


Thelma & Louise: Rape culture, mudflaps and vaginal horizons¹

Dayna McLeod
McGill University (Canada) ✉ 

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ENG Abstract. This video essay isolates the rage of the protagonists of Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*, against personal and systemic patriarchal violence. Using animation, multiscreen, and supercut editing, this video essay supposes what happens when supporting male characters are removed, erased, or diminished to focus our attention on Thelma and Louise's response(s) to their violent acts. It also imagines mudflap girls –now women– talking and fighting back against their oppressor. Finally, this video essay transforms Thelma and Louise's suicidal leap into a deep dive of the vagina, often essentialized, in heteropatriarchal discourses, as synonymous with the female body.

Keywords: erasing male characters; fighting back; patriarchal violence; rage.

ES Thelma y Louise: Cultura de la violación, pegatinas machistas y horizontes vaginales

Resumen. Este videoensayo aísla la rabia de las protagonistas de la película *Thelma y Louise* (dirigida por Ridley Scott, 1991) contra la violencia patriarcal personal y sistémica. Mediante técnicas de animación, multipantalla y montaje *supercut*, este videoensayo elimina, suprime, o invisibiliza personajes masculinos secundarios para centrar la atención en la reacción de Thelma y Louise a sus actos violentos. También imagina a las chicas de los *stickers* [pegatinas machistas] –ahora mujeres– hablando y luchando contra su opresor. Por último, este videoensayo transforma el salto suicida de Thelma y Louise en una inmersión profunda dentro de una vagina, que a menudo, en los discursos heteropatriarcales, queda naturalizada como sinónimo del cuerpo femenino.

Palabras clave: supresión de personajes masculinos; pelear; rabia; violencia patriarcal.

Summary. 1. Written statement. 2. References.

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1. Written statement

In my video essay, 'Thelma and Louise: Rape culture, mudflaps, and vaginal horizons', I erase, remove, and diminish supporting male characters who perpetuate violence against the title characters of *Thelma and Louise* (directed by Ridley Scott, 1991) to focus our attention on their responses to these men and the acts they commit. Using various editing techniques that rearrange shots within several key scenes and sequences, I present a narrative of female rage as performed by Geena Davis (as Thelma) and Susan Sarandon (as Louise) and responses to their rage that

reflect systemic methods of cis-heteropatriarchal power and control.

I have divided the video essay into four parts. It starts with an introduction that shows the famous self-portrait polaroid taking scene and establishes how the gun got into Louise's hands. 'Act one: In response to the violent act of rape' presents the post-attempted rape scene and instigating event of the film when Louise has stopped the rape of Thelma in the parking lot of the club, they were at by brandishing the gun at the rapist. Not wanting to reproduce or induce the trauma of this rape scene

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by re-showing it in its original form in this video essay, I cut out the rapist's assault on Thelma and focus instead on Louise and her response to the rapist and his actions. I also masked out the rapist with digital noise, making him faceless in order to cast this now static-filled figure as a stand-in for all rapists and their depictions in film. I do this to focus our attention on Louise and her response to him, and on the violent act of rape that this character represents, not the specific actor playing the part of a rapist.

'Act two: In response to sexual harassment and verbal assault' uses multiscreen, repetition, mudflap girl graphics, and sound to recontextualize Thelma and Louise's encounter with a truck driver who has been continually sexually harassing them throughout their journey. I start this section with the point of view of the truck driver in mind to make clear his gaze and how he sees these women from his perch as he looks down at them from his rig. I've essentially put mudflap girl glasses on him, and this is what we see him see. I layered a jittering neon pink mudflap girl outline animation on top of some of the Thelmas and Louises across the multiscreen scenes to activate the screen and mobilize this traditionally sexualized symbol of objectification, which has been repurposed, reclaimed, queered, and celebrated by feminists (Feministing, 2004; Hardy, 2006), knitters (Stoller, 2004), and artists (Nakagawa, 1999; Barry, 2007; Lugo, 2014; Lewis, 2018; Fontannaz, 2020; Anagnostopoulos, 2023), alike. In this recut scene, Thelma and Louise strike a similar pose to the iconic silhouette. I use the mudflap girl to emphasize this similarity and to make Thelma and Louise take their revenge against misogyny, the 'male gaze', and being called beavers while overlaid in mudflap 'grrrls' power.

I started my edit of this section by separating shots in which Thelma and Louise are in frame either individually or together from the shots that featured the truck driver. During this process I noticed that when Louise shoots out the truck tires, the audible firing of the gun is not paired with the shot of her, but with the shot of the tire itself being penetrated by the bullet. This happens several times in the original scene. When I cut both sound and image and isolated these shots, Louise's gun sounds ineffectual, emitting an almost cute 'pew pew'. I edited the shots of Louise shooting her gun so that these seemingly ineffectual gunshots now explode the trucker's tankard. I end this section with a kaleidoscope-like reflection of Thelma and Louise driving away from the scene, making the image mirror into itself with the black plumes of smoke from the explosion twisted into a vulvic Rorschach test.

In her extraordinary multiscreen video essay *Improbable dialogisms or the art of flying*, Barbara Zecchi (2022) intercuts two unrelated films, Vittorio De Sica's *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) and Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) with *Thelma and Louise*. The excerpts she uses from these films each feature their underdog protagonists working against police aggression and are ultimately lifted into fantastical flight (one on broomstick, the other on bicycle) as a means of escape. It is Zecchi's careful juxtaposition and intercutting between all three films that similarly hoist Thelma and Louise in their car as they escape the insurmountable force of militarized police facing them. Emphasizing this new and recontextualized

ending, Zecchi literally tilts the frame to save their lives. 'Act three: In response to a militarized police attack' similarly interferes with the ending of *Thelma and Louise*. In my version, I show the extreme response of the police to Thelma and Louise against the backdrop of a vulva-ized Grand Canyon. I was struck by Harvey Greenberg et al. (1991, p. 30) description of the Grand Canyon as a «great vaginal wonder of the world». I am making literal Kinder's words here to make transparent the ridiculousness of this kind of critique as well as the assignment of this film as (cis)feminist by other critics: of «promoting violence, of being 'man-hating propaganda'», of Thelma and Louise as «being bad role models for women» (Bogutskaya, 2023, p. 162). Using an endoscopic camera, I filmed original footage to re-imagine this last scene of *Thelma and Louise* sailing over Grand Canyon cliffs as draped in and made of (gender-inclusive) labia lips. I have edited their car to leap into an expanse of never-ending fleshy pink depths to the tune of the popular staple song 'Carolina in the Morning' (1922) with lyrics queered to «nothing could be finer than to be in that vagina» as their car gently comes to rest on a pelvic floor. I use this song for its joyfulness and celebration—an enthusiastic pairing with pleasure as Thelma and Louise plunge into vaginal space, an interiority that is fashioned as infinite where they do not die. I use this song too, to clarify, emphasize, and otherwise make clear that the fleshy cavern I have put Thelma and Louise in as vaginal for viewers who might not have read my not-so-subtle reimagining of Grand Canyon cliffs as vulvic terrain.

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