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FILM C390, Films of the 90’s, Summer I 2012, M/W 6p-10p

23 May 2012

Thelma & Louise

A Study of “Mother-Daughter” Adult Relationships

*Thelma & Louise*, an American film released in 1991 and directed by Ridley Scott, tells the tale of two women against the world, and how their adventures eventually drive them to their deaths. The titular characters, throughout the span of the film, embody one of the most important relationships that women at one time or another personify and/or experience themselves. Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) are content in taking their place as daughter and mother, respectively; a constant give-and-take between these two strong female characters that have been vilified in the media as being overtly feminist and man-bashers.

This type of relationship between women, particularly women that “find each other” as adults, can take on a much deeper meaning then women that start out as friends when they are children. As adults, the relationships that women seek out in other women often are meant to fill an empty space in each other’s heart and soul. Thelma, later on in the film, divulges that she started dating her husband Daryl (Christopher McDonald) when she was “but fourteen years old” and married at the age of 18. With this information, coupled with no mention of any sort of family, the viewer is led to speculate that perhaps her relationship with her parents, particularly her mother, was non-existent. She speaks of no older siblings that would have been able to guide her down a different path. With the limited information we have, Thelma is stuck with Daryl with no other support at her disposal, save Louise. Thelma, either consciously or subconsciously, may be searching out a mother-figure or even a sister-figure in Louise to fill a gaping hole in her own heart.

These two characters are ageless due to the nature of the relationship-hopping that they do throughout the span of the film. In the first scenes, we see Thelma in a nightgown, fawning over her caricature of a husband, fumbling over her words as she tries to stir up the courage to ask his permission for a girls’ weekend away. In this moment, she appears very immature, resembling a young lady feeling her way through the new experience of being someone’s wife. At this same time, Louise, though ageless, walks in the air of a much older, wiser woman, in her pressed waitress uniform and orthopedic shoes. When they speak on the telephone, Louise dotes over Thelma like a recent empty-nester who just had her daughter married off to a bonehead of a husband.

This mother-daughter relationship resurfaces later in the film, after Thelma is brutally attacked and Louise murders would-be rapist Harlan. Louise arrives just in time to stop the savage and impending rape, quickly shooing Thelma behind her proverbial apron as she holds the attacker in her gun sights. With Thelma safe from harm, Louise turns into a mother bear caring for her cub, and for the other babes of the forest that may eventually fall into the grasp of one Harlan Puckett. It is at this moment Louise is her most motherly, exterminating Harlan even though Thelma is far from his reach. She takes the burden of the immoral act upon herself to spare others to go through what she has presumably already encountered in Texas. In this supreme motherly act, Louise sacrifices herself for Thelma and for the countless girls that may have already experienced Harlan’s touch at the Silver Bullet Bar, and for the ones who never have to suffer the tragedy of rape.

Moments later as the gun barrel continues to smoke, Louise licks a handkerchief and hastily wipes the blood and dirt from Thelma’s tear-stained face. Like a mother to a daughter, Louise knows that Thelma is safe, and while she tries to maintain a soft exterior, she is more concerned with condemning the action of Thelma prior to venturing into the back parking lot with Harlan. The hurried smearing of saliva across Thelma’s face is done with little care for comfort, and is done more as a passive-aggressive ‘talking to’ from mom.

When J.D. (Brad Pitt) enters their story, Thelma takes an immediate liking to him, as evidenced by the puppy-dog eyes and whimpers that she aims towards Louise, resembling a child asking “can’t we take him home, mama?” When Louise finally relents and allows J.D. to tag along to Oklahoma City, she leaves the two “kids” to get to know each other in the backseat of her car. Thelma, for the moment, is lost in an adolescent fantasy, where she is no longer married and is free to flirt and dream. Louise looks content to drift in and out of that same fantasy where they haven’t started down a path from which they can never return.

At the motel in Oklahoma City, the women are apart for the first and last time within the context of the film. The two rooms and its inhabitants mirror the stages of life that each of the women have been personifying throughout the film. Louise and Jimmy (Michael Madsen) retire to their own room to discuss more mature subjects like settling down and marriage. There is a tension between Louise and Jimmy, much like an older, weathered couple would have. They fight and they love, all with a big black cloud looming over the both of them. Jimmy doesn’t understand that this will be the last time he sees the love that he took advantage of, and Louise does not have the heart to tell him the truth of why she is fleeing. The heaviness of their reunion is palpable. Meanwhile, in the other room, Thelma and J.D.’s experience is light and fun. They are silly and play with each other, as Thelma begins her sexual awakening. As they destroy the hotel room with their raucous love-making, they are like teenagers in heat without a care in the world. And just like a young girl in love, Thelma lets her guard down and trusts J.D. explicitly. Because of this naivety, she is hustled yet again, and their Mexico-relocation money is stolen by the bad-boy J.D. Louise chastises Thelma for being immature and gullible, but does not linger too long, just as a fair mother would.

After Thelma’s sexual and life awakening, she is impulsive and carefree when she elevates herself to armed robbery of a convenience store in the desert. She realizes that the life she lived before with Daryl is dead, and she is free to reinvent herself. However, like a teenage girl, she does not think beyond her next immediate step and furthers the case against the two fugitives. This only infuriates Louise more, who in turn scolds the woman-child in the passenger seat. Thelma is unstable, feeling her way through her new skin, as she drinks in excess and becomes increasingly brazen as she talks about the life she’d been living up until this point. Her outward appearance also begins to morph; the genteel Southern belle in a sun dress and hairspray heavy red locks is gone. She has been replaced by a dirty, unkempt shadow of her former self, as she begins to reinvent herself. As Thelma exists in the now, Louise in the driver’s seat thinks beyond their current situation, trying to somehow make sense of the weekend’s activities.

Throughout their unplanned crime spree, they are never too far from sanity, always talking through the decisions they make. True to form as mother-daughter relationships go, while what they are doing can have no optimal outcome, they still discuss the-could-be’s of their escape to Mexico. Louise is the mouth-piece of the duo, discussing their fate with Officer Slocumb (Harvey Keitel), trying in vain to sweet talk her way out of multiple prosecutions. “They constantly articulate and interrogate their impulses, repeatedly checking by phone to clarify their status.” (Boozer 191) Louise speaks on behalf of Thelma, as the wiser of the two.

Crime-spree aside, Thelma’s new life is on an upward trajectory. She dreams of her new life in Mexico, having found her calling as a “bad-girl.” Louise realizes the gravity of their situation, and in her quiet moments, she constantly tries to think of a way out for both of them. It isn’t until they are faced with a no-win situation that Thelma snaps out of her new found freedom and comes back to reality. She is the voice of reason, per se, as she presents the duo with their only escape plan --- to die happy and free, and on their own terms. At this point in the film, Thelma is at her most mature, weighing all of the options simultaneously, coming to the conclusion that suicide is their only option. Louise, relieved that for the first time on this trip she doesn’t have to bear the complete burden of their actions. At this moment, there is an emotional transference between the two women, and Thelma takes on the role of care-giver and mother to Louise. They kiss, not in a sexual manner, but rather as a mother-daughter, and grasp hands as they catapult off of the cliff into eternity.

*Thelma & Louise* has long been vilified in the media as a feminist diatribe. However, the mother-daughter relationship showcased between these two women (although the actresses were only ten years apart at the time of filming: Sarandon 45, Davis 35) is a beautiful study of adult women trying to fill a gaping hole in their hearts. While the over-arching reception of this film in popular culture is that of anti-men and pro-feminism, I believe that at the heart of film is an inspiring relationship to any woman who missed out on a mother-daughter relationship as a child or for a woman without children. The film shows that adult women friends can fulfill subconscious yearnings for a mother-daughter relationship.

**Sources**:

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