Discussion Questions for Women in Film-Cleveland Gathering, Wednesday, October 29, 2014:

Focal Film: *Thelma & Louise* (1991; U.S.; Screenplay by Callie Khouri (Academy Award winner for her first screenplay); Cinematography by Adrian Biddle, B.S.C.; Music by Hans Zimmer; Directed by Ridley Scott)

In *Thelma & Louise*, the characters are:
* Thelma Dickinson, a housewife (played by Geena Davis)
* Louise Sawyer, a waitress in a coffee shop (played by Susan Sarandon)
* Hal Slocumb, a detective for the Arkansas State Police on the trail of Thelma and Louise (played by Harvey Keitel)
* Jimmy, Louise’s noncommittal boyfriend (played by Michael Madsen)
* Darryl Dickinson, Thelma’s boorish but comically pathetic husband (played by Christopher McDonald)
* Max Stratton, FBI detective working with Hal—who always seems to be eating (played by Stephen Tobolowsky)
* J.D., a charming, hitchhiking con artist (played by Brad Pitt)
* State Trooper, who gets locked in a car trunk (played by Jason Beghe)
* Truck Driver, whose rig explodes (played by Marco St. John)
* Harlan Puckett, a lecherous rapist...the only man killed in the film (played by Timothy Carhart)

Our discussion group has avoided this film for the past couple of years. It is a “no-brainer” as a film featuring important women’s roles, but it is notoriously prone to evoke conflicting reactions. It’s a sort of “Rorschach test” film. Some members of our group love it, and some hate it. This diversity of response is understandable. As scholar Marita Sturken wrote in her mini-book from the British Film Institute series, *Thelma & Louise*, “In the summer of 1991, *Thelma & Louise* was talked about. It was talked about in the media, in film reviews, on television talk shows, in letters to the editor, over the dinner table, in the local bar, at the water cooler and in the bedroom. It was detested and beloved.”

The firestorm of public debate about *Thelma & Louise* initially culminated in a June 24, 1991, *Time* Magazine cover story, “Why *Thelma & Louise* Strikes a Nerve.” From academia, the film prompted unprecedented immediate critical symposia in the journal *Film Quarterly* and the arts magazine *Cineaste*. Over the years, the debate and critique have continued, with two full scholarly books analyzing the film’s historical importance to Hollywood and to American society in general appearing in 2007.

More than any other film we have discussed, then, *Thelma & Louise* has been adopted in the popular and scholarly literature as a touchstone for discussion, on topics ranging from feminism and pornography to law and ethics to travel and tourism. As Harvey Greenberg writes in his introduction to the 1992 *Film Quarterly* collection of essays on the film, *Thelma & Louise* is an “exuberant...highly polysemic text.” And the titles of some of the books that have included a focus on this film tell this story—they are listed in the Addendum to this list of questions.
In sum, *Thelma & Louise* has been viewed and analyzed as:
--A Road Movie (a particularly *American* film type, by the way)
--A Buddy Film
--A “Lovers on the Run” Film
--A Female Revenge Film
--A Melodrama (what used to be called a “Women’s Film”)
--A Fairy Tale
--A Screwball Comedy
--A [Dark] Comedy (as referenced by director Ridley Scott)
--A Western
--(Specifically) An Outlaw Western
--A Text for Legal or Ethical Analysis
--A Text for Analyses of Representations (of Women, of Hillbillies, of Travel, etc.)
--An Excellent Example of Screenplay Writing

1. Hilary Neroni’s book on “The Violent Woman” provides both context and a question: “While it is true that the violence Thelma and Louise committed in the film was both aggressive and extreme—from killing a man, to robbing a convenience store, to blowing up a tanker truck, and so forth—compared with other standard action films in which the body count often ranges between fifty and two hundred, *Thelma & Louise* is practically nonviolent, with its body count of only one.” Why, then, was there such an “hysterical” response to the film’s violence? Why this double-standard? Neroni offers one explanation—the “averageness” of the two main characters. Do you agree?

2. Scholar Cathy Griggers (in a film theory book chapter; Collins et al., 1993) places *Thelma & Louise* in a “textual lineage” of films featuring “nightmare female leads and narratives about female revenge fantasies”—e.g., *Body Heat* (1981, with Kathleen Turner); *Black Widow* (1987, with Debra Winger and Teresa Russell); *Fatal Attraction* (1987, with Glenn Close); *The Grifters* (1990, with Angelica Huston). How do you think *Thelma & Louise* fits (or doesn’t fit) this grouping? Do you think that the earlier release of such films had anything to do with the public reception to *Thelma & Louise*?

3. Some scholars have called *Thelma & Louise* a “gender bending” film (e.g., Marita Sturken), and others a “genre bending” film (e.g., Michael Dunne). Which do you think is more salient?

4. Scholar Marita Sturken asks us to consider these issues—that *Thelma & Louise* was “a film about which one was supposed to have an opinion. Was it unfair to men? Was it cathartic? Was it encouraging women to emulate bad male behavior?” Was the debate about the film driven by an anti-feminist backlash? Marita Sturken says it’s more complex than this, noting that many feminists were opposed to the film. Rather, she says, the debate was “rather over whose feminism the film represented.” Your thoughts?

5. Some type of character transformation is typical for a “road movie” (Dunne). It is the character Thelma who urges Louise to “keep going” at the end, indicating a significant evolution from her weak and subordinate persona at the beginning of the film. Can you trace this evolution? And has Louise changed as well?
6. Road movies also typically involve some meaningful chance events (Dunne). Some critics have called Thelma and Louise “accidental outlaws.” How do these notions fit the film?

7. How much of the power of the film do you attribute to the screenplay? To the directing? To the performances of actresses Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon?

8. Screenwriter Callie Khouri has called the film an “outlaw” movie “for women”...”they are not in control, but rather out of the control of others.” What is your take on this interpretation of what constitutes an “outlaw” story?

9. Screenwriter Callie Khouri has also said that she does not consider Thelma & Louise a feminist story. On the other hand, she has said that she wrote the screenplay at a time when she had become fed up producing music videos with predominantly sexist narratives. “In order to get my karma straight about women, I had to write this script. When you become known in the business for producing videos that more often than not have naked women writhing in front of the camera for no reason and to not such interesting music, you eventually have to look at what you’re doing.” How does this inform you about Khouri’s goals for Thelma & Louise?

10. In an interview with screenwriter Callie Khouri, she is prompted: “Still others have labeled you a toxic feminist.” (NOTE: This label was applied by critic John Leo, writing his review of the film in 1991 in U.S. News & World Report.) Khouri responds: “Kiss my ass. Kiss my ass. I was raised in this society. Let them get their deal worked out about the way women are treated in films before they start hassling me about the way men are treated. There’s a whole genre of films known as ‘exploitation’ based on the degradation of women and a whole bunch of redneck critics extolling its virtues, and until there’s a subgenre of women doing the same thing to men in numbers too numerous to count, as is the case with exploitation films, then just shut the fuck up.” Your response?

11. When producers Ridley Scott and Mimi Polk were considering directors for the film, one candidate who turned it down said, “I have a problem with the women.” Scott said, “That’s the whole point of the story, that you have a problem with the women,” and subsequently directed the film himself. What was the “problem with the women”?

12. One particularly interesting analysis of the film invokes scholar Laura Mulvey’s famous essay on women in film as the “object of the male gaze.” Throughout the film, we see Thelma and Louise as the objects of various men’s gaze...but we also experience Thelma and Louise’s gaze—of J.D. (Brad Pitt), of other men, of themselves, and of each other. Is this possibly non-traditional use of the gaze one reason the film evoked such strong responses from both men and women?

13. An actual study of 73 college students’ responses to Thelma & Louise found a clear gender difference. “Women spectators overwhelmingly interpreted the events in the film as evidence of women’s marginalized status in a patriarchal society, and interpretation that resulted in their overall endorsement of and identification with the film’s protagonists. Men generally failed to make this connection, resulting in their interpretations of the film primarily as an unfair exercise in male-bashing” (Cooper, 1999). Your thoughts?
14. Did *Thelma & Louise* become a “turning point” for women’s roles in film, as predicted by critic Peter Keough when the film first came out?

15. How does the film portray the law? Think about the culpability of Louise when she shoots Harlan; the justification for the exploding of the tanker truck; the role portrayals of investigators Hal and Max, and the State Trooper.

16. For a moment, consider the men’s roles in the film, which have been criticized as “perpetuating a series of stereotypical men who are caricatures of the worst aspects of masculinity” (Sturken). Even the saintly Harvey Keitel character has been called an “Uncle Tom.” What do you think?

17. In an example of feature-length “creative geography,” British director Ridley Scott filmed exteriors for *Thelma & Louise* almost entirely around Bakersfield, California, and Moab, Utah; these locations stood in for the fictional route the two women take from Arkansas to the Grand Canyon. Famously, the “grand” canyon into which Thelma and Louise drive the 1966 T-bird is actually Dead Horse Point State Park in Utah. Think about how you may have constructed the legendary journey and its landscape in your own mind, using the bits of “incorrect” geography provided by Scott. (Also note that Scott included shots of Monument Valley in Arizona/Utah, classic Hollywood director John Ford’s favorite Western location...think of the connotations.)

18. *Thelma & Louise* was a deviation from director Ridley Scott’s earlier films in its grounding in a present-day real environment. His notable previous films included *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Legend* (1985), all stylish fantasy or futuristic science fiction films shot largely on sound stages. On the other hand, *Thelma & Louise* reprised Scott’s focus on the female protagonist who undergoes a personal transformation, arguably through de-feminization (Dove-Viebahn, 2013), as in *Alien* (and Scott’s future *G.I. Jane*, 1997). Do you think *Thelma & Louise* is heavily a product of Scott’s unique vision?

19. Scholar Claudia Gorbman (in Cook book) points out that *Thelma & Louise*’s hybrid musical score, combining Hans Zimmer’s instrumental score with 18 pop songs, provides a “complex intertextual soundscape” that shapes the film’s possible meanings. How was your reception affected by the film’s music?

20. The iconic final shot of the film is a freeze-frame, reminiscent of final freeze-frames in both Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) and George Roy Hill’s *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). What does this mean, do you think? An alternative ending was shot and edited, which shows the car falling far into the canyon, and then returns to Hal and the officers looking out over the canyon. How would this alternate ending have changed the meaning of the film?

Discussion questions by Kim Neuendorf, Ph.D.: k.neuendorf@comcast.net
Archive of Women in Film-Cleveland discussion questions: http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/womeninfilm
v. 10/18/14
Addendum: Books featuring analyses of *Thelma & Louise*, by type:

**FILM STUDIES:**
- *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (Collins et al., Eds., 1993)
- *Intertextual Encounters in American Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture* (Michael Dunne, 2001)
- *Lost Highways: An Illustrated Guide to the Road Movie* (Jack Sargent & Stephanie Watson, 1999)

**FILM AND GENDER/FEMINIST STUDIES**
- *Female Action Heroes* (Gladys L. Knight, 2010)
- *Feminist Film Studies* (Karen Holinger, 2012)
- *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (Karen Hollinger, 1998)
- *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Murray Pomerance, Ed., 2001)
- *Thelma & Louise: Counter Cinema Against Patriarchal Ideology* (Choi, 1995)
- *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (Hilary Neroni, 2005)
- *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (Sarah Projansky, 2001)

**THE CRAFT OF SCREENWRITING:**
- *Four Screenplays: Studies in the American Screenplay* (Syd Field, 1994)

**LAW AND ETHICS:**
- *Criminology Goes to the Movies: Crime Theory and Popular Culture* (Nicole Rafter & Michelle Brown, 2011)
- *Seeing the Light: Exploring Ethics through Movies* (Wanda Teays, 2012)

**INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:**
- *GenderSpeak: Personal Effectiveness in Gender Communication* (Diana K. Ivy, 2012)

**GAY/QUEER STUDIES:**
- *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* (Shameem Kabir, 1998)
- *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Barbara Johnson, 1998)

**SOCIOLINGUAL ANALYSES:**
- *Hillbillyland* (J. W. Williamson, 1995)

**TRAVEL:**
- *Gender, Genre, & Identity in Women’s Travel Writing* (Kristi Siegel, Ed., 2004)

**THE FULL CULTURAL IMPORTANCE OF THE FILM:**
- *Thelma & Louise and Women in Hollywood* (Gina Fournier, 2007)
- *Thelma & Louise Live! The Cultural Afterlife of an American Film* (Bernie Cook, Ed., 2007)