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THELMA AND LOUISE: 'EASY RIDERS' IN A MALE GENRE.

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After a historical study of the representation of women in the road movie genre, this article focuses on the analysis of the role of women in a representative US American Road Movie of the 90s, Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991). A contrastive analysis between the 'foundational road movie': Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) and Ridley Scott's road feature is carried out in an attempt to understand the evolution from a traditionally male genre to the appearance of female Road Movies like *Thelma and Louise*, that is, of road narratives presenting women as the only protagonists. The study of this sample female Road Movie focuses, first of all, on its generic traits, secondly on the analysis of gender and sexual relationships as depicted by Ridley Scott, to go on to conclude that the road is no longer an exclusively male domain.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ROAD TO FEMALE ROAD MOVIES

The analysis of the role of women in Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), a representative US American Road Movie of the 90s, shows how this genre reproduces the gradual evolution of the position of the American woman under the oppression of the patriarchal system and demonstrates that the Road is no longer an exclusively male domain. In order to contrast these new 'female' Road Movies with previous archetypal male road films we shall examine the representation of women in this genre. Just as historically a gender division of roles led women to depend on men for survival, women in films have also depended on men's control of the narrative. This identification of gender with the active/passive dichotomy became a stock feature in classical films where men portrayed dynamic characters in constant evolution, while women remained static spectators of male action-makers. As Laura Mulvey explains: "Woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, tied to her place as bearer, not maker of meaning" (1989: 14-15) while "man functions as the active one advancing the story, making things happen" (20). Women seem therefore condemned to a lack of protagonism, both in real life and in their representation on the screen, where they are allotted a passive status in minor roles as plot-elements, a disrupting factor that triggers the action and calls for the male hero to restore order. This has traditionally been the recurrent role for women

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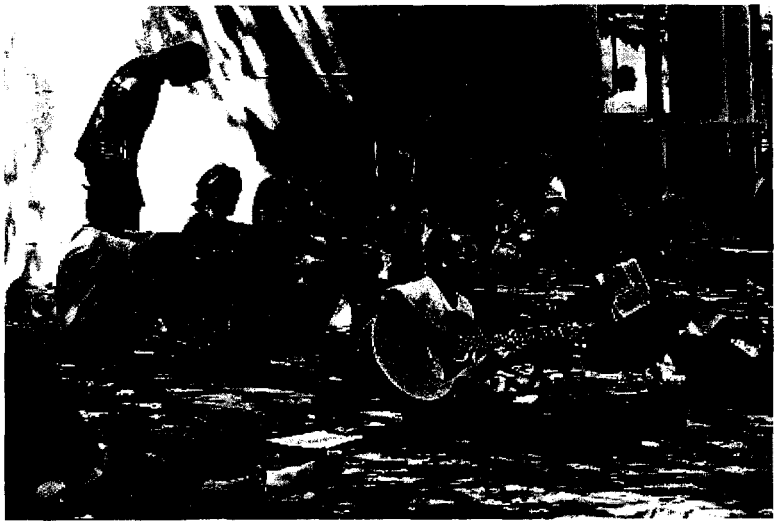

Conversation task

We are going to have a ten-minute conversation. Try to answer the questions you will be asked as completely as possible and feel free to interrupt your interlocutor, ask her questions or shift the original topic of discussion whenever you want.

included meaningfully in their initiation journeys, remaining together in the static realm of the home, in the best Western style.

Easy Rider's first achievement, which turned it into "a generational landmark" (Klinger 1997: 180), was its raw realism, its graphic representation of sex and violence together with its potential for questioning the nation's identity. But what is significant for this analysis is the fact that this realism is achieved through the film's prevailing male presence. Two women motorcyclists on a journey of drugs, sex and violence would most likely have exerted too extravagant and unbelievable an effect at a time in which women were not entitled to show sexual pleasure and were relegated to accidental minor roles as sexual 'tools-of-the-trade'. This would have deprived the film of its genuine, fundamental realism.

The vast majority of Road Movies throughout the 70s and into the 80s kept *Easy Rider*'s stereotype of the male 'buddy' pair, which explains the recurrent lack of true female protagonism all along this period. This male 'buddy' couple was already popular in such TV series as *Route 66* (starring George Maharis and Martin Milner) and the Road to comedies of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. But for some existentialist road features presenting a lonesome male protagonist (*Vanishing Point* by Richard C. Sarafian, 1971; *Radio On* by Chris Petit, 1979, etc.), 'buddy Road Movies' like *Two-Lane Blacktop* by Monte Hellman (1971), *Kings of the Road* by Wim Wenders (1975), *Backroads* by Phillip Noyce (1977), and others presented men with each other, without women. However, there would come a time for this buddy pair which pervaded the Road Movie genre during the 70s to disappear. As Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark clearly explain, at that moment when, thanks to the gay liberation movement, the appearance of two men on their own started to suggest homosexual connotations, the Buddy Road Movie's prosperous story started to decline:

> At the beginning of the decade 1969 to 1979 ... the mainstream audience hardly expected two men to sleep with each other.... By the end of the decade audiences could no longer as easily ignore the possibilities that the intimacy of a same-sex road couple suggests. (1997: 9)

Nevertheless, despite the exclusively male outlook of the genre up to the 80s, a few road films introducing for the first time female heroines were also made at the time: Francis Ford Coppola's *Rain People* (1969), Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970), or Martin Scorsese's *Boxcar Bertha* (1972) and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More* (1974) all present escaping housewives as full protagonists. Reassuring though it might seem at first sight to find women in such revolutionarily independent roles, this turns out to be nothing but a disappointing mirage since all of these women depend on men they encounter during their journeys. In a manner reminiscent of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*, these men will bring alienation, domination and aggressiveness to their lives.

Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More may serve as a good illustration of this pattern. A double deception disrupts the female spectator's ephemeral initial relief of witnessing an independent woman on the road, searching for her 'American Dream'

in the Western genre, later followed by the early Road Movies. In both of them female characters are relegated to inert inoperation, "figuring as helpless, parasitic embellishments to a masculine genre" (Roberts 1997: 62). Within these minor roles as plot-inducing, hero-dependent women, two recurrent representations need to be mentioned. Firstly, woman as temptress, (best exemplified in the *femme fatale* figure of the *film noir* tradition) offering a counterpoint to the virtuous values of man, acting as "a foil to the laconic, macho, male actor" (62). Secondly, we find the morally correct wife and suffering mother, the compliant daughter, the loving wife or lover, etc., woman as a weak 'plot-trigger' precipitating the hero's personal evolution. These two roles for women, are already present in Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), allegedly the first Road Movie. But woman's role as a basic ingredient of a romantic love story is rather frequent in the road narratives. As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn states "both the Western and the Road Movie romanticize movement, freedom, the open road, the quest for the new" (1998: 176). Thus, numerous Road Movies which border on the gangster genre such as Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941) or Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948) constitute a good illustration of this generic male prevalence together with a peripheral representation of women as emotionally attached to men.

As a contrast to the average male road feature some romantic Road Movies whose representation of women stands out as defying generic standards deserve to be analysed. The significance of Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1950), the love story of a couple of trickshooting circus performers who become sharpshooting criminals, stems from the unprecedented decisive role for a woman in the genre, making her a noteworthy predecessor of future heroines on the road, like Bonnie, Thelma or Louise.

A second remarkable heroine of a romantic road narrative is to be found in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Bonnie's aggressive personality resembles more the traditional male hero than the previous passive female fugitives. Indeed, her depiction as an active heroine in sex and violent scenes constitutes a significant step forward in female representation. However, there is still much to be improved, since, as Roberts clearly illustrates: "these women are crucial to the film, yet still act as appendages to masculinist fantasies" (1997: 62).

In later Road Movies, another predominant role for female characters other than 'plot-inducer' in a love story as seen in the previous two examples, is that of the 'sex-provider' portrayed in Dennis Hopper's emblematic *Easy Rider* (1969), the story of two alienated motorcyclists 'hitting the road' on a mad discovery of life's excesses. Hopper's road film inherited this role for women from Jack Kerouack's novel *On the Road* (1957), a main influence on the genre. This partly autobiographical novel-chronicle of the Beat Generation narrates the journey of initiation of two friends through a variety of routes and mental states in a nightmarish introduction to rock, sex and dope, a journey later emulated on the big screen by Hopper's Wyatt and Billy. As basic ingredients of the male wanderers' sexual experiences, women in both works suffer from men's excesses but are never

Food, Lodging (1992) recalls, has traditionally been a right limited to men. In Scott's film it is women who walk away but for different reasons. While Wyatt and Billy start a quest for freedom, fleeing from the boring domesticity of a conservative community, the search for freedom for Thelma and Louise (and for subsequent road heroines) involves their escape from a mostly man-made painful past and/or present in order to reach a new community, generically lying in a sunny Western or Southern location, namely Arizona or California. These two women's escape is triggered by their transgression of the Law: Louise shoots a man who nearly rapes Thelma on the girls' first night out. However, what turns out to be most revealing is the fact that women's illegal acts in the film are always the result of men's crimes, which somehow justifies the female leads' actions and vindicates the unfairness of the current legal system. In the same way as rape generates murder, theft, in the figure of a hitch-hiker (Brad Pitt), provokes Thelma's initiation as a robber. He gave her not only an expert private lesson on the art of hold-ups, but especially the need and the rebellious attitude against society to accomplish the crime.

Thus, rather than accessories or parasites of the male as in early road films, these 'girl riders' fleeing from male domination now possess the basic Road Movie traits associated with mobility. As Cohan and Hark state, the denial of the responsibilities of domesticity —employment, marriage and motherhood— constitutes a required condition for 'easy riders' to exist: "A road narrative, first of all, responds to the breakdown of the family unit" (1997: 2). Free from their partners' oppression, these heroines now have the right to the joy of being mobile, autonomous and independent.

Although this escapist dream proves only feasible through the denial or rejection of a fixed sedentary job, on the whole *Thelma and Louise* vindicates the importance of economic autonomy for the independence of women. Louise's greater self-sufficiency when compared to her travelling companion does not only come from assertiveness but also from the economic autonomy her job affords, clashing with Thelma's status as an unpaid housekeeper, something decided by her husband. The precious money that can facilitate their escape remarkably does not come from a man, but from Louise's life savings. Thelma's final awareness of the need to become economically independent from men proves most revealing if we bear in mind Friedrich Engels' theories that: "To emancipate woman and make her the equal of man is impossible as long as she is shut out from social productive labour and restricted to private domestic labour" (1986: 184).

Despite their learning a lesson on mobility, that is to say, on the value of both personal choice in intimate relationships and economic independence through harsh experiences on the road, Thelma and Louise are still able to appreciate the freedom of their journey of initiation. On their escape they experience the joy of sharing moments of intense difficulty with one's best friend as well as the pleasure of contemplating landscapes of indescribable beauty, which were totally unknown to them beforehand. It is the road trip which has enabled them to compare their adventure with their own unsuccessful past experiences and those of other women symbolically introduced through the soundtrack song 'Ballad of Lucy Jordan',

of getting a job after the providential death of her neglectful husband. First of all we face the negative implications of the female condition, both at work and in the home, her alienation in a patriarchal world where she is only considered as a body. Secondly, what comes as most disturbing is the heroine's understanding of her own personal quest as the search for a man without whom she is unable to live. Despite its generic raw realism and its innovative female protagonism, Scorsese's feature does not prove satisfactory enough from the feminist standpoint since its patriarchal final resolution abides by Hollywood's tendency "to restitute woman to her place, if she has adopted an unusual not female role; romantic love will make her give in her control to a man" (Kuhn 1991: 48). This is a perfect example of what Roland Barthes calls 'inoculation':

> ideology inoculates itself with a small dose of criticism in order to distract attention from its fundamental evils ... patriarchal order is restored, suitably modified. (Wood 1986: 154-55)

The introduction of female protagonists like Scorsese's Alice, and previously Lewis's Laurie and Penn's Bonnie, though each in their own very different style and time, all constitute a stepping stone to cross the wide bridge separating traditionally male Road Movies like *Easy Rider* from road narratives presenting women as positive full protagonists. Owing to women's absence or peripheral representation, the female spectator has traditionally been forced to feel pleasure identifying herself with male characters, denying somehow the female part of every woman spectator. As a consequence, a need for movies presenting not only female protagonism but more complete heroines with whom the female audience could finally identify without a feeling of masochistic empathy should be satisfied. This is the reason why a female road feature like Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), deserves a more profound analysis.

2. *THELMA AND LOUISE*

2.1. Women On the Road

> Something has changed inside me, and I couldn't go back, I couldn't. I feel awake, wide awake. I don't remember ever feeling this awake. Everything looks different. Do you feel like that too? Like you've got something to look forward to?

These words that Thelma utters in one of the final scenes of the film reflect her experience of transformation on the road, characteristic of this genre. But what factors have made this female experience possible? Why can a Road Movie now present women as fully credible characters deviating from the norm, thereby showing women on their own, enjoying traditionally exclusive male features or, rather, privileges?

The first joy of the female audience comes in the observation of the female leads' denial of the regressive stereotypes qualifying women as unable to achieve freedom of mobility, which, as the character of Trudi in Allison Anders's *Gas,*

transforming effect of the road, which makes her rebel against her aggressive husband and shout:

> Darryl, you're my husband, not my father!
> Go and fuck yourself!

On a week-end getaway from male partner domination, they get to the road only to find ill-treatment from yet again, other men: rapists, a cheating hitch-hiker, a harassing lorrydriver, suffocating policemen. The early scene depicting Thelma's quasi rape is the best illustration of the constant physical and psychological male abuse that these two female friends suffer throughout the film. Remarkably, all these secondary characters' abuse has sexual connotations, therefore revealing this as one of the main factors generating oppression for women in this patriarchal system. As Leslie Dick observes: "whenever Thelma has fun with men, something terrible happens" (1997: 22).

However, despite these negative sexual connotations, the representation on the screen of women's sexual liberation also offers a positive reading of the film. The female spectator can now feel the pleasure of watching sexually active heroines showing desire. We witness Thelma's metamorphosed state after the best of sexual experiences with the hitcher, unimaginable before with the only experience of her unsatisfying husband. As Louise remarks she "finally got laid properly" and this awakening to sex shows her as no longer the sheepish housewife prone to rape, theft, and male abuse. After the transforming effect of the journey on the road she proves even "dangerous because she desires" (Leong, Sell and Thomas 1997: 75).

Another feature worth mentioning in this film is the fact that men are present as an abusive same-sex group. As Dick comments:

> What is amazing about the sexual politics of *Thelma and Louise* is that while ostensibly presenting women without men, it also gives us men without women: Harvey Keitel as the cop who pursues them; various husbands, boyfriends, F.B.I. agents cackling to one another. (1997: 22)

It is ironically the same policemen who gather around a television set in Darryl and Thelma's house to watch a 'weepie', traditionally associated with the female gender, who star in the ruthlessly crushing final scene. In it we witness the overwhelming persecution of the protagonists by a whole male army, metaphorically symbolizing women's persecution by men in every aspect of life. Surrounded by countless police cars, the heroines' gloomy destiny is to choose their immolation by pressing down the accelerator to drive over the cliffs in Monument Valley. This pessimistic ending presents death not quite as a compensating punishment inflicted by an unforgiving society, as in Wyatt's and Billy's cases, but it shows Thelma and Louise's own decision not to go on living in this oppressive patriarchal world "and to fly their flags of discontent and exclusion" (Atkinson 1994: 16). *Thelma and Louise* therefore presents women in a patriarchal US American society where men wield all the power, both in and outside the home, a power they use to constrain and

whose lyrics read: "At the age of 37 she realized she would never ride through Paris in a sports car with the warm wind in her hair". Hence, regardless of the overall negative experience of these women on the road, they do not seem to regret what they have gone through together. All in all they finally manage to enjoy the nightmarish adventure.

2.2. Women and Men

In terms of its representation of society, *Thelma and Louise*, like *Easy Rider*, confronts traditional cultural and social values, offering a faithful illustration of the emerging counter-culture of their time. Hopper's film tried to find alternative lifestyles to the suffocating conservatism of the reigning system, whereas *Thelma and Louise* also vindicates social rights, but, this time, they are those patriarchy has traditionally denied women, as Cohan and Hark remark:

> *Thelma and Louise*'s female couple, who replace the male buddies or heterosexual lovers of earlier road movies, react to the failure of patriarchy to support their desires, ... and most of all, overturn the masculinist bias of the road. (1997: 11)

Or as Roberts explains, the protagonists get to the road "to flee patriarchy and its effects on their lives" (1997: 63).

Bearing in mind the earlier minor presence of women in male buddy Road Movies as 'sex-providers', it comes as a surprise at first sight that a female road feature like *Thelma and Louise* should present a great number of characters of the opposite sex. Protagonists in female Road Movies flee from the negative effect of a male-dominated and -oriented society for women, therefore needing the presence and reference of male counterparts to intensify the powerful bonding arising between suffering women. Full women protagonists still appear in relationships with men: either regretting previous choices or loosening binding ties. After an early wedding and many years of unfulfilling marriage, Thelma grows aware of her husband's not only neglectful but also destructive attitude towards her. Darryl has adopted the patriarchal role of the powerwielding head of the family unit whose life develops outside the home, the constraining place he relegates his abject wife to. He denies Thelma a job and even motherhood. No wonder she embarks on an innocent weekend getaway without warning him.

As a contrast to Thelma's domination by her possessive husband, we face Louise's totally different, down-to-earth views on marriage. Fed up with a boyfriend who is unable to commit himself, she sharply guesses it is not out of love that he has proposed to her, but out of panic that she may dump him for someone else and, as she cleverly remarks: "That is not a good reason for getting married". Similarly, in showing disagreement with Thelma's narrow-minded understanding of life for women as always submitted to men, she proclaims that every woman has another choice: that of assertively saying no rather than organising her own life for or around a man. Reassuringly enough for the female spectator, Thelma gradually suffers the

appearance —'feminine' dress, well-combed hair and make-up— of the beginning of the film contrasts with the more austere look æblouse buttoned up to the neckæ of Louise, and especially with both girls' male cowboy outfits of the end of the film. Significantly Thelma gets her US-flagged cap from a representative of patriarchal abuse: a lascivious lorrydriver who keeps harassing them during their escape until they finally blow up his truck. Secondly, thanks to Louise's help, Thelma starts making decisions on her own, something Darryl had always done for her, first to get to the road without his permission, then to try and escape across the border.

Neverthelesss, there comes a time for the tables to turn. What marks the sharp turning point in Thelma's personality is Louise's breaking down after the hitcher's theft. Once they lose Louise's life savings, their access to freedom, Louise's strong, phallic traits are transferred to Thelma, who now takes the lead to go on fighting. She will steal the money they need and will coldbloodedly sort out a policeman's interference in the desert. She is no longer the 'sedate' character Louise mentions at the beginning of the movie. Her repressed true nature can now come into the open:

> 'I guess I went a little crazy'.
>
> 'No, you've always been crazy. This is just the first time you've ever had to really express yourself'.

And remarkably enough, it is Thelma who finally suggests their *seppuku*, their brave immolation in Monument Valley.

The deepening of these two female riders' personal relationship is not only facilitated by a gradual development of the resemblance between their personalities but also by the fact that this is something inherent in women's own essence:

> A boy develops his masculine gender identification in the absence of a continuous on-going relationship with his father while a girl develops her feminine gender identity in the presence of an ongoing relationship with the specific person of her mother. (Williams 1991: 313)

Women's relatedness, in contrast with men's lack of it, makes the female gender benefit from a stronger same-sex bonding, characterized by a greater potential for empathy and sensitivity. Never before had such a strong bonding been present in male buddy Road Movies like *Easy Rider*. In these, male leads, though building ties of friendship on the road, prove rather laconic and distant, failing to trespass the barrier of 'privacy', since this may reveal the weaknesses an archetypal, phallic character needs to conceal. This empowering bonding among women has made some critics describe Thelma and Louise's friendship as "defiant sisterhood" (Atkinson 1994: 14).

Thus, such factors as the intimacy of their means of transportation, their critical condition as outlaw fugitives, and their lack of outside help bring about a deepening of Thelma and Louise's friendship, together with a significant transformation in Thelma's character, who gradually mirrors Louise's phallic traits. In addition to

abuse women. Despite the female protagonists' denial and rejection of this submission to male domination, the exaggerated proliferation of police cars, like a plague of insects that keeps reappearing, suggests that, no matter what radical and transgressive decisions women may make to 'defeat' patriarchy, men will always reappear, even in greater numbers, to ruin women's lives.

2.3. Women and Women

> Just about a hundred goddamn people saw you dancing cheek-to-cheek with him all night. Who's going to believe that? We don't live in that kind of world, Thelma!

Apart from their common condition as victims of male abuse and their unsatisfactory love relationships these two characters present totally different personalities. The above words, coming from Louise, an 'expert on human nature' as waitresses are defined in the film, finally convince naïve Thelma not to report the rapist's crime and to escape, since the police will not believe the truth about what really happened. Louise, an independent, struggling, down-to-earth woman seems to represent "the all-powerful (phallic) mother of the child's pre-Oedipal imaginary", while husband-dependent Thelma reminds us of "the unempowered castrated mother of its post-Oedipal symbolic" that Linda Williams mentions as the two representations of woman in our patriarchal system (1991: 314). Eager to spend some days away, the personal relationship between these riders deepens through the intimacy provided by the means of transport and the critical situation of patriarchal oppression that they are suffering from. It is precisely the outbreak of the crisis originating from the rapist's murder that triggers the transforming effect of the road on the protagonists, together with a gradual strengthening of their female bonding. Lacking in outside help from close relatives or dependable friends to resort to when in trouble, they find the support and comfort they now need in their very own friendship.

What comes as most revealing about this relationship is the process of approximation between these two opposite personalities, this "evolving mismatched pairing" (Tasker 1998: 96). The unempowered castrated woman which Thelma signifies will gradually mirror the all-powerful phallic traits Louise stands for. Right at the very beginning of the trip we face Thelma imitating Louise by smoking (banned by her husband) and by pretending to have a lower-pitched voice while saying: 'Hi, I'm Louise!', both things traditionally associated with the male rather than the female gender. It is exactly these stereotypically male features that Louise possesses —given her condition as 'once-bitten-twice-shy-character' (as allegedly raped in Texas)— that Thelma slowly acquires. This trip being the very first time she leaves town without her husband, Thelma will bring his gun although she cannot even use it: it is first a phallic symbol playing a surrogate role for the male power and control she seems to need, and later on a symbol of her own 'empowerment'. Thelma will start getting rid of all the female traits which imply patriarchal oppression in her life, ranging from physical appearance to lack of decision-making and especially her naïvety, all of which Louise is already devoid of. Her 'ladylike'

these, women's inherent bonding (absent in men and hence in Buddy Road Movies too) further strengthens their relationship, empowering them to defy an army of men who represent patriarchal male domination and abuse. Their deaths seem therefore to relieve those who cannot assimilate such a great power in women or who fail to accept a relationship suggesting female homosexuality. For those, as Leslie Dick explains, their deaths offer a way to avoid their depiction as declared homosexuals confessing love to one another:

> The very end, when the girls drive their car over the cliff, is one of those times you feel 'Shit, these women have to die because they're about to turn to each other and say, "I love you"'. (1997: 22)

To conclude, what is ultimately most significant is how the representation of credible female characters on the road shows an evolution in the roles patriarchy has traditionally allotted to women: from helpless mother and widow in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* to powerful women fighting a biased society in *Thelma and Louise*. Thanks to their experience on the road, female protagonists are or will become independent, autonomous women both in the economic and emotional spheres. Hence, through this depiction of dynamic, decision-making women as full protagonists who show pleasure and desire and are empowered by an inherent female bonding, Scott's film vindicates women's right to choose and to fight patriarchal oppression for women. On top of that, as Yvonne Tasker argues, it also acts as a "stimulant to a public debate about relationships between men and women" (1998: 144). The road is no longer a masculinist hegemonic domain in US American movies. The genre has embraced women's right to exist, and has covered the need for "positive strong female characters with whom the female audience can pleasurably identify without experiencing feelings of guilt or remorse" (1991: 20), as Kuhn puts it. With *Thelma and Louise* as a starting point, the road genre offers a fruitful representation of an increasingly complex array of gender and sexual relationships and tendencies throughout the whole decade of the 90s. The Road Movie genre still has a lot to say.

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