasy is an indispensable aspect of human life, providing us with the service of various psychical coping mechanisms. Rather than acting as a diversion from reality and from real concerns, fantasy functions as a highly mediated staging of those very hopes, anxieties and fears that reality, in all its complexity and contradiction, gives rise to in the first place. Fantasy takes these very real dilemmas and converts them into symbolically enacted scenarios, replete with emblematic solutions. Along these lines, Ang (1990: 83) aptly summarizes the importance of fantasy "as a reality in itself," stating that "fantasy should not be seen as mere illusion, an unreality, but as... a fundamental aspect of human existence: a necessary and unerasable dimension of psychical reality."

Indeed, fantasy's ability to provide imaginary solutions to problems and conflicts otherwise irresolvable in real life represents one of fantasy's most important psychic and

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<sup>30</sup>See Ien Ang (1990), Cora Kaplan (1986), Alison Light (1984), Tania Modleski (1982) and Valerie Walkerdine (1984), for examples.

ideological functions – that is, its ability to symbolically fulfill wishes that are impossible to satisfy within hegemonic definitions of reality. This is the second aspect of a psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy that feminist film and cultural critics tend to retain in their discussions of popular fantasies for women: fantasy permits the expression of desire for 'something else', something other than what is. Indeed, one of the main functions of popular culture, which constitutes a large part of its appeal, is to express Utopian wishes that are at odds with the capitalist or patriarchal status quo. Like Jameson and Lovell, Richard Dyer (1981: 177) argues that "[e]ntertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and may be realised." Similarly, Alison Light (1984: 9) aptly defines this aspect of popular fantasy as "the explorations and productions of desires which may be in excess of the socially possible or acceptable."

The pleasure of fantasy, which derives from the elaborate staging of these desires, is achieved through defensive mechanisms that permit taboo or threatening subjects to bypass the censorship of the unconscious, converting the unthinkable, forbidden wish into a safe daydream that is comfortable for and palatable to the conscious mind (cf. Laplanche and Pontalis [1968] 1986: 21) – and by implication to hegemony.<sup>31</sup> For example, Cora Kaplan (1986) and Valerie Walkerdine (1984), among others, identify the use of several different mechanisms within popular fiction that work to distance the taboo wish from the everyday, thus rendering the engagement of difficult issues possible. One of these mechanisms includes the displacement of the story into another historical period, providing distance from the contemporary situation – otherwise, the story may be too close for comfort. Kaplan states that the "reactionary political and social setting" of the

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<sup>31</sup>Psychoanalytic discussions of popular fantasy are generally indebted to the essay "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" by Freudian psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis ([1968] 1986).

novel *Gone with the Wind* thus provides "a privileged space where the most disruptive female fantasy can be 'safely' indulged" (164). Another distancing mechanism is the incorporation of excessively melodramatic devices, such as coincidence, that supposedly render the story too fantastical to have any bearing on reality. As Walkerdine states, "The major narrative device which renders these difficult circumstances palatable is precisely that they *are* fantastic" (168).

Both these examples show how the socially prohibited wish is transformed into the socially representable fantasy. Cowie (1984), one of the first feminist film critics to explicitly consider fantasy and cinema in social-psychoanalytic terms, explains that cinema, and I would add any popular narrative, reworks fantasy for public consumption (in the ways indicated above), converting desire into "public forms" (86). Moreover, since fantasies are enactments of wishes for the socially prohibited, then "what is prohibited," says Cowie, "is always present in the actual formation of the wish" (81). Within this theoretical context, textual analysis becomes an investigation of prohibited desires that are given only the most inhibited (and therefore hegemonically acceptable) expression. Along similar lines, Lesage (1982: 84) has argued that strategies for making certain conflicts and resolutions more acceptable than others – that is, tactics for making fantasies hegemonic – "are worth attending to in close detail, for they have much to teach us about the interconnections between the narrative arts, ideology and what we want."

These are important points to consider within the context of popular fantasies for women as they raise some significant questions. For one thing, since there are women's genres whose conventions we recognize by virtue of their repetitiveness, then what is the source of the anxiety, historically and socially speaking, that gives rise to its insistent and obsessive re-staging, and on whose behalf? Since women's hopes, fears and desires require fantasy wish-fulfillments, then just what are women wishing for and how are these wishes transformed into non-threatening, pleasurable daydreams? Since discussions of fantasy have tended to be long on the psychic and short on the social, then how do we

theorize the relationship of fantasy to the everyday realities of women from which fantasy draws its raw materials?

For feminist critics such as Kaplan, Light, Modleski and Walkerdine, the above questions have been central to their understanding of the relationship of popular fantasy to the concerns, frustrations and desires of historical women (and girls). Modleski (1982: 14-5), for example, addresses the "deep-rooted and centuries-old appeal" of certain recurring narratives within women's popular fantasies, such as the gothic romance, to come to the following conclusion:

Their enormous and continuing popularity, I assume, suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives. The narrative strategies which they have evolved for smoothing over those tensions can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but to invest their situations with some degree of dignity.

For Modleski (1982: 57) and the other feminist critics I have mentioned in this chapter, feminist criticism's purpose is to understand the social, historical and psychic conditions that make some fantasies more necessary for and more popular among women than other fantasies, and to grasp the textual strategies by which these fantasies are rendered representable. To that end, the feminist film critic must perform a dual operation involving the apprehension of the hegemonic female fantasy in both its positive and negative aspects – as the simultaneous expression and containment of women's desires.

This 'both-and' of hegemonic fantasy necessitates a 'both-and' of criticism, a proposition this thesis has been, since the beginning, working towards. Earlier, I defined feminist film criticism as a process of negotiation occurring between a feminist critic who struggles against oppressive discourses found inside and outside the popular film, and who is also a female spectator implicated in hegemonic, yet not always unpleasurable, constructions of femininity and desire. Hence, in the midst of viewing and writing, the feminist film critic is both female and feminist, both complicit and resisting, both a

textually addressed subject and a viewer situated in a particular social and political context. My discussion of Gramscian approaches to feminist film criticism brings me back to these earlier claims, which pointed to the need to understand the feminist film critic's ambivalent relationship to popular cinema as one fraught with pleasure and displeasure. When the feminist film critic analyzes Hollywood cinema for the pleasures and displeasures it affords her, she is engaging with the notion that popular film embodies flip sides of the same fantasy – a fantasy of resistance and containment that attracts and repulses her at the same time. In this way, an analysis of the 'both-and' of hegemonic fantasy must start from the feminist film critic's consciousness of her own contradictory responses before it can begin to consider the multiple, though not unlimited, points of address made available to viewers in general.



**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**FEMINISM, BACKLASH AND THE HEGEMONIC FEMALE FANTASY**  
**IN *THELMA AND LOUISE***

**Introduction**

The diverse and diametrically opposed political readings that have been ascribed to *THELMA AND LOUISE* (1991), especially amongst feminists, makes it an excellent example for engaging with questions around polysemy and meaning, negotiation and hegemonic female fantasy. The purpose of my analysis in Chapter Three will be twofold: to examine the ways in which this film's polysemy lends itself to diverse interpretations, and to consider the ideological implications of *THELMA AND LOUISE*'s polysemy, specifically its implications for feminism.

*THELMA AND LOUISE* afforded me various pleasures and displeasures, resulting from its attempts to accommodate contemporary feminist concerns with male violence against women. Male violence against women has been a cinematic staple since the days of D.W. Griffith. While many Hollywood films continue in the tradition of Griffith using such violence to evoke, at best, pathos or suspense, and at worse, titillation, other Hollywood films try to break with that tradition, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. *THELMA AND LOUISE* represents the latter type of film.<sup>32</sup> This film displays a consciousness of contemporary feminist discourses on issues of male violence against women, and seeks to incorporate such discourses while simultaneously adhering to the contradictory institutional demands of Hollywood filmmaking – that is, the demands for established forms and genres, as well as for novelty and contemporaneity. According to Gledhill (1988: 69-70), while Hollywood production is indeed formula-bound, the drive to appear contemporary and innovative necessitates that even the most formulaic of plots

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<sup>32</sup>Other recent examples include *THE ACCUSED* (1988), *MORTAL THOUGHTS* (1991), *SLEEPING WITH ENEMY* (1991), *BOYS ON THE SIDE* (1995) and *DOLORES CLAIBORNE* (1995).

must address, however obliquely, the topical issues of the day and offer new approaches to old genres, as *THELMA AND LOUISE* demonstrates. As a consequence, explains Gledhill, "[c]ontradictory pressures towards programming that is both recognizably familiar (that conforms to tradition, to formal or generic convention) and also innovative and realistic (offering a twist on, or modernizing, traditional genres) leads to complex technical, formal or ideological negotiations in mainstream media texts." Gledhill further maintains that when such negotiations occur in the woman's film (e.g., between patriarchal notions of womanhood and the heroine's struggle for independence), they are a source of pleasure for female audiences (84-6). Speaking for myself as a feminist critic, it is through the negotiations into which *THELMA AND LOUISE* enters, in its attempts to accommodate contemporary feminist concerns, that I am able to experience pleasure in this popular film.

Besides addressing issues of interest to the women's movement, one of Hollywood's other, most recent nods to feminism has been to insert women into protagonist roles in traditionally male genres such as the Western (e.g., *BAD GIRLS* [1994]; *THE QUICK AND THE DEAD* [1995]) or the detective thriller (e.g., *BLACK WIDOW* [1987], *BLUE STEEL* [1990]; *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* [1991]; *COPY CAT* [1995]). As a road movie, *THELMA AND LOUISE* belongs to this recent trend in Hollywood filmmaking. The road movie thematizes transformation through journey, with the main characters' movement from a familiar context to an unfamiliar space leading to personal discovery.<sup>33</sup> Combining aspects of the buddy film, the outlaw couple film and the Western, the road movie often traces the picaresque adventures of two male friends as they bond across a natural landscape and through their mutual disregard for women and social institutions, in particular the law and community.<sup>34</sup> Whether on the road as in *EASY RIDER* (1969) or the wide-open range as in *BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE*

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<sup>33</sup>My thanks to Jackie Levitin for pointing out this characteristic of the road movie.

<sup>34</sup>The road movie is a curiously under-theorized genre in film studies. My own conceptualization of it as cross-generic points to the difficulty in fixing it as a distinct genre.

SUNDANCE KID (1969), these men are romantic outsiders unable to live within society and its rules, rebelliously seeking freedom from social convention. Paradoxically and typically, these characters are conventional themselves. They are hardly transgressive since, ultimately, they help to perpetuate closely held American myths about free will, rugged individualism and self-reliance.

THELMA AND LOUISE draws upon road-movie codes, parachuting women into a traditionally male genre, to mobilize the desires of its contemporary female audience. My concerns are with how the intersection of gender and genre inflects this film so that it speaks about ideological struggles over notions of femininity in the early part of the '90s, and with the ways in which the road movie regenerates itself to become a fantasy enactment of contemporary social conflict over notions of the law, gender and heterosexual relations.

THELMA AND LOUISE aptly illustrates the kind of complex textual negotiations of which Gledhill writes. As a generic hybrid, this film blends aspects of the road movie and the woman's film, offering gender-bending twists to old Hollywood conventions. Moreover, it acknowledges aspects of contemporary feminist concerns, in particular, issues around male violence against women – a violence that results in the female protagonists committing their own acts of violence against men.

The theme of violence places THELMA AND LOUISE and others like it within the context of mainstream battle-of-the-sexes rhetoric. As a hegemonic strategy, 'battle of the sexes' works to obscure feminist concerns with structural, gender-based inequalities. 'Battle of the sexes' implies a natural, inevitable conflict abstracted from historical and systemic conditions. Moreover, it suggests a power struggle for the supremacy of one sex over the other which is counter to feminist democratic principles, and which perpetuates the misogynist stereotype of the feminist as castrating bitch or, to use a more recent term, as 'feminazi', on and off the screen. Of course, this is not the only contemporary discourse in which to situate these films. In recent years, for instance, women's movements in

Canada and the United States have helped raise awareness on issues of concern to women. Sexual harassment, date rape and domestic violence have been, at various times, on the public agenda – they are popular issues that twenty-five years ago had no vocabulary. Women's movements have also brought attention to the ways in which social institutions often fail to protect the interests of women against male abuses in the workplace and in the home. Problems and concerns previously associated with feminism only are now daily public concerns in Canada and in the United States, regardless of how women and men situate themselves in relation to feminist political practice. Films like *THELMA AND LOUISE* represent the impact of feminist thought on public discussions.

Both the oppositional thinking of feminism and the conservatizing rhetoric of battle-of-the-sexes highlight struggles over attempts to re-define gender relations. I want to keep these opposing ideological perspectives in mind as a way to engage with the possible meanings *THELMA AND LOUISE* may possess when read from the historical context in which it was produced. In some measure, this film attempts to negotiate the concerns I outline, raising topical questions about male violence against women, women and the law, heterosexual relations, and relationships between women. The film also works within ideological and generic parameters that limit its engagement with these contemporary issues in particular ways, generating meanings that are, in some cases, contradictory, and in others, clearly hegemonic.

### **Notes on reception**

In critical discussions of *THELMA AND LOUISE*, the focus has been either on the film's reception or on making progressive readings. Indeed, the film's reception in particular has been well-documented (see especially Carter 1993: 125-31, Walters 1995: 4-10, and Willis 1993: 120-22). Here, academic critics as well as film reviewers pay particular attention to the gendering of readings, showing that interpretations of *THELMA AND LOUISE* have been split along gender lines, with male critics decrying the film as

an example of violent, 'battle-of-the-sexes' male-bashing and as a threat to American moral standards, and female critics arguing that the film addresses the social experiences of American women, expressing their concerns about sexual harassment and rape, and the law's insensitive treatment of women who have been victimized by such crimes. The latter are issues that, Mia Carter (1993: 126) points out, male critics often ignore in their readings, focusing instead on the film's representation of men. Summarizing the situation, Carter explains that

Along with the Thomas-Hill Senate Hearings, and the Kennedy-Smith, Tyson, and St. John's Six rape trials, [screenwriter] Khouri and [director] Scott's movie – and the critics' and audiences' distinct responses to it – highlighted the dramatic differences between male and female experience in contemporary American culture (132).

A less-documented aspect of the film's reception has been the split amongst feminist or feminist-minded women. Speaking from my own experiences, I have been in Women's Studies classes at Simon Fraser University where students have produced diametrically opposed interpretations of *THELMA AND LOUISE*, with some women claiming the film for feminism, and other women condemning it as damaging to the feminist project. My interest in the film derives largely from its ability to produce opposing feminist readings and to, in effect, divide feminists, which to me suggests not only competing feminisms but differences among women, their social experiences and the interpretive strategies they employ. One of my hopes is that my analysis will point to ways for accounting for such differences in interpretation and may provide a model for analyzing other films that produce opposing feminist responses.

To return to the film's critical reception, some feminist critics such as Alice Cross and Pat Dowell (Kamins 1991) maintain that *THELMA AND LOUISE* is reactionary and at times even offensive to women (e.g., the film is nothing more than a regressive male-buddy film in female drag. The film acts as a warning to women who challenge the status

quo), while others, such as Mia Carter (1993), Patricia Mann (1993), Martha Minow (1992), Susan Morrison (1992), and Elizabeth V. Spelman (1992) want to assert its progressive qualities or at least its potential to leave open the possibility of progressive readings for female and/or feminist viewers. To make a progressive reading, each of these critics raise important points: Carter suggests that readings must pay attention to what male critics ignore in their interpretations; Morrison argues that the film must be read in the context of the woman's film rather than the road movie; Minow and Spelman observe that readings of the film depend on how one situates oneself in relation to the law and authority; and Mann maintains that the film must be read allegorically as a parable for our times, rather than literally. She (1995: 233) notes that literal readings of the film have resulted in "an anxious and hostile torrent" from "sophisticated reviewers who usually accept the brutality and anarchy of contemporary films as unobjectionable cultural and political tropes [but] found it difficult to respond to the narrative of THELMA AND LOUISE metaphorically."

In some measure, THELMA AND LOUISE attempts to engage with each of the ideological agendas (the progressive and the reactionary, the feminist and the anti-feminist) that various critics have imparted to it. The result is that THELMA AND LOUISE presents us with a layered, polysemic essay on contemporary gender relations. My response to previous writings on the film will be to bear in mind the textual strategies that make both reactionary and progressive claims possible, as a way to account, at least in part, for the cultural event that was THELMA AND LOUISE's reception. Discussions of THELMA AND LOUISE's reception have emphasized contexts for reading. In contrast, I want to hold the text accountable, at least in some measure, for both the reactionary and progressive readings it has produced. The focus on the context of reception, specifically on the gender of audience members and on the gendering of interpretations, has left out a consideration of the text and the way in which it is itself contradictory and ambiguous.

### Notes on production and publicity

A brief look at press accounts of the production of *THELMA AND LOUISE* and at promotional publicity surrounding the film and its stars is helpful in sketching out the apparent conditions under which this film was produced. While the circulation of such information no doubt had an impact on readings of the film, I am more concerned, for the purposes of this analysis, in considering how press accounts may suggest conflicts or concerns that arose during the making of *THELMA AND LOUISE* and that may have become manifested in the text.

Discussions of the screenplay in mainstream media accounts focus on the feminism of its author, Callie Khouri, and on industry interest in the story. Khouri was a first-time screenwriter when she penned the Oscar-winning screenplay for *THELMA AND LOUISE*. In interviews, Khouri identifies herself as a feminist, but also claims she did not write *THELMA AND LOUISE* with the intention of producing a feminist tract, contrary to what her critics might claim: "I am a feminist, so clearly it is going to have my point of view. But this is a movie about outlaws, and it's not fair to judge it in terms of feminism" (quoted in Rohter 1991: C21; cf. Pagnozzi 1995: 122). Khouri explains that her concern with the lack of respectable film roles for women led her to write the screenplay (Rohter 1991: C21, C24).<sup>35</sup> In 1989, director Ridley Scott, known for his genre-twisting in films such as *ALIEN* (1979) and *BLADE RUNNER* (1982), optioned her script with plans to use it as a project for his production company (Arrington 1991: 108). According to *New York Times* writer Larry Rohter (1991: C24), "[Khouri's script] became the talk of Hollywood – or at least of agents with female clients," and "attracted the attention of the four big studios and big stars like Goldie Hawn, Cher and Michelle Pfeiffer." Scott says he had no plans to direct the film himself, until he shopped the

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<sup>35</sup>The *New York Times* headlines for the interview with Khouri call her "The Third Woman of *THELMA AND LOUISE*" and "The Woman Who Created *THELMA AND LOUISE*." As Mia Carter (1993: 131) points out, "Khouri has been held accountable for her script as few other screenwriters before her."

screenplay around to various top directors and found their reactions so positive, that he decided he would take it on as director (Arrington 1991: 108).

Reports in popular magazines and newspapers about the making of *THELMA AND LOUISE* seem to suggest that the circulation of the screenplay within the industry did not generate controversy but genuine interest. Given that *THELMA AND LOUISE* was the first screenplay of a virtual unknown, such interest is remarkable, and if I may speculate, speaks to industry confidence in the film, in the wide appeal it could garner. From the perspective of female stars, the screenplay no doubt was refreshing in that it featured not one but two female roles in a narrative that put women front and centre. As actor Geena Davis, who plays Thelma, comments, "I had been hearing about this great script with not one but two great parts for women, which is a very unusual event... [I] just loved both the parts. It's not often you see parts for two fully realized women characters and have a movie be about women's adventures and journeys" (quoted in Rohter 1991: C24). This discourse around the screenplay suggests there were no concerns that the film would alienate audiences. In a 1996 interview, actor Susan Sarandon, who plays Louise, comments that at the time she was making *THELMA AND LOUISE*, she had no idea it would inspire the heated debate that it did, implying that outcry over the film came as a surprise. According to Sarandon, "I don't quite understand what happened, because I thought it was just a cowboy movie with trucks and women instead of guys and horses" (quoted in Homes 1996: 65). Khouri expresses similar dismay, stating, "I couldn't keep up with the number of people who attacked me. I didn't think what I wrote was even mildly offensive, and all these people were calling me a fascist" (Pagnozzi 1995: 122).

Relying on hindsight and media accounts of the film's production is problematic. On the one hand, it may be that publicity was controlled so as to contain any mention of conflicts over the script during the filming. On the other hand, it may be that confidence in the script was so high that concerns, if there were any, were minor. In any case, press coverage of the making of *THELMA AND LOUISE* gives a picture of an ordinary,



routine and uneventful production – surprising considering the controversy the film subsequently generated in its release. Rohter (1991: C24) even reports that MGM/Pathé, the studio that took on Scott and *THELMA AND LOUISE*, "promised not to force Ms. Khouri and Mr. Scott to tinker with the script or change the dramatic conclusion."

While this is somewhat astonishing in some respects, in others it isn't if one considers just how ambiguous Khouri's screenplay is. As Harvey R. Greenberg (Martin 1991-92: 21) puts it, "Khouri's script... enhances the film's ambiguous openness for interpretation by sharply scanting information of the protagonists' prior lives, except for a few bold strokes. What one gets of the women is what one sees." Indeed, interviews with Sarandon suggest that the script was so full of holes, that the actors "had to come up with so much backstory" in order to find motivation for the characters (Sarandon quoted in Smith 1993: 47). Discussing the emotional logic behind Louise's shooting of Harlan, Sarandon explains that a backstory had to be constructed: it was decided that Louise was re-living her rape in Texas, after seeing her friend humiliated in the same way (Smith 1993: 49). In the same interview, Sarandon cites other scenes that were either rewritten or supplied as backstory, including Thelma's and Louise's different methods of packing, as well as the actual shooting. According to Sarandon, there was discussion as to whether or not the shooting should be interpreted as an assassination, indicating a certain amount of anxiety with the scene, an anxiety that would later be echoed more vociferously in the film's critical reception. "What I didn't want it to be, which was discussed, was an assassination; I didn't feel [Louise] was together enough to do that," explains Sarandon. "When she says, 'Buddy, you keep your mouth shut,' after he's obviously dead, it shows she's gone off a bit" (quoted in Smith 1993: 49). In a later interview, Sarandon states, "In the script, she takes a stance and executes him. I couldn't imagine her taking that stance. I wanted to change it so she just brings the gun up and it goes off – which is what happens sometimes with guns" (quoted in Homes 1996: 65). Comments like those of Sarandon's are revealing. While there doesn't appear to have been concern over the screenplay in the

sense that it might be offensive or alienating, there was nonetheless a concern with its ambiguity and with how the shooting might be read. This concern is framed in terms of character motivation rather than in ideological or political terms.

An interview with Scott during the filming, attests to the collaborative spirit that apparently developed on *THELMA AND LOUISE*: "I believe in the process of real collaboration, not just saying, 'Go stand on that chalk mark.' So I go for actors who bring themselves – and their brains – to the table. These two [Davis and Sarandon] are very bright women, and they keep surprising me every goddamned day. They are very interesting women" (quoted in Arrington 1991: 108).

Indeed, publicity around Davis and Sarandon during and after *THELMA AND LOUISE* stress the intelligence of these two actors, as well as their forthrightness and uncompromising approaches to acting and to life. Publicity around the two stars is important in understanding some of the readings the film may have produced for different viewers. Both Davis and Sarandon either identify themselves or have been identified as feminists and political activists (cf. Rapping 1994: 60-2). In interviews during and in the wake of *THELMA AND LOUISE*, Davis often comments on the treatment of women in film and on the plethora of degrading film roles, "where women either [have] shallow, one-dimensional caricature parts or they're being mutilated, skinned, slaughtered, abused and exploited with their clothes off" (quoted in Jerome 1991: 90, 96; cf. Rohter 1991: C24 and Kalogerakis 1994: 251, 326). Davis is known for taking film roles that are atypical for women. She says, "It's important to me to find parts that don't denigrate women," and she also delights in declaring herself a feminist: "They're still shocked when I say yes... Really, *feminist* has become such a frightening word" (quoted in Abramowitz 1994: 56, 59).

Similar discourses construct the persona of Sarandon. Articles often mention her anti-Gulf War stance and her participation in protests (Homes 1996: 64; Smith 1993: 52; Yagoda 1991: 22, 48). *Ms.* recently recognized Sarandon for her activism and voted her

one of the magazine's "Women of the Year" (Jacobs 1996: 53). Moreover, Sarandon is constructed as an actor who also values good roles for women and who will go to significant lengths in order to avoid compromising herself or the female characters she plays. A popular anecdote cited is that she deliberately cut her hair short and wore boots (instead of high heels) during the making of *TEMPEST* (1982), hoping she'd be fired after she discovered that her character's only interest was in getting laid (Smith 1993: 53; Yagoda 1991: 26). Moreover, writers often construct Sarandon, who is rightly cited as a rarity in Hollywood – a mature woman who still gets good jobs and is allowed to be sexy and smart – as a positive role model and an inspiration for younger women (Homes 1996: 66; Smith 1993: 45).

This latter discourse around Sarandon frames media accounts of the relationship between Davis and Sarandon during the making of *THELMA AND LOUISE*. *People Weekly's* Jim Jerome (1991: 92) reports that the film represented a "chance for Davis to bond with a fellow actress" and claims "Sarandon became a role model for Davis." Both these comments are interesting given that the film is about female bonding and about the naive Thelma's transformation into her role model, the worldly and wise Louise. Davis is quoted speaking admiringly of her co-star and saying, "She's great and strong and wonderful. I used to tease her and say, 'When can I be like you?'" (Yagoda 1991: 25). Framing the women's relationship in this manner suggests that writers want to strongly identify the two actors with their respective characters. *Premiere's* Rachel Abramowitz (1994: 59) goes so far as to imply that Davis's feminist consciousness was raised because of her experiences making *THELMA AND LOUISE*: "Ever since *THELMA AND LOUISE*, Davis has been more politically engaged, speaking mostly on women's rights. When Susan Faludi's *Backlash* appeared [the same year as *THELMA AND LOUISE*], Davis sent out copies to a number of Hollywood colleagues. She's taken more public stands." Parallels between Davis and Thelma seem hard to resist, and Davis is sometimes described in words that could be used to describe Thelma, particularly around her desire

to be free and in charge of her life (cf. Abramowitz 1994: 56). As Jerome (1991: 96) writes, "[F]or Davis – as for Thelma – the name of the game is independence..."

### **Narrative synopsis**

The themes of independence and freedom are central to *THELMA AND LOUISE*, the story of two female friends who embark on a weekend getaway that goes awry. Thelma is a frustrated suburban housewife in her early thirties, seeking a brief respite from a domineering husband who has her cloistered in their suburban home. Louise, a middle-aged waitress in a greasy spoon, is fed up with her job and her non-committal boyfriend.

As they head out in Louise's blue convertible Thunderbird, the women are excited about the weekend they are going to spend together at a friend's empty cabin. On their way, they stop at a road house for a drink and a bite before continuing on their journey. Here, Thelma dances with a stranger named Harlan who later beats her and tries to rape her in the parking lot. Louise happens upon the scene, armed with a gun, and saves Thelma. As the two women leave, Harlan hurls insults at them. Louise shoots him dead, and the women find themselves on the run from the law. They decide to head for Mexico.

On the road, the women encounter an obnoxious truck driver and a cute cowboy, with whom Thelma has a fling. The cowboy robs them of Louise's savings, the money they were using to get to Mexico. This robbery prompts Thelma to hold up a convenience store. Later, when a police officer stops the two women for speeding, they lock him in the trunk of his cruiser. They make phone contact with Hal, a detective who is trying to track them down and who has knowledge of Louise's past. En route to Mexico, Thelma and Louise talk about their friendship and their lives, and speculate about the nature of crime and responsibility, blame and punishment.

Eventually, the law catches up with Thelma and Louise in a spectacular, desert chase-scene in which capture seems inevitable. However, the two friends decide that

going back to their old selves would amount to going to prison, so they choose to evade arrest by driving the convertible off a cliff into the Grand Canyon. Rather than leaving us with an image of suicide, the film quickly reverts to earlier clips showing the women's pleasure and excitement at the start of the road trip.

### **Fathers and husbands**

THELMA AND LOUISE's opening sequence sets up the primary conflict that motivates the narrative: a woman's desire for freedom from male authority. The sequence cuts between Louise working at the restaurant and Thelma trying to contend with her domineering, loudmouthed husband, Daryl. The *mise-en-scène* of the opening sequence suggests the entrapment of the two women. Louise winds her way between tables and customers, and Thelma contends with the domestic chaos of her cramped suburban kitchen. Both women move in spaces that are cluttered, and both women are tightly framed by the camera.

On the telephone, Louise tells Thelma she wants to get out of town to punish her boyfriend who is unwilling to make a commitment to her. As Daryl, who cannot find his socks, blusters in the background, Louise cajoles Thelma, calling her a "little housewife," in an effort to persuade her to abandon Daryl for the weekend. Thelma replies that she has not asked his permission yet, prompting Louise to inquire impatiently and accusingly, "Is he your husband or your father?" Louise's question signals the film's first challenge to traditional gender relations. While in another historical context, one might have answered there is no difference – a woman must obey both – in a '90s context, the question brings attention to the on-going re-definition of heterosexual relations occurring in the wake of second-wave feminism. Significantly, however, Daryl is characterized as a buffoon rather than a menace, and this sets off several possible meanings, depending on the viewer's relationship to patriarchal authority.

Mann (1995: 234) comments that Daryl's blustering "suggests the empty quality of patriarchal authority" in contemporary America. I agree with this reading but would add that this characterization of Daryl also works as a containment strategy, lessening the threat the film poses to sexist male audience members, who can breath a sigh of relief: *they* are not *him* since Daryl's sexism is excessive and comical while theirs is reasonable and normal (read 'invisible'). The film's use of male stereotypes such as Daryl, as well as others (e.g., the working-class rapist, the obnoxious truck driver, the arrogant cop, the seductive cowboy), invites women's recognition at the same time that it distances the men on the screen from the men in their lives and, arguably, in the audience, rendering the fantasy safe. Indeed, the film's use of male stereotypes is in danger of hijacking any criticism *THELMA AND LOUISE* may wish to direct at the social formation. The problem, becomes 'some men' rather than an entire society founded on patriarchal assumptions, and criticism of the social formation is rechanneled so that it is directed at male stereotypes like Daryl.

Moreover, the conflicts that emerge from Thelma's oppressive domestic situation, however comical, help trigger her search for autonomy, suggesting that a woman's desire for self-determination is still in need of exterior justification – in this case, an extreme jerk for a husband. The implication is that if Daryl had been different, Thelma's inclination toward female autonomy might never have existed. As Thelma later says to a police officer who has a wife, "You be sweet to her. My husband wasn't and look how I turned out."

However, Daryl's demands on Thelma, even if they appear ideologically contradictory and are stretched to the point of ridiculousness, still speak to frustrations expressed in many other examples of women's popular cultural practices such as the soap opera, the fashion magazine and the woman's film. The familiarity and recognizability of the question Louise asks ("Is he your husband or your father?") is important, then, in that it links up with a host of frustrations of concern to (heterosexual) women – from

unsatisfying relationships with men to an unfair share of the housework to the vague feeling that there could be more to life – and opens space for a negotiation of meanings that may relate to women's social experiences.

### **The knowing woman**

While Louise starts off as the stronger and more independent-minded of the two women, the story belongs to Thelma and her transformation from a meek, obliging housewife who has never been out of town without her husband, to a (quasi-)feminist, gun-wielding, whiskey-drinking outlaw. Still, Louise is set up, initially, as Thelma's older, more experienced and more knowledgeable role model. At the beginning of the road trip, Thelma, with unlit cigarette, emulates Louise smoking. "Hey, I'm Louise," she says to her friend, signifying her desire to be like Louise, to know what she knows. The naive woman's fascination with the experienced woman links *THELMA AND LOUISE* to previous examples of the woman's film such as *REBECCA* (1939), *ALL ABOUT EVE* (1950) and *DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN* (1985) (cf. Morrison 1985 and Stacey 1988). While the first two films render this fascination problematic, *DESPERATELY* like *THELMA AND LOUISE* valorizes it and encourages it. Indeed, after Thelma's admission of wanting to be like Louise, the film works as wish-fulfillment, much like the bump on the head Roberta/Roseanna Arquette receives which makes her believe she is Susan/Madonna. It is not surprising, then, that Daryl refers to Louise as a "bad influence" on Thelma. Moreover, the two women resemble each other from the start (both have red hair, with Geena Davis dyeing hers for the part of Thelma, Louise's would-be kid sister), and increasingly so as the narrative progresses. At the outset of the trip, Thelma wears her hair 'big' and her dress frilly, while Louise sports a well-constructed hairdo and chic spangled jacket. While on the run, each woman discards the accoutrements of femininity – Thelma, her frilly dress and Louise, her jewelry and lipstick. Through a process of

deglamourization, they come to look more and more like each other, in jeans, T-shirts and loose hair.

Key to Thelma's transformation is the acquisition of the knowledge that Louise possesses. (Of course, a woman with knowledge is dangerous, more so than a woman with a gun.) While the knowledge that passes from Louise to Thelma is never explicitly spoken in the film, I want to suggest that what Louise knows (from an experience in Texas to which she refuses to refer) and what Thelma subsequently learns at the road house, where she narrowly escapes a rape, may be read as a female initiation into patriarchal relations. Feminist critics such as Rhona Berenstein (1992), Karen Hollinger (1993), Alison Light (1984), Susan Morrison (1985) and Tania Modleski (1982) have written about REBECCA in this way, suggesting that the girl (we never learn her name) comes into maturity once she learns the terrible truth about the position of women in a patriarchal culture, and subsequently, must choose between the worldly and independent Rebecca, the image she wishes to become and who threatens patriarchal authority, and Maxim, who represents that authority and whose approval the girl seeks. In the end, she chooses the latter. While comparing the narrative of a gothic romance to that of a road movie may seem like a stretch, it may be that 'feminizing' a male genre involves the incorporation of narrative codes that are familiar to female audiences, that draw from women's genres, and that speak in some way to shared anxieties arising from similar social experiences.

In *THELMA AND LOUISE*, Thelma learns the terrible truth about male dominance of which Louise never speaks. With this knowledge, she rejects her husband, her former self as a "little housewife" and chooses Louise over patriarchal authority. More correctly, the women choose each other, and in this way, the film works to confirm the popular notion (suspicion?) that women really do find female friendships more satisfying than romantic relationships with men, which is one of the sources of pleasure the film provides to its female audience. Moreover, Thelma's and Louise's rejection of patriarchal



authority and their refusal to give heterosexual relations primacy over their friendship has led to many readings of the film as a lesbian coming-out story, which not only widens the film's address (according to Holmlund's criteria, it would qualify as a "mainstream femme film") but further accentuates the threat the women's relationship poses to patriarchal authority, as represented in the narrative by the law (cf. Griggers 1993).

### **Rape and allegory**

The road to Thelma's transformation is a treacherous one that places her further and further outside the law. It begins at the road house where the two women have stopped to have a drink on their way to their destination. Here, an increasingly drunk Thelma dances and flirts with the stranger Harlan, much to Louise's annoyance. Later, Harlan beats and tries to rape Thelma in the parking lot, until Louise comes to the rescue with the gun Thelma packed for the trip in case of "psycho killers". Thelma's frightened imagination at the start of the trip illustrates what Carter (1993: 123) calls "the truth of women's grim social awareness; too often we are afraid." Indeed, Thelma's fears at the beginning of the trip become manifested in the form of the rapist Harlan, whose desire to control Thelma's body acts as an extreme and brutal projection of Daryl's seemingly less threatening desire to control Thelma's life. When Harlan shows no remorse for his attack, and instead hurls sexual insults at the women, Louise shoots him dead.

Harlan's murder is one of the more difficult scenes to read in the film and has produced the most controversy, generating several conflicting interpretations. The scene produces at least two possible readings, one literal, the other allegorical, each with different political implications. The literal reading interprets the attempted rape and subsequent murder as an advertisement for vigilantism: the scene advocates that individuals take the law into their own hands, acting as judge, jury and executioner. That Louise shoots Harlan in response to verbal rather than physical abuse makes it difficult, according to these accounts, to justify the punishment she metes out. Moreover, the scene

draws an equivalence between the violence of language and the violence of rape so that two key feminist concerns – male violence against women and the power of language to perpetuate misogyny – become dangerously conflated instead of remaining separate but connected. This conflation gives grounds to criticize feminists as ‘politically correct’ and humourless ‘feminazis’ who take everything too seriously (e.g., you can’t say anything these days for fear a ‘feminazi’ might slap you with a harassment suit). In addition, the popular recognition of rape as a feminist issue links the scene to radical feminism’s kill-your-rapist rhetoric, which has been attacked in the mainstream, has been interpreted in the context of ‘battle-of-the-sexes’, and has served to further marginalize feminisms of all kinds.

This literal reading may be further divided into those that are feminist and those that are anti-feminist, with both, ironically enough, rejecting the film as dangerous and reactionary. In a literal feminist reading, the scene is damaging to feminism and to women because it misrepresents feminist concerns with language and violence, and plays into the hands of conservatives who fear that the ‘feminazis’ are going too far and must be stopped (by film’s end, they are). In a literal anti-feminist reading, the scene validates hegemonic anxieties about unruly, hysterical feminists who are getting out of control and must be reined in (by the conclusion, they are). As Dowell (Kamins 1991: 28) remarks, “Thelma and Louise have made their most indelible mark as cautionary figures for men. (Less noted is the fact that they serve as a warning to women, too.)”

When read allegorically, however, the scene has altogether different ideological implications. Rather than conflating issues of sexist language and male violence against women, an allegorical reading sees these two feminist concerns as metonymic representations in the film. Metonymy works by using a part or element of something to stand in for the whole. Metonyms depend upon our skill at constructing ‘the rest’ from the part we have been given. In *THELMA AND LOUISE*, the attempted rape and the subsequent verbal attack are parts that make up the whole of women’s social experiences

in a sexist society. With this in mind, Harlan's death takes on particular connotations and acts as a lightning rod, drawing to it social questions that the film wants to explore. As Putnam (1993: 295-6) explains it, the murder is committed

...to avenge not only this outrage [the verbal assault after the sexual assault] but all of the little rapes, the everyday usurpations of female autonomy that all women know. Viewed allegorically, the scene portrays the ritual re-enactment of cultural conflicts at the heart of women's everyday lives. The actual social world is magnified, symbolized, throughout this sequence of crime and redress.

Harlan represents every misogynist we have ever encountered. In the role of feminist avenger, Louise shoots Harlan for Thelma, and as we later learn, for herself in reaction to a past trauma of which she will not speak. Harlan is symbolically exorcised, cast out, by Louise's bullet in punishment for all the times a woman's agency has been denied, either through violence or language. The film illustrates in larger-than-life proportions the interconnectedness of sexist language and male violence against women, and the ways in which women are routinely dismissed, silenced or humiliated. Read allegorically, the scene demonstrates Thelma and Louise's right to say 'no' to all forms of misogyny and to be heard rather than deliberately and continually ignored. This particular reading depends upon metonymic interpretive skills that draw out the parts and connect them to the whole, that is, to the social world in which the female audience members experience sexism.

It is along these lines that I think the waitress at the road house offers the best reading of Harlan's murder. Interpretations of the crime depend upon the degree to which the viewer is willing to metonymically relate the waitress's comments to the experiences of Thelma and Louise and women generally. During the police investigation, the waitress tells the key investigator that she hopes his wife "did it" and that "I coulda told you Harlan was going to end up buying it." Without saying anything explicit, the waitress *knows* (and presumably, the women in the audience *know*) what kind of man Harlan is, and that sooner or later (we hope) he would pay for it. In this reading, the experiences of women

are the focus and not the murder itself (which, conversely, tends to be the case in the literal readings). As Minow and Spelman (1992: 1293) state, “[Louise] shoots in judgement; she has judged that he will not stop this behaviour and that even if Thelma gets away, other women will be victimized.” Significantly, it is not the law that finally punishes Harlan and stops him from hurting more women. Rather, it is a woman who, by her action, is now positioned outside the law.

Elayne Rapping (Kamins 1991: 13) has written that Louise's shooting of Harlan during the verbal assault "muddies the political waters hopelessly." As my discussion of possible readings suggests, I agree with Rapping's comment and would add that the scene works to open up the film's polysemy, allowing for hegemonic and counter-hegemonic readings. Had Louise shot Harlan because he refused to stop his sexual assault, the scene's meaning would have been clearcut and unambiguous, leaving no space for multiple readings. As it is, the shooting during the verbal attack opens *THELMA AND LOUISE* to various interpretations, resulting in a relativism that renders feminist, oppositional claims on the film as legitimate as hegemonic ones. Still, to see a man punished by a woman for his sexism rather than a woman for her sexuality gives the film a unique political resonance. While the fate of the femme fatale rarely inspires the righteous indignation of male film reviewers, it is interesting that the death of a misogynist asshole could inspire the outpouring of moral outrage that it did. Comments by Davis and Khouri aptly sum up the situation: defending the film against charges of male-bashing, Davis argued, "If you're feeling threatened, you are identifying with the wrong character," and Khouri, maintaining that the film is not hostile toward men, stated, "I think it is hostile toward idiots" (Davis and Khouri quoted in Rohter 1991: C24, C21, respectively). The disturbing question is, Why were some male film reviewers identifying with Harlan at all?

### **Women and the law**

Thelma and Louise flee the crime scene, and it is Louise's firm conviction that they cannot go to the police. At various points in the narrative, the option of turning to the police for help is presented either by Thelma or by Hal/Harvey Keitel, the sympathetic cop who, in his own way, wants to help the women at the same time that he is tracking them down, bringing with him the force of the law. The film acts as a venue for discussing the relationship between women and the law. *THELMA AND LOUISE* displays a consciousness of contemporary feminist critiques of the law and its insensitive, inadequate treatment of women who have experienced male violence. Moreover, the film suggests that Louise has been mishandled by the law previously in Texas. She knows they won't be believed. They have been drinking, and Thelma was seen flirting with Harlan. When Thelma first mentions the idea of going to the police and explaining to them what happened, that "he was raping me," Louise says the police wouldn't believe her because "a hundred goddamn people saw you dancing cheek to cheek... We don't live in that kind of world!" *THELMA AND LOUISE* works from our knowledge of recent, publicized rape trials where women have been required to prove their behaviour was faultless, that they did not provoke or, in some way, deserve the assault. As Carter (1993: 134) points out,

The sad truths of the real world and the disappointing scenarios of too many recent rape trials have taught women that they will not be believed, however battered and bruised and no matter how well-witnessed the crime... Many women understand all too well why Thelma and Louise fled.

The question of whether or not Thelma was 'asking for it' echoes public discussions of where 'the blame' lies in rape cases. (cf. Grundmann in Kamins 1991: 35). In this way, the women's personal and private conversation becomes a social conversation (cf. Minow and Spelman 1992: 1291). Moreover, their conversations inside the car, while on the road, work in the same way that conversations do in the soap opera, with characters recounting dramatic events through fragments of conversation in an attempt to make sense of them

and give them meaning. *THELMA AND LOUISE*'s attempts to blend (masculine) action with (feminine) conversation are indicative of the textual negotiations the film enters into as it tries to 'feminize' the road movie through recourse to codes more familiar in women's genres such as the soap opera and the woman's film (cf. Gledhill 1988: 70 and 1992: 114). In addition, considerable negotiation occurs between differing viewpoints on issues of blame and responsibility. However, both Thelma and Louise eventually, and importantly, reject the notion that a woman's behaviour is in any way culpable in her own assault. Furthermore, despite the best intentions of individuals like Hal, the film is firm in its conviction that the law as an institution does not work on women's behalf, but instead, turns the victims into criminals and criminals into victims, forcing women like Thelma and Louise to take the law into their own hands.

As a social institution, the law works to define notions of criminality and justice, which are often gendered concepts, as *THELMA AND LOUISE* demonstrates in its concerns with the system's inadequate treatment of women victimized by male violence. To stress the point, the film sets up a contradiction between the way in which the film's police and legal discourses define Thelma and Louise, and the way in which the two women are constructed for the audience. We are given two views of Thelma and Louise, which complicates our relationship to the women and to the law, no matter where we may stand on the issues the film portrays. The events leading up to and including Thelma's robbery of the convenience store provide a good example. Here, Thelma and Louise pick up a charming hitchhiker named J.D./Brad Pitt, with whom Thelma has a fling (the film's way of demonstrating what consensual sex between strangers looks like), during which he explains to her the patten he uses when conducting an armed robbery. The morning after, J.D. steals Louise's \$6,700 in savings, the money the two women were using to get to Mexico. When the women discover the theft, Louise is devastated, about to give in to the law, until Thelma takes charge of the narrative, and robs a convenience store. When the hold-up occurs, the audience is positioned outside the store with Louise, who is unaware

of Thelma's actions until she comes running out of the store telling Louise to start the car. Thelma's behaviour here is unexpected since, up until this point in the narrative, she has been passive with Louise making all the plans.

Thelma's crime is captured on the store video. The first time the audience actually sees the crime is on this video, which the police investigators and Thelma's husband are watching as evidence of the two women's criminal inclinations. The scene makes us privy to the kinds of interpretations that the spectacle of Thelma – conducting an armed robbery using J.D.'s self-assured patter – can produce. When read through the lens of the law, Thelma, and by extension, Louise are criminals, armed and dangerous. But an alternative reading presents itself, arising from the viewer's role as witness to the social experiences that led to their criminal behaviour (i.e., Harlan's murder, the convenience-store robbery, the destruction of the truck driver's rig, the locking of the officer in the trunk of his cruiser). By positioning the viewer as witness to the crimes, the film presents a reading of Thelma and Louise as women mis-defined by the law and wronged by a sexist society. As Minow and Spelman (1992: 1296) point out,

The law has its own rules about what are the relevant and irrelevant facts about people's lives. The price of being protected by the law in court is to surrender control over the telling of your story. Its rich, complicated and confusing textures are not digestible by the legal record. People's real stories are outside the law. Had Thelma and Louise turned themselves over to the law – whether to the sheriff or to an attorney – they would have become subject to constraints much like those from which they found themselves fleeing, constraints which among other things make their versions of themselves and of the world irrelevant.

The law attempts to seize control of Thelma's and Louise's story, in order to put in its place a version of the two women that is in keeping with received notions of criminality and criminal women. "I almost feel like I know you, Louise," says detective Hal. "I know what happened to you in Texas." Quick to reply, Louise says, "You don't know me," challenging Hal's claim to knowledge of her story. To further accentuate the conflicting

versions available of *Thelma and Louise*, the scene of the police watching the spectacle of the robbery on video is followed by a scene in which Louise admonishes Thelma to not litter. While this is a minor incident in the film, its inclusion nonetheless serves to illustrate an important point: that these women are not without morals nor a sense of social responsibility. Rather, it is society that is morally and socially irresponsible in its treatment of women. Minow and Spelman (1992: 1290) comment that

Although the law put them beyond its ken and beyond its protection, Thelma and Louise engage in a continual discussion about blame and guilt, and about responsibility and obedience. Placing at the center these *outlaws'* views of law and morality displaces societal images of the outlaw as amoral. Their own moral judgments afford a critical perspective on law and conventional morality.

Making the audience privy to Thelma's and Louise's points of view serves to further complicate viewers' attitudes towards the law and other social institutions, which have the power to define behaviour as criminal, individuals as outlaws. Louise is keenly aware of how the law is defining her and positioning her in relation to the rest of society, whereas Thelma has difficulty in apprehending the shift that has taken place in her social positioning. "We're fugitives now," says Louise to Thelma, "Start behaving like that." But what constitutes fugitive behaviour, and who gets to decide who is a fugitive are questions that always hover on the surface of the narrative and that also illustrate the film's strong links to the outlaw couple film.

### **The female outlaw couple**

The outlaw couple film has its origins in the American, Depression-era gangster film, where the gangster is sympathetically portrayed as someone who overcomes class limitations and defies the class hierarchy of capitalist society. These films ask who is the bigger criminal, the gangster or the capitalist society? And where does responsibility for criminal behaviour lie, in the individual or in the society? *THELMA AND LOUISE*



works in similar ways but as an indictment against patriarchy, as well as capitalism. *THELMA AND LOUISE* demonstrates the way in which a Hollywood genre renews itself to become an enactment of contemporary social conflict. According to Glenn Man (1993: 44-5),

Analogous to such forbearers as Rico (Edward G. Robinson, *LITTLE CAESAR* 1930) and Tony Camonte (Paul Muni, *SCARFACE* 1932), who dare to disturb the hierarchy of class in society through criminal violence, Thelma and Louise disrupt their gendered placement in society and therefore must be brought to task or eliminated as threats to the status quo, the traditional fate of all movie gangsters... What once passed as social/class oppression in the genre now becomes a social/gender oppression in the 1990s.

In gangster films featuring outlaw couples, the couple is forced to live outside the law. It is not by choice that they find themselves outside society and its institutions. In outlaw couple films such as *THEY LIVE BY NIGHT* (1948), *GUN CRAZY* (1949), *BONNIE AND CLYDE* (1967) and *THIEVES LIKE US* (1974), social forces are portrayed unsympathetically and the outlaws are romanticized because they are presented to us as victims of a corrupt society. As *Ms. Magazine* film reviewer Kathy Maoi (1990: 83) states, "Thelma and Louise become outlaws not because they love violence, but because men won't leave them be." As an outlaw couple film, *THELMA AND LOUISE* exposes the inadequacies of patriarchal society as a whole. In the end, however, society wins out, and, as is the tradition in the outlaw couple film, the couple is destroyed for they pose too great a threat to the social order.

Moreover, as a *female same-sex* outlaw couple, Thelma's and Louise's threat to the social order is magnified. While their flouting of the law threatens hegemony in general terms, the fact of their femaleness increases their threat. Like (Arbuthnot's and Seneca's argument [1982] about) *GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES*, *THELMA AND LOUISE* is unique in that it presents us with a female friendship that is not tainted by jealousy or competition but instead is based on loyalty, caring, and mutual admiration. This is a

departure from films that portray women in competition with each other for the attention of men or that render female same-sex identification as narcissistic or even pathological. By contrast, *THELMA AND LOUISE* emphasizes the women's allegiance to each other in a positive way, and as such, poses the ultimate threat to patriarchy – lesbianism and the elimination of the male, or more symbolically, of a reassuring patriarchal presence (cf. Straayer 1990: 54-56). Men may bond with other men (with the unstated rule that they never have sex with each other) in the interests of shoring up misogyny and male dominance, as they do in the male buddy film or the film noir, but women are not to bond with other women, either as friends or especially as lovers, and they are not to put their relationships with women (if they are misguided enough to have any) above those with men. Doing so, makes outlaws of women.

Discussing the outlaw in American mythology, Minow and Spelman (1992: 1286), argue that our ability to accept outlaws as "noble" depends on how we judge the outlaws' worldview and their actions, which "in turn, depends largely on whether the observer believes the victims of such actions deserve what happens to them. The observer's conclusions are likely to rest not only on what the purported noble outlaws believe but on who they are." Thus, they argue that when Bernard Goetz, New York City's "Subway Vigilante", was made into a "noble outlaw," it was because he was a white man shooting young, black, would-be robbers. His law-breaking was deemed acceptable, and theirs wasn't. Minow and Spelman ask, "Suppose Goetz had been a Black man, and the young men he shot at, white? Or suppose that Goetz, the white man, had shot at other whites – say, fraternity boys out on a little spree?"

These authors' observations raise important points in relation to readings of *THELMA AND LOUISE*. First, as they (1992: 1286-7) point out, our relationship to the two women's lawlessness depends upon how we judge their actions and their perception of the world:

Viewers of *THELMA AND LOUISE* who are ready to regard the two women as noble outlaws have to be able to think about both the women and those affected by their actions in fairly specific ways. Thelma and Louise have to be seen as acting, preferably self-consciously, in accordance with a just principle or concern. The would-be rapist Harlan and others directly affected by the women's actions have to be seen as in some sense deserving what they got, whether or not the law prohibits their being treated that way.

Minow's and Spelman's conclusions aptly account for the competing readings available of *Thelma and Louise*, and bring us back to my comments about literal versus allegorical readings: in order to justify Louise's shooting of Harlan, the viewer is required to make metonymic links between other aspects of the film and the social world in which Thelma and Louise, and the female audience members live. Producing a reading that justifies Harlan's punishment is impossible without a sense of that social world.

On their road trip, the women encounter a "miscellany of masculinity" from the would-be rapist Harlan, to the obnoxious truck driver, to the paternalistic Hal (Dargis 1991: 17). As Ann Putnam (1993: 296) points out, the two women travel through "a landscape awash in waves of pumping testosterone: spouting steam, spraying planes, spilling hoses, pumping oil riggers, and men pumping iron and pumping gas." The social world that Thelma and Louise inhabit is a male-dominated one in which institutions such as the law are seen as working against the interests of women. To see Thelma and Louise as "noble outlaws" depends upon a particular experience or understanding of the social world and the institutions that comprise it. One's relationship to hegemony will have a bearing on the reading of *THELMA AND LOUISE* one produces. Thelma and Louise defy hegemonic definitions of morality, of law and order, and live by a personal, what one might even call, nascent-feminist moral code that reflects their social experiences as women. Their code is not in keeping with that of the male-dominated society in which they live, and which has behind it the hegemonic force of the law. Thelma's and Louise's defiance of conventional rules of behaviour is rendered all the more transgressive because

they are women, and specifically, because they are women who reject traditional notions of gender, which fix femininity as eternal, abstracted from historical circumstance. In *THELMA AND LOUISE*, the hegemonic stakes are high since the two women try to construct a femininity that, counter to patriarchal definitions, attempts to acknowledge their social experiences as women. Because Thelma and Louise refuse to passively accept conventional views of femininity, which naturalize the routine victimization of women, they threaten patriarchal authority – an authority dependent, in part, upon women's silent quiescence. If a viewer is committed to the gender and cultural status quo, then *THELMA AND LOUISE* is bound to be discomfitting, as its critical reception has indicated.

It is important to elaborate on Minow's and Spelman's comment on the ways in which *who* the outlaw *is* will determine their status as noble or ignoble. In Thelma's and Louise's case, we are referring to two, straight, white women from working-to-lower-middle-class backgrounds. It is worth considering the effect their gender and social status has on possible readings and on viewers' relationships to the two characters. To begin with, the importation of women into a traditionally male genre requires a degree of gender bending that is evidenced in *THELMA AND LOUISE*, and that is accompanied by a sense of gender transgression. In this case, women, who are usually defined as having nurturing, non-violent, passive qualities, are committing crimes at gun point, including acts of violence against domineering men. If one is committed to male dominance, a certain amount of discomfort will be connected to the punishments Thelma and Louise mete out to their male aggressors, making the two characters anything but noble in their affront to patriarchal authority. As Maoi (1991: 84) comments, "Women can shoot a gun for the government and blow away anyone who threatens their men or their kids, but any 'heroine' who packs a pistol against systematic male violence is going to take some heat." In this reading, even the deaths of Thelma and Louise may not be enough to quell patriarchal fears of unruly women because the spectre of their example lingers, disquietingly, long after the projector stops. That is to say, Thelma's and Louise's gender

transgression exceeds the bounds of narrative closure, and this is best exemplified by the way in which the film, after the two women have (presumably) plunged to their deaths in the Grand Canyon, reverts to a montage of narrative high points during the end credits, reminding the audience of the women's strength and exuberance.

Even if one is not committed to the patriarchal status quo, it still may be difficult to produce a progressive reading of the two characters. Thelma's and Louise's gender transgression may work to produce diametrically opposed feminist readings which jeopardizes their status as noble outlaws, and which, broadly speaking, indicates struggles amongst feminists over issues of gender and representation. As I indicated, I have been in Women's Studies classes where a discussion of *THELMA AND LOUISE* has produced a split between those students who see the characters' gender transgression as justified, as an allegory for contemporary feminist concerns, and other students who see it as an insult to women because the film masculinizes the female characters so that they resort to stereotypical masculine forms of behaviour – in this case, aggression and gun-related violence – which feminists want to challenge. As an example of the latter concern, Dowell (Kamins 1991: 28) remarks that the film "does little more than fill a male formula with female forms." In light of this comment, it is difficult to regard Thelma and Louise as noble – never mind, feminist – outlaws.

My criticism of concerns such as Dowell's is not meant to invalidate them but to consider their assumptions and their implications, which I believe are problematic. In particular, the concern with women behaving like men invites a discussion of notions of femininity and masculinity, as well as of popular fantasy. The question for me is not whether or not Thelma and Louise are indeed behaving like men, but rather, how do definitions of appropriate gender behaviour impact on one's reading of the film as progressive or reactionary? Comments such as Dowell's above suggest that there is behaviour that is acceptable for and essential to women and other behaviour that is not. Taking the argument that Thelma and Louise are women in male drag suggests that there

is an essential femininity beneath their genre-induced, masculine masquerade. While feminist concerns with violence and aggression are certainly not to be dismissed, comments about Thelma's and Louise's 'masculinization' inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal and essentialist-feminist myths about a feminine essence that is non-violent, self-sacrificing, nurturing, passive, non-aggressive.<sup>36</sup> As a result, it is easy to see why the film has produced unfavourable responses from both feminist/oppositional and conservative/hegemonic perspectives, making temporary and inadvertent allies out of the unlikeliest political groupings.

Is there a way in which the contemporary issues addressed in *THELMA AND LOUISE* could have been articulated in non-violent, non-aggressive fashion? Yes, but this would require a fantasy that is altogether different from the one which *THELMA AND LOUISE* offers us, and which brings me to my second point arising from the possible difficulties in making a feminist reading of Thelma and Louise as noble. I worry that comments like Dowell's are alienating to and dismissive of those women, like myself, who found this female fantasy gratifying. In the context of the political role of feminist film criticism, I fail to see the strategic benefits of an approach to criticism such as Dowell's, whose comments erase questions of popular fantasy – on how and why this film struck a chord with its intended female audience, and what this may mean in relation to current struggles.

My discussion of *who* Thelma and Louise are in terms of their gender has taken me on a different track, but I return now to Minow's and Spelman's observation that *who* the outlaw *is* will in part determine their acceptability as noble outlaw. Certainly, Thelma's and Louise's class positions will impact on readings of the two characters and

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<sup>36</sup> Whether or not there is an essential femininity has been one of the big feminist debates. Essentialist feminists celebrate women's innate difference from men. The result is a valorization of femininity, a reversal from its usual denigration in a Western patriarchy that privileges masculinity. Essentialist feminists embrace women's allegedly innate capacities for nurturing and connection, which other feminists argue are patriarchal constructs used to limit women to maternal, care-giving roles. See Linda Alcoff (1988) for a discussion of the legacy of essentialist feminism (which she terms "cultural feminism") within feminist theory and politics.

may have contradictory effects. For instance, Minow and Spelman (1992: 1288) argue that the class backgrounds of Thelma and Louise function hegemonically as a distancing strategy, making the fantasy "more palatable to the middle-class audiences to whom the film is directed than if the heroines were solidly middle- or upper-middle class." The same can be said for the race of the two women, as well as their sexuality. (Imagine critical reception if Thelma and Louise had been black or explicitly identified as lesbians?) However, I am not convinced that the film's address works with respect to class in the way Minow and Spelman suggest. On the contrary, rather than being directed specifically at a middle-class audience, the film seeks to cut across class lines by speaking in general, that is, 'classless', terms about the thwarted dreams of youth, which is problematic in itself in that it feeds into American myths about a classless society and distracts from economic and societal constraints that may diminish youthful aspirations.<sup>37</sup> In any case, contrary to Minow and Spelman, I want to suggest a positive feminist reading that may emerge from Thelma's and Louise's class background. Drawing from my own response to the film, I would argue that the characters' class positions may work to heighten their transgression, as well as the pleasure associated with it.

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<sup>37</sup>However, I agree with Minow and Spelman when they argue that the working-class positions of the men, specifically, Harlan and the trucker, works to justify Thelma's and Louise's actions and their status as noble outlaws. According to Minow and Spelman (1992: 1289), "If class difference may make it safer for many viewers to like Thelma and Louise, one might ask whether Harlan and the truck driver seem to deserve what they get because they are presented as working-class men... It is worth asking whether the working-class status of Harlan and the truck driver makes it easier for middle-class women to think of them as unregenerate creeps who fully and unquestionably deserve everything Thelma and Louise dish out to them. No doubt their being working-class men makes it easier for middle-class men to deny that they are like these guys and thus to insist that they surely do not deserve to be treated like Harlan and the truck driver."

Moreover, I wonder the degree to which stereotypes of white Southerners adds to our reading of these men as deserving of their fates, which in turn, bolsters Thelma's and Louise's noble outlaw status. Similarly, it would be worth considering how stereotypes of white Southern women may work in relation to readings of the two characters.

## **Resistance and address**

Thelma's fugitive status is directly proportional to her new-found self-determination, which began initially with her decision to go with Louise for the weekend without Daryl's permission. Each of Thelma's self-determining actions increases her criminality, her threat to the social order: she decides to run to Mexico with Louise after she phones Daryl and tells him he is her husband not her father; she chooses to have sex with J.D., after which she "finally understands what all the fuss is about;" she takes control of her situation by robbing the store to make sure she and Louise have money to complete their escape. She is no longer the woman Louise accused of "flaking out" every time she was in trouble. Having made the full transition to Louise-ness, Thelma wears her friend's jacket when, over the phone, she tells Daryl "to go fuck [him]self."

Many feminist critics point out that only after Thelma gets "properly laid", as Louise puts it, does she become fully transformed. For instance, Dowell (1991: 29) says, Thelma "even seems to get smarter after going orgasmic, a venerable tradition in Hollywood." Similarly, Alice Cross, Roy Grundmann, Sarah Schulman (Kamins 1991: 33-36), Ann Putnam (1993: 298) and Suzanna Danuta Walters (1995: 9-10) express dismay that Thelma's sexual encounter with a stranger happens so soon after the attempted rape, and that this liaison results in the theft of the two women's getaway money. In other words, the implication is that Thelma is punished for her desire and for her active sexuality.

My feelings about J.D.'s function in the film are so ambivalent that, initially, I had no plans to write anything detailed about the character. In the end, I had to come to grips with my gut-level annoyance in order to understand what exactly I was annoyed with. The character of J.D. produces contradictory responses that I think are the result of the contradictory place he has in the narrative: he both hinders and helps Thelma in her transformation. He acts as a hindrance in that he interrupts the women's flight to Mexico through his sexual liaison with Thelma and through his theft of the getaway money. This



reading lends support to Mann's argument (1993: 235) that the film shows us that "any form of male desire is likely to be dangerous to women's efforts to realize themselves." Indeed, J.D. halts the progress of the women's story by coming between Thelma and Louise, and in the way of their efforts to escape their former selves. He represents a problem for the women. However, at the same time that J.D.'s halting of the narrative works to interrupt female bonding, it also reassures heterosexist audience members that there's nothing going on between Thelma and Louise save for their friendship. To put it another way, the encounter with J.D. helps prove that Thelma is straight and that she hasn't gone off men despite her brutal experience with Harlan.

But J.D. is different from the other men in the film, and I think this lends credence to readings of him as a positive force in Thelma's transformation. After all, J.D. has more in common with the women than the men in the film since, like Thelma and Louise, he is also outside the law (cf. Man 1993: 40-1). In other words, Thelma, Louise and J.D. are kindred spirits. Moreover, J.D. shows Thelma how to operate outside the law more effectively by demonstrating his bandit routine to her, which she then adopts in her hold-up of the convenience store (cf. Willis 1993: 124 and Man 1991: 41). Still, there are problems that remain, and when all is said and done, I am still irritated by J.D.'s polysemy. On the one hand, there doesn't seem to be an adequate way around the implication that all Thelma needed was a good lay. On the other hand, there is no overlooking the fact that Brad Pitt's minor role in *THELMA AND LOUISE* drew appreciative attention from female audiences – in fact, Pitt's current stardom owes much to this film which introduced him to movie-goers. It may be that some female audience members identified with Thelma and her situation (a frustrating home/sex life with a boring, inattentive husband) to such a degree that the fantasy of finally getting properly laid was an appealing one in which good sex could very well be transformative. Ultimately, I would argue that to dismiss the sex scene as a containment strategy on the

part of a heterosexist patriarchy is to disregard how this aspect of the film may have connected up with the fantasies and desires of some heterosexual women in the audience.

All in all, Thelma's transformation represents the most pleasurable part of this female fantasy, a fantasy that is, in my opinion, made all the more satisfying given the class positions of the two heroines. Louise is a lower-income food-service worker while Thelma is a middle-income housewife. Their class status and social environment has limited the choices they can make, leading to frustration and boredom. As Cathy Griggers (1993: 134-5) points out,

They've been around long enough to know they haven't been far enough – not yet. And so they've got cabin fever – the desire to get out and to get away – if only for the weekend... [Moreover, t]hey have cabin fever for different reasons. Thelma is fed up with housework, Louise with the salary-wage exchange. The tips don't make up the difference. There's something missing, something left unmarked in the political economy of both the contemporary working single-woman and the domestic housewife.

Like the gangsters of Depression-era Hollywood, who also come from working or lower class backgrounds, Thelma and Louise transgress against the limitations of their class, as well as gender. Their flight from their social and economic positions is a fantasy that opens up the film's textual address for at least two reasons: first, it connects with the lived realities of its intended female audience in ways that acknowledge both the diversity of female social experiences and the commonalities that can bring women like Thelma and Louise together; second, it expands its address to include both women and men by tapping into adult fears that life hasn't exactly lived up to the fantasies of youth.

On the one hand, the film is specific in its address to women, especially in its concern to expose patriarchy's containment of women's desires. But on the other hand, the film is general in its address to both sexes, specifically in its concern to articulate, in an

albeit implicit rather than explicit way, capitalism's containment of desire. Feminist film critic Carol J. Clover (Martin 1991-2: 22) rightly argues that

To focus, as the debate about *THELMA AND LOUISE* did, on those men who disliked it is to miss what I think is the far more significant fact that large numbers of men both saw and *did* like it... lots of men were evidently happy to enter into that very American fantasy [the buddy-escape plot] even when it is enacted by women, even when the particulars are female-specific (rape, macho husband, leering co-worker), and even when the inflection is remarkably feminist. And although the film showed signs of defensiveness on this point (the *niceness* of the Harvey Keitel figure struck me as something of a sop to men in the audience), it was on the whole surefooted in its assumption that its viewers, regardless of sex, would engage with the women's story.

As I indicated earlier, the focus on the gender split in reception has ignored the text of *THELMA AND LOUISE*. Clover takes this point further to argue that the attention to the gendering of readings has also ignored this film's appeal for men. The sheer popularity of the film would indicate that not all men found it difficult to relate to the story of Thelma and Louise. I would add that the film's 'surefootedness' in its assumption that it could appeal to viewers of both sexes is evidenced in the initial interest Hollywood heavyweights paid to the screenplay of Khouri, an unknown entity at the time.

As the narrative moves towards its conclusion, the film increasingly comes to speak about adult disappointment – adolescent dreams will not be realized because, contrary to popular belief, we aren't masters of our own destiny. There are forces beyond our control that limit our lives and the choices we can make. For instance, in a set of close-ups of the two women, whose faces dramatically fade into each other's, a Marianne Faithful song plays on the soundtrack: "At the age of 37, she realized she'd never ride through Paris in a sports car with the warm wind in her hair." This melancholy song comments on the plight of Thelma and Louise, women who are beyond youth and whose choices in life have been radically diminished. Lost youth becomes a metaphor for the

drudgery of taking up our responsibilities in a capitalist world. This metaphor seems to be more focused around the Louise character who is the older of the two women and who is more inclined to notice the sad, resigned faces of the elderly people she encounters on the road (cf. Johnson in Martin 1991-2: 23). *THELMA AND LOUISE* exposes the American dream – the possibility of upward mobility for an individual regardless of background, the belief in a classless society – as a myth.

Read in this way, in general terms that I think widen narrative address, *THELMA AND LOUISE* becomes a film about breaking free. In publicity interviews, comments about the film from director Ridley Scott and actor Geena Davis speak to the theme of freedom and offer an explanation as to why people who worked on the film believed in its universal appeal, in its ability to address both women and men. According to Scott, "The film's not about rape. It's about choices and freedom" (quoted in Taubin 1991: 19; cf. Arrington 1991: 107)), and according to Davis, "This is a movie about people claiming responsibility for their own lives" (quoted in Minow and Spelman 1992: 1285). My intention here is not to diminish or challenge the film's address to women. Rather, I want to suggest that there are aspects of the film's address that speak to an audience of women and men.<sup>38</sup> (The box-office success of the film suggests that it appealed to a wide audience, despite the wrath it elicited from some male film reviewers.)<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, the acknowledgment of adult disillusionment that comes to the surface closer to the end of the film, coupled with the reckless excitement that it may not be too late to change things, renders it difficult not to go along with the ride – even if one seriously minds women with guns.

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<sup>38</sup>An important question to consider would be to what extent the film's universal theme of freedom obscures the class and gender specificity of Thelma's and Louise's situation, thus rendering the fantasy less threatening to hegemony. In other words, the desire for freedom comes to be seen as a timeless concern, an aspect of human nature, rather than deriving from historical circumstance. Conversely, if the film's concerns with oppression do manage to cut across classes and genders, might this not suggest the opposite, that the film does in fact threaten hegemony because it draws upon a commonality of social experiences? And finally, is it possible that *THELMA AND LOUISE* does both?

<sup>39</sup>*Current Biography* (1991: 513) reports that *THELMA AND LOUISE* was Scott's most successful film to date. Moreover, in its first two weeks in release, *THELMA AND LOUISE* made \$12 million at the box office (Rohter 1991: C21).

The class and gender, as well as generational, implications of Thelma's and Louise's escape become increasingly poignant by the conclusion, particularly in the scene in which the women are driving in the desert at night, on the lookout for police who are on to them. The spaces in which the two women move open up here. The framing, and the panning and tracking shots accommodate the wide-open vistas and big sky of the frontier. Traditionally, the desert has been the landscape of the Hollywood Western.<sup>40</sup> The cowboy doesn't just ride into the sunset in the closing credits – he rides into the desert landscape, choosing the company of his horse, maybe a male buddy, over civilization and all the social conventions that that entails (marriage in particular). But the desert frontier is no longer the traditional preserve of white masculinity, as the black Rasta cyclist and the two fugitive women prove (cf. Dargis 1991: 17). Women have rarely gone to the desert but things are changing, at least if Thelma and Louise have anything to say about it. "I've always wanted to travel but I never got the opportunity," says Thelma. No longer content to be left behind singing sad ballads at the local saloon, Thelma and Louise have elected to go to the desert, metaphorically speaking, even if it means dying. As Thelma says later, when she is afraid Louise might make a deal with the cops, "Something's crossed over in me, and I can't go back ... I just couldn't live."

Thelma has been married since she was eighteen, but only now does she feel "wide awake ... everything looks different, like I got something to look forward to." For the heroine of the woman's film, the very presence of a desire for 'something else' is literally better than nothing. To be in possession of desire *in spite of* the oppressive social circumstances in which the heroine finds herself makes life somewhat livable – there is something to hope for, however utopian-seeming her dreams may be. The narrative of *THELMA AND LOUISE* is as much about awakening desires and hopes in the women on the screen (and in the audience) as it is about their adventures on the road. As a woman's

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<sup>40</sup>The desert scenes in *THELMA AND LOUISE* were shot in Monument Valley, also known as the Utah Canyonlands. This choice of location is significant since Monument Valley appears as the backdrop in many classic John Ford Westerns.

film, *THELMA AND LOUISE* draws upon several social experiences that women may share in common (e.g., sexual harassment, the threat of male violence, housework, the salary-wage exchange) as raw material, and then articulates the day-to-day desires and frustrations of its intended female audience in fantasy form. Moreover, there is a sense in which the expression of these female frustrations and resentments via masculine road-movie conventions marks the fantasy as especially illicit for women, and therefore, all the more pleasurable (and dangerous). Like Thelma, I, too, "am glad I came with you, no matter what happens."

Well, maybe not entirely.

### **Gender, backlash, closure**

The ending of *THELMA AND LOUISE* has produced almost as much controversy and has generated almost as many conflicting responses as Louise's killing of Harlan. After eluding the police for many days, the two women eventually find themselves cornered, trapped between Hal and his army of police officers at one end, and the Grand Canyon at the other. The showdown represents the final struggle to contain Thelma and Louise in a definition of femininity and criminality that shores up hegemonic interests. Thelma and Louise express surprise at the magnitude of force marshalled on behalf of containing them. "All this for us?" Louise asks. Their incredulity marks their lack of understanding of the threat they pose to the social order. It also marks the end of the female fantasy and the beginning of the hegemonic fantasy. Suddenly, Thelma and Louise like the audience are faced with the consequences of gender transgression.

To put it another way, the social world intrudes upon the fantasy, with the purpose of bringing the narrative to a pro-social conclusion, that is, a resolution that supports hegemony, and that makes an otherwise dangerous fantasy of female resistance safe enough for public consumption. However, the effort to impose such a resolution on *THELMA AND LOUISE* is fraught with troubling contradictions, emanating from the

questions the film has been asking all along: Who is the criminal and who, the victim? And whose interests does hegemony, as represented by the law, serve?

Hal becomes a personification of the contemporary struggle to re-define gender relations. He mediates between legal/hegemonic discourses around Thelma and Louise and the two women's experiences of the social world. He desperately wants to arrive at a compromise between the two perspectives. Hal is also a familiar figure in popular film these days: the local cop who attempts to understand the situation in all its complexity and ambiguity unlike the institutionalized authority of the FBI who see the case in simplistic and resolute terms.<sup>41</sup> Hal knows about Louise and Texas, and he wants the policemen to refrain from shooting at the two women, to arrest them with as little force as possible. "How many times do women gotta be fucked over?" he asks his fellow police officers. Despite his best intentions, Hal doesn't really get it in the sense that he is still trying to work within institutions that are founded on patriarchal, gender-biased assumptions. Moreover, he believes in his ability to act as an individual and to bring about justice within existing social institutions. The two women must be apprehended and held accountable for their actions because those are the rules under which Hal operates. He does not represent a challenge to hegemony in the way that Thelma and Louise do, for they are not willing to compromise. Hal, on the other hand, is the symbol of compromise, the very exemplar of hegemony at work. As a kinder, gentler patriarch, Hal seeks a middle ground where he can accommodate competing interests and beliefs – from conservative law-and-order issues and patriarchal fears of unruly women, to women's experiences of the social world and feminist concerns around issues of male violence against women.

Mann (1995: 235-6) maintains that Hal "shows the future possibility for male desire to alter itself..." In other words, Hal represents an emergent masculinity, and this works in at least two contradictory ways in the film. First, and negatively speaking, Hal offers a way out for those male audience members made uneasy by the questions around

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<sup>41</sup>My thanks to Jackie Levitin for pointing out Hal as a familiar figure in recent film.

gender and power that the film asks. Hal offers a vision of a patriarchy that is tempered by 'feminine' (not feminist) concerns but that is still in the right. To use a relevant cliché, he is a reformist not a revolutionary. Moreover, as the only positive male stereotype in the film, the implication is that what may be needed are more gentlemanly patriarchs like Hal. In that case, father still knows best (even if no one seems to be listening at the moment). Second, and positively speaking, his struggles to negotiate various ideological interests and beliefs signifies a patriarchal hegemony that is in transition, or perhaps even in its dying days, for the film clearly demonstrates that consensus on a definition of femininity that shores up patriarchal interests is not only contested but already irretrievably lost. In cases like this one, the last resort is force, a final attempt to secure patriarchal-hegemonic interests through state-sanctioned violence, as represented in the film by the police.

Unlike Hal, the cops represent old-style, status-quo masculinity. Their response to Hal's request to not shoot, is that the women are armed. Over a speaker, a male voice intones, "Failure to obey is an act of aggression against us," which aptly summarizes the film's primary, motivating conflict: the failure of women to obey men will be interpreted by men as an act of aggression against them. And to the end, Thelma and Louise refuse to obey. "Let's not get caught. Let's keep going," says Thelma, and Louise agrees, as the two women clasp hands and kiss in a shot/reverse shot, which, says Putnam (1993: 301), "elevates the friendship between women to the status of heterosexual romance, the end toward which every thing is always working in a traditional Hollywood film," and which, I would add, further indicates the threat their relationship poses to a status quo built upon male dominance and the primacy of heterosexual relations. As they go racing towards the canyon in the blue convertible, Hal runs after them futilely, for the car goes sailing over the cliff. A freeze frame shows the car suspended in mid-air, the shot fades to white, and then, a montage of past scenes showing the women alive and happy rolls during the end credits.



Many critics have argued that one's reading of the ending, of the two women's deaths, is genre-dependent.<sup>42</sup> For instance, Man (1993) and Morrison (1992) maintain that reading *THELMA AND LOUISE* as an example of the woman's film means that the ending works as a critique of patriarchy, and as such carries subversive connotations. The woman's film is centred around a female protagonist, who in her search for personal fulfillment, finds she must contend with societal constraints on her desires. According to Morrison (1992: 49),

What the majority of these female protagonists quickly discover... is that in the patriarchal society of their diegetic world, there is no place for an active, independent woman.... [I]t is, time and again, only through renunciation and sacrifice that they achieve their ultimate goal; indeed, have any hope of achieving it. Those women who refuse to forego their active desires in effect refuse the possibility of recuperation. Consequently, they almost always are punished by a kind of filmic moral trajectory that brings a double closure, to the woman's life and to the film's narrative. This is not to imply that the cinema is not fascinated with 'bad' women; only that it makes sure that they are not rewarded for their 'crimes' against society.

Both Man and Morrison argue that *Thelma and Louise* in refusing to compromise their personal desires, reject recuperation by patriarchy. Their suicide is their final act of self-determination in a social world that denies women agency. The women's deaths come to represent the magnitude of patriarchal oppression, an oppression from which death is the only release, providing transcendence of the social world. While Morrison sees the two women's deaths "as a victory rather than defeat" (53), Man is more cautious, saying that "Thelma and Louise triumph and they do not" (48).

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<sup>42</sup>In the later stages of writing this thesis, I was presented with another possible reading of the cliff scene, which sent my jaw dropping because it had never occurred to me nor (to the best of my knowledge) to most of the critics writing on the film: that *Thelma and Louise* do not die. This generally overlooked possibility begs questions as to why critics, even those who were committed to progressive allegorical readings, interpreted the scene according to the terms of realist cinema when the film, because of its *mise-en-scène* and its allegorical narrative, demands to be read as a fantasy (cf. Willis 1993: 125). When questioned on why she killed off her two characters, Khouri says, "I never thought of it that literally. I never considered they died" (quoted in Pagnozzi 1995: 128). Bumper stickers around Vancouver proclaiming "Thelma and Louise live" indicate that certain female car-owners share Khouri's interpretation.

Man's comment aptly encapsulates the contradictory quality of Thelma's and Louise's Pyrrhic victory over patriarchy. It is important to question the degree to which the ending can be read as progressive, as critical of the status quo. Both Man and Morrison do not take into account that the women's refusal to be recuperated produces its own recuperation on behalf of hegemony. Annihilation means, paradoxically, both transcendence and containment. While Thelma's and Louise's suicides represent their refusal to capitulate with male dominance, their deaths also represent the containment of their threat to patriarchy. Moreover, their deaths suggest that there are no alternatives to the existing order. The message is 'it's not changing, so like it or leave it.' Indeed, the only resolution to the conflict envisioned is one that poses the least threat to hegemony. To put it another way, the film can only offer a solution that complies with existing definitions of reality, the law, and gender.

This is where *THELMA AND LOUISE* most demonstrates that it is a hegemonic female fantasy for it cannot offer a vision of a social world transformed (cf. Man 1993: 45-6). By working within hegemonic limitations, the film can only reinforce the status quo. For example, the film offers Thelma and Louise only two choices: obey patriarchal authority and live according to its rules, or disobey and die. This begs the question, to what extent is Thelma's and Louise's decision to die actually of their own making or to what extent is it socially pre-determined? In other words, even in suicide, Thelma and Louise might not be masters of their own destiny. Instead, they, like this female fantasy, accept hegemonic limitations on women and turn tail, so to speak, rather than fighting the backlash against them, with the hope of transforming their world.

In the 'battle of the sexes,' hegemony prevails, and patriarchy's worst fears about disobedient women are excised. *THELMA AND LOUISE* can be seen as yet another illustration of patriarchal paranoia over psycho women killers, as exemplified in recent films such as *FATAL ATTRACTION* (1987), *BASIC INSTINCT* (1992) and *THE TEMP* (1993). The history of the femme fatale in cinema deserves a remark here since Thelma

and Louise, like their contemporaries in the films I mention above, are cousins to the castrating temptress of '40s and '50s film noir, who meets with her demise in punishment for her crimes against men and, as a phallic woman, against nature, too. The post-war period was characterized by a backlash against women and the autonomy they enjoyed during wartime, when the able-bodied male population was overseas. In the late '40s and throughout the '50s in the United States, a process of patriarchal retrenchment included various state-sponsored campaigns to return women to the home, women who had worked in factories and businesses in men's absence and as part of the war effort. Popular culture participated in this effort via the image of the femme fatale in cinema, as well as TV shows extolling the bliss awaiting women who returned to domesticity (cf. Faludi 1991: 51-4, Kaplan 1980, Krutnick 1991).

In her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, which documents the antifeminist backlash of the '80s, Susan Faludi (1991: xvii-xix) describes the cultural phenomenon of "backlash" as a flaring up of hostility towards feminism, occurring in periods in which women are seen as making – either real or imagined – headway towards autonomy. According to Faludi,

... hostility to female independence has always been with us. But if fear and loathing of feminism is a sort of perpetual viral condition in our culture, it is not always in an acute stage; its symptoms subside and resurface periodically. And it is these episodes of resurgence, such as the one we face now, that can accurately be termed "backlashes" to women's advancement. If we trace these occurrences in American history..., we find such flare-ups are hardly random; they have always been triggered by the perception – accurate or not – that women are making great strides. These outbreaks are backlashes because they have always arisen in reaction to women's "progress," caused not simply by a bedrock of misogyny but by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status, efforts that have been interpreted time and again by men – especially men grappling with real threats to their economic and social well-

being on other fronts – as spelling their own masculine doom.

To put it in a cultural studies framework, backlash suggests to us just how much patriarchal definitions of femininity have become contested in the last two decades. Carter (1993: 134) points out that the backlash against *THELMA AND LOUISE* during its reception was indicative of male critics' anxiety about feminism and their inability to accept that "things have changed," that "women, whether Khouri's mythological heroines or those among *THELMA AND LOUISE*'s passionate audience, are no longer silent, passive creatures." The backlash against feminism and against a film like *THELMA AND LOUISE* demonstrates the degree to which women's movements have been successful in challenging traditional assumptions about women. Woman is indeed a contested sign. More crucially, backlash demonstrates hegemonic efforts to reassert a notion of femininity that supports status-quo patriarchy. "[Moreover t]he anti-feminist backlash has been set off not by women's achievement of full equality," explains Faludi, "but by the increased possibility that they might win it. It is a preemptive strike that stops women long before they have reached the finish line" (xx).

Placed in a historical context, I want to consider *THELMA AND LOUISE* as a backlash representation but not in the usual sense, that is, as an instance of backlash. Rather, I see *THELMA AND LOUISE* as a fantasy enactment of backlash as experienced by women (though the film may work as an endorsement of backlash, too, producing contradictory readings). Faludi characterizes the '80s in terms of "a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women" (xviii). Faludi describes women's increasing disillusionment during this period:

By the end of the decade, women were starting to tell pollsters that they feared their sex's social status was once again beginning to slip. They believed they were facing an "erosion of respect," as the 1990 Virginia Slims poll summed up the sentiment. After years in which an

increasing percentage of women had said their status had improved from a decade earlier, the proportion suddenly shrunk by 5 percent in the last half of the '80s, the Roper Organization reported (xvii-xviii).

Faludi's *Backlash* appeared in 1991, the same year as THELMA AND LOUISE. Both emerge from a period of backlash against feminism. In different ways, each addresses the needs and anxieties of the contemporary situation from which they emerge, and each traces women's anger and frustration, as well as women's increasing sense of despair during this period.<sup>43</sup>

In fantasy form, THELMA AND LOUISE maps women's experience of backlash from the moment in which the two women begin to assert themselves and their desires to the moment in which hegemonic force is used to contain them. THELMA AND LOUISE is a metaphorical representation of backlash. In symbolic fashion, the film plays out the process by which women's challenges to hegemony have resulted in a breakdown of consensus over Woman in recent years. Seeing its interests under siege, patriarchal hegemony has retaliated in response to its perception that women are going too far. The result has been backlash, as represented in the film by the law and its use of force against Thelma and Louise. The film gives symbolic expression to women's worst fears about backlash, before that expression is rechanneled and contained.

Like BASIC INSTINCT, FATAL ATTRACTION or THE TEMP, THELMA AND LOUISE may be reassuring to those who are committed to patriarchal authority and who are, consequently, disturbed by Thelma's and Louise's transgression. Like these other films, THELMA AND LOUISE may very well be read as an endorsement of backlash, as a warning to women who seek autonomy. Through the two women's deaths, THELMA AND LOUISE does indeed reinforce the status quo. But this kind of conservative reading

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<sup>43</sup>An interesting aside to the relationship between the book *Backlash* and the film THELMA AND LOUISE is that author Faludi and screenwriter Khouri became fast friends that same year and continue to have a friendship. According to *Vogue's* Amy Pagnozzi (1995: 122), the two women's works tended to be cited together by media pundits, raising Khouri's curiosity about a contemporary who was also being attacked as a fascist. Khouri bought a copy of the book and loved it so much, she decided she had to get in touch with Faludi. Khouri says, "...I called her and said, 'Okay, we're friends.'"

is rendered problematic because the film draws upon women's experiences of backlash as raw material for the female fantasy it presents. This is contrary to the backlash films I mention above, which to me, seem to speak solely from, to and about patriarchal anxieties over 'liberated' women.

THELMA AND LOUISE's difference from other backlash representations comes from its interest in women's social experiences, and its desire to express women's concerns in a fantasy of resistance, an outlet for the expression of women's fears and frustrations. Even if the film eventually eliminates any alternatives to the status quo, it still has an interest in envisioning a different state for women. For instance, its critical stance towards the law and its treatment of women in cases of male violence against women argues that changes to the status quo are needed. Moreover, THELMA AND LOUISE presents us, however fleetingly, with a utopian vision of a life other than the one Thelma and Louise have left behind, a life where the two women put their friendship, their responsibility to each other above their relationships with men, in solidarity against a common foe, patriarchal authority. As Manohla Dargis (1991: 18) says, "Thelma and Louise create a paradigm of female friendship, produced out of their wilful refusal of the male world and its laws. No matter where their trip finally ends, Thelma and Louise have reinvented sisterhood for the American screen." This is the excess that THELMA AND LOUISE produces, an excess that slips past the bounds of its pro-social closure, and that, for me, accounts largely for the moralistic, conservative backlash against the film at the time of its release. The images of Thelma and Louise that we are shown during the end credits may resonate more powerfully than the vision of their suicidal leap. (As the bumper stick says, "Thelma and Louise live.")

Nonetheless, Thelma's and Louise's refusal of the male world and its laws is pessimistic rather than socially transformative. In the end, I am still left uncomfortable by the need for two women's deaths in order to make a point about patriarchal injustice. At the same time, I believe that seeing Thelma and Louise sipping margueritas in Mexico

would not be the point either. In the end, *THELMA AND LOUISE* presents us with the difficulty of envisioning a feminist future in a time when we in Canada and the United States are desperately fighting to keep the gains women's movements have made in the last twenty years – never mind imagining new possibilities. *THELMA AND LOUISE*'s pessimism speaks to this disillusionment, to the feeling that female resistance cannot transform a male-dominated world. *THELMA AND LOUISE* is a symptom of backlash and of the resulting malaise that women have been experiencing since the '80s. All the same, Thelma's and Louise's consciousness has been raised, and they like us need to see where we go from here – and it is not to the bottom of a canyon. Still, in a time of backlash, the possibility of social transformation may very well require women to join hands and take a leap of faith.

## CONCLUSION

Faced with a polysemic world where meanings are multiple and interpretations seem relative, my thesis has explored methods of textual analysis that assume the continuing relevance of the text as a social object for study. As illustration, I have tried to account for the diverse interpretations *THELMA AND LOUISE* has produced at the level of the text, which I maintain is ambiguous and contradictory. Investigating the text's determinants on meaning, I highlight several textual moments that open up the film to both reactionary and progressive readings. I have also discussed *THELMA AND LOUISE*'s critical reception insofar as the many contradictory responses this film has produced have enabled me to engage with questions around polysemy and address. I have analyzed the film's polysemy and address with a view to understanding its wide appeal primarily for feminist and non-feminist women, and for many men. (In addition, I have tried to account for this film's unpopularity amongst some male film reviewers and even amongst some feminists.) The kind of feminist film criticism I arrive at attempts to perform a dual operation involving an analysis of the textual strategies by which a popular film expands its address, and a discussion of the ideological implications of those strategies for feminism.

A closer analysis of this film's reception would consider the impact of film reviewing on viewers' interpretations and the political stances and corresponding audiences of those publications that printed reviews of *THELMA AND LOUISE*, and examine individual critics' ideological track records. Such an analysis would point to some of the contextual determinants on meaning production and to the range of interpretive frameworks made available to viewers. While I have maintained that this film is ambiguous enough to be open to a number of interpretations, an audience study at the time of *THELMA AND LOUISE*'s release might have indicated the degree to which the



text itself drew viewers in the direction of a particular reading or the degree to which the context of reception pulled the text within certain interpretative frameworks. Furthermore, most critical discussions of *THELMA AND LOUISE* published within a year or two of the film's release focused on interpreting the film's progressive aspects. Writing nearly four years since its premiere, I consider the film as accommodating of certain feminist concerns but too contradictory to be unreservedly labelled progressive or claimed on behalf of feminism. Yet when I first saw the film I, too, was willing to do so. Since then, what has changed? How does the particular historical circumstance in which *THELMA AND LOUISE* is received impact on readings, so that in one historical context we may view this film as more progressive or, conversely, as more reactionary than in another? Although a few well-noted works on film reception do exist (e.g., Bobo 1988, Ellsworth 1986, Staiger 1992, Straayer 1985), further research within film studies must explore the reception context and its impact on interpretations, necessitating additional forays into cultural studies and television studies, which have paid more attention to audiences and reception than film studies has. Concerns around address, ambiguity and polysemy have been central to television studies, where work has been done on the ideological implications of polysemy, and on the relationship between television texts, audiences and meaning.

My analysis of *THELMA AND LOUISE* investigates the ways in which this film expands its address to include women of different ages, sexual orientations and classes, as well as men. In particular, the notion that *THELMA AND LOUISE* is somehow 'universal' in its appeal because it thematizes the desire for freedom from social and economic constraints and, accordingly, allows for cross-class, cross-gender identifications deserves additional exploration in relation to popular films generally. Questions for further consideration would include: What are the strategies popular films employ in widening their address and what are their implications? Do these strategies obscure social relations by suggesting there is a universality and timelessness to human experience or do

they tap into a commonality of social experiences derived from our lives under capitalism and patriarchy in the late twentieth century? Do we interpret these strategies as the work of hegemonic accommodation, as the counter-hegemonic potential embedded in a given popular film's address or as both? What might be the implications for feminist filmmaking or for oppositional cultural practices in general?

Such questions return me to Jameson's argument that popular texts contain Utopian impulses – that is, the fantasy of collective solidarity, social harmony and classlessness, which Jameson maintains is both an imagined alternative to and a gentle criticism of the existing social order. According to Jameson, a text's Utopian impulses represent a society's hopes, desires and fears, and at the same time, work as a "fantasy bribe" offering substantial compensation in return for our consent to the status quo. The result of this exchange, says Jameson, is a kind of collective solidarity – perhaps not in the usual sense we have come to understand this term, but nonetheless a coming together of people with diverse interests and experiences. The popular film's Utopian impulses are therefore worth paying attention to in more detail for they have much to tell us about ourselves and our visions for the world in which we live.

The notion of a 'both-and' of criticism has been at the heart of my investigation. In general, this thesis has been concerned with discussing and investigating popular film from the dual position of female spectator and feminist critic, with the purpose of arriving at a contradictory place for interpreting – a place of both identification and distance in the ideological analysis of popular film. This kind of criticism has practical implications for me, as some of my work outside university has involved, and will continue to involve, the writing of cultural analysis for general audiences. Often, I have had the concern that readers might perceive my writing as a critical review of them and their viewing habits rather than of the film or television show I happened to be analyzing. My commitment to writing cultural analysis that does not alienate non-academic audiences makes Jameson's call for a criticism that goes "beyond good and evil" particularly relevant to my concerns.

Jameson argues for a dual hermeneutic that sees the popular text's negative, recuperative aspects and its positive, Utopian potentials.

However, vigilance is required. For instance, my discussion of *THELMA AND LOUISE* may veer more towards the optimistic than the vigilant at times, and I have concerns about this. The film is indeed one of the brighter moments in contemporary Hollywood representations of women. Yet it is a rare example, which perhaps suggests the desperation of those of us who were eager to embrace any Hollywood film that did not feature the woman as the male psycho-killer's object of desire, or as a male-bashing psycho-killer herself, or as the girlfriend of the male lead (who may/may not be a psycho-killer, depending on the genre). Because it is an exception to the usual Hollywood fare, *THELMA AND LOUISE* may be regarded as an instance of hegemonic accommodation, a momentary acknowledgment of women's anger and frustration at the status quo. To put it another way, *THELMA AND LOUISE* aside, what has Hollywood cinema done for women or for feminism lately?

In order to develop a feminist film criticism that goes "beyond good and evil," I have considered examples of the Hollywood woman's film as hegemonic female fantasies and as complex negotiations of ideological tensions existing in the social formation. Understanding the nature and content of the woman's film's address to female audiences gives an indication of the social, ideological and psychic forces at work in women's lives historically. Moreover, analysis of the hegemonic limits on female fantasy and female desire, as dramatized in examples of the woman's film, suggests the problems and difficulties we – as female spectators and as feminist critics – have faced in the past and continue to face today in envisioning a world in which our lives and our choices are unencumbered.

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