

FILM REVIEW

Women Behaving Badly: 25 years of *Thelma & Louise* (and six years of *The Red Book*)

Thelma & Louise R. Scott (Director) (1991). Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

‘Something’s crossed over in me and I can’t go back,’ explains Thelma, ‘I mean, I just couldn’t live’. She has lost the desire and even the capacity to return to her old life of downtrodden domesticity and her brutish, domineering husband. Earlier in the film Louise tells her, ‘You get what you settle for,’ and, by the movie’s end, both women are through with settling. (Lipsitz 2011)

If I speak in the spirit of this time, I must say: no one and nothing can justify what I must proclaim to you. Justification is superfluous to me, since I have no choice, but I must. I have learned that in addition to the spirit of this time there is still another spirit at work, namely that which rules the depths of everything contemporary. (Jung 2009, p. 119)

I saw *Thelma & Louise* about six months after its general UK release in 1992 in an almost deserted cinema on Tyneside in the North East of England. I have never forgotten the powerful impact of the opening credits, which dwell on a desert landscape, and indeed recall the film itself in far more detail than any other film before or since. Such testimony suggests the archetypal nature of the movie, in both the Jungian sense of the mobilization of inherited potentials for making meaning and images, and in the literary-film studies sense of tropes repeated over time that themselves structure genres, familiar narratives, frequent topics and cultural meanings. Within these two different disciplinary senses of the word ‘archetype’ – that can certainly overlap, yet do not have to – resides so much potential for scholarship in the liminal spaces between popular culture and a Jungian approach to the psyche.

For example, what might appear a perverse comparison of a Hollywood film with Jung’s more recently published *The Red Book* could, I suggest, offer some useful reflections on both texts. After all, both works struggle to contain women behaving badly! Both are concerned with relations to the underworld, explore the soul as feminine, experience epiphanies in the desert and persist in the culture as a problem of form – in questions of realism, multi-genres and ending in *Thelma & Louise*, and disciplinary violations (and ending) in *The Red Book*. Put another way, both *Thelma & Louise* and *The Red Book* construct themselves into the territory of myth, and they do so over the challenge of the feminine to contemporary norms. And both works coalesce around figures forced into encounters with the spirit of the depths.

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In the wonderful collection edited by Chris Hauke and Luke Hockley, *Jung & Film II: the Return*, Hauke astutely explores the presence of popular cinema as a topic in *The Red Book* (Hauke, 2011, pp. 109–118). Pointing out that the whole work concerns Jung's struggle with opposing parts of himself, Hauke shows that the meeting with the lowly man who longs for the cinema is a prelude to an extended treatment of the role of the banal, usually as feminine (Hauke, 2011, p. 110). Popular cinema today retains its cultural role of standing for the banal, he reminds us. *Thelma & Louise* can be considered as both a recipient of the banal as a popular, if controversial, movie, and as an investigation into lives apparently confined to the banal in its two protagonists. But first, a look at the film's challenging plot with its subsequent reputation as a problem of history. Surprisingly, here *Thelma & Louise* can be helped by *The Red Book*.

Story and his-story

While the first glimpse of *Thelma & Louise* is of an impressive desert with towering mountains, the scene swiftly contracts to focus on two women in restricted lives who decide to escape for a weekend away together. Louise is a waitress with an unsatisfactory boyfriend while Thelma is a housewife with a controlling, boorish husband. Exhilarated by her escape, Thelma is keen to celebrate at a bar en route. Here she is saved from a real threat of rape by Louise toting a gun. Unfortunately, Louise also lacks psychic stability in the face of sexual violence and shoots dead the would-be rapist when he goads her. We learn that she has been raped before and has never recovered. Sure that the law will not recognize her response as the effect of unhealed trauma rather than murderous intentions, both women go on the run.

A further twist in the story occurs when they take on a hitchhiker, the charming J.D. who gives Thelma a night of wonderful sex while teaching her how to rob stores. Thelma decides to put this lesson into practice after they discover that J.D. has taken all of Louise's money. With the police in pursuit, a third encounter with a potential animus figure (after violence of the attempted rape and unreliable Eros of J.D.) is a police officer played by Harvey Keitel. He displays understanding of Louise's trauma-induced actions, but is still determined to subject both women to the law. After amusing and comically harmless adventures in tying up a policeman and blowing up the oil tanker of a trucker for his obscene behavior, both women end up in the desert at night feeling more alive than ever. In the morning, when the police arrive they decide to 'go on' rather than face prison and the law. In the famous and ambivalent ending, they drive their Thunderbird car over the Grand Canyon. The camera ends in freeze frame with them flying through the air.

So as Raina Lipsitz put it in her 20-year anniversary article in *The Atlantic* on 'Thelma & Louise: The Last Great Film about Women', Thelma and Louise do not 'settle'; they literally 'fly', presumably to their deaths (Lipsitz 2011). Numerous interpretations have been offered of the ending of the film – from the proper destiny of women who have betrayed both conventions and feminism by resorting to crime, to a fully feminist escape from the law and the Law of patriarchy (definitely rule of the father in this sensitive film in which men are structurally, not 'naturally' opposed to the two women). What Lipsitz's article also details is her disappointment that a film that treats women as protagonists with complex psyches, as *Thelma & Louise* does, did not result in a significant expansion of mainstream movies about female lives.

History has not fulfilled the promise of what some feminist commentators saw in *Thelma & Louise*, which is where perversity comes in. After all, arguably *The Red Book* begins with the 'I' (Jung?) protagonist also feeling frustrated with history in the sense that it is manifest as 'the spirit of the times'. History as the knowable story of the times is failing to recognize, to integrate with, the – as yet unknown – spirit of the depths. Or, one might say that in the light of the persisting paucity of the representation of women as complex beings in mainstream popular culture, the gendered spirit of our time was, in *International Journal of Jungian Studies* 3

1991, interrupted by a resurgence from the depths of the feminine in *Thelma & Louise*. The film marks the return of the repressed (at least partly as feminine), so perhaps it also offers a voice for the spirit of the depths?

Therefore the relative lack of recent films devoted to diverse female leads shows *Thelma & Louise* as 'other' – and not in an essentialist way, given its male director. Indeed, once *Thelma & Louise* is shifted from essentializing views of gender (that female and male bodies encode a simple binary feminine or masculine), its position as an historical anomaly, suggesting that it contains much 'spirit of the depths' also moves it out of a literal interpretation. It really is not 'about' how and why actual women might choose to leap off a cliff!

And although authorial and directorial intention is not all important when considering a text as saturated with the 'other', it is nevertheless worth noting that the scriptwriter argued that the ending was symbolic (quoted in Lipsitz). What I want to add to this notion of 'symbolic' – in the general meaning of the word as 'not literal' – is the Jungian development of 'symbolic' as pointing to the unknown, or not yet knowable, in the sense of being an emissary of the 'spirit of the depths' or archetypal unconscious. It is time to look more closely at *Thelma & Louise* as an analogue of *The Red Book*.

Thematic links between *Thelma & Louise* and *The Red Book*

In treating of the feminine as insufficiently represented in the spirit of the times, both *Thelma & Louise* and *The Red Book* offer the feminine in the banal mobilized by the myth of Persephone. Several times Jung's 'I' figure is invited to 'rescue' or redeem a feminine figure. Crucially this invitation is framed in the terms of love, not the traditional masculine heroism of vigorous physical action. Indeed the historic blond male hero in the figure of Germanic legend, Siegfried, is killed off early in *The Red Book* with the complicity of 'I.' Similarly there is a conspicuous absence of flamboyant male rescuers in *Thelma & Louise*. J.D. is more like a devious and erotic film noir femme fatale, the good policeman will not risk going outside the law, and when Louise does try to behave like a male hero in rescuing Persephone/Thelma from rape with a gun, she inadvertently commits murder.

For both *Thelma & Louise* and *The Red Book*, the conventional male hero is defunct. 'Persephone,' in both texts, I suggest, has to become a more active agent in her own salvation. Significantly, the feminine in both works retains the flavor of Persephone by not fully escaping the underworld. Where in the myth, Persephone eats the fruit of Hades and must therefore return for a few months each year to reign as Queen, *Thelma and Louise*, both Persephone victims of male violence, definitely do go on to negotiate a relation to the underworld of crime. They only partially escape that underworld by exchanging it for an

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underworld of death and transcendence. In this sense, their oft noted 'marriage' at the end of the film when they kiss and clasp hands before heading for the Canyon, is also a marriage to Hades (Man 1993, p. 42).

Meanwhile, in *The Red Book*, wily Salome proves to be an effective shapeshifter as she deepens the relation between 'I' and the spirit of the depths. She too re-negotiates the symbols of femininity, sacrifice and death in the invitation to eat of the dead child, while extending the representative capacities of the feminine to the animal and the profane.

I want also to stress the common denominator of 'the lowly' in both works that pivot on the feminine attempting to speak from the position of Other. For after all in the film and the book, the lowly as in the lower classes and the banal, provide a social dimension to the underworld that abuts the underworlds of crime in the vulnerability of people without the protection of social status. In *The Red Book* 'I' comes to fellow feeling for a dying criminal, for the insane, for a female cook with a simple faith, as well as those marked Other by supernatural powers. *Thelma & Louise* begins with those lowly feminine serving roles of waitress and housewife and shows their vulnerability to a law that is patriarchal for not acknowledging the violence done to women in rape.

Fleeing from the law of the spirit of the times, *Thelma and Louise* end in the desert.

'I don't remember ever feelings' this awake,' says *Thelma* as they drive through the desert in the middle of the night, leaving their old lives behind. 'Everything looks different. You know what I mean... Everything looks new. Do you feel like that? Like you've got something to look forward to?' quoted in Lipsitz *How eerie is this wasteland*.

TRB p. 141

[In the desert] Did you not see that when your creative force turned to the world, how the dead things moved under it and through it, how they grew and prospered. TRB p. 142.

The desert is the place of revelation and of contact with the numinous in both texts. *Thelma and Louise* in the desert at night can at last feel their status as outsiders to the law as 'Other', as an expansion of psyche, an exhilaration. In the quotation above, *Thelma* expresses a possibility of new life, in effect a rebirth. *The Red Book* contains something of this spiritual dimension of being in the encounter with the confused hermit, Ammonius, while the initial digression into this 'wasteland' is, as above, something that provides a negative perspective on life dedicated to the spirit of the times. Where *The Red Book* sees creativity deadened in the conventional world, *Thelma & Louise* shows the two women experiencing psychic creativity for the first time in the desert.

It is as if both texts show a strategic yet similar sense of the state of gender relations: *The Red Book* from a masculine perspective finds the desert's 'eerie wasteland,' revelatory of the deadness of 'the times' while *Thelma & Louise* from a feminine perspective shows the psyche that has not been allowed to live fully in 'his-story' coming alive. Also in a fascinating ambivalence of agency, *Thelma and Louise* have both been driven out of the conventional world by their victim status as 'Persephone,' yet have also chosen to drive to the place of freedom (and death) in the desert. They are victimized but not victims in their choices – very much, I suggest as *Persephone* herself can be viewed. For *Persephone* may have been 'seized' by the underworld masculine, yet she chooses to eat the seeds and thereby negotiate a permanent, limited and powerful relation to Hades as place and personality.

Such immersion in the Persephone myth and the desert suggests an argument in both texts about the soul as feminine. While this notion is re-iterated throughout *The Red Book*, I suggest that even there it becomes more than Jung's well known tendency to lapse into essentialism. In *The Red Book* the soul is feminine because 'I' is identified as masculine; true, and Jung likes structural binaries, but also because the epoch of the spirit of the times has been wounded by its patriarchy. A similar phenomenology of gender exists in *Thelma & Louise*. It is possible to both see the plot as a series encounters with animus figures (from failed partnerships to an ultimately impotent assemblage of fathers in the police gathering at the rim of the Grand Canyon), in classic Jungian essentialist style, while the whole tenor of the film exposes that the soul is feminine because of what this world is repressing.

Hence one can read the final embrace of the two women in two ways: the first is that of exploiting the potential in Jungian gender to go beyond essentialist oppositions, that of *International Journal of Jungian Studies* 5

a sacred marriage or conjunction between women signified, symbolized on screen by their joint leap into the sky. Here we do indeed have a Jungian as well as mainstream sense of 'symbol' in taking the final moments of the film as a symbol of union with the other so ultimate as to include sexuality, spirituality, transcendence and death. Secondly, more culturally, the refusal of the women to submit to the law and the Law, could be interpreted as the return to the collective psyche of the feminine that has been repressed for all of us.

We recognize Persephone's return to our lives as both provisional and persistent. The soul is reborn in the experience of watching *Thelma & Louise* as a feminine part of the collective psyche that is both visible again (Persephone returned from the underworld) and, retains connection to the spirit of the depths (Persephone's healthily powerful role with Hades as queen for part of the year). Not only might *Thelma and Louise* figure Persephone, but their duality points to such a role for the film itself in the collective psyche.

The problem of form

We come finally to the problem of form, which has been touched upon with *Thelma & Louise* in the various approaches to the ending. Yet the film also models literary-film debates in its referencing of many diverse film genres. Glenn Man in 'Gender, genre, and myth in *Thelma and Louise*,' argues that the film braids at least three Hollywood gendered genres of the Western, Gangster film and the Melodrama, all predicated on an opposition between the individual and society, in a need to resist conformity and community, in the drive to integration. Whereas in the western, the lone hero's isolation enshrines resistance to conventions, 'he' (and it is always he) often decides to collaborate with authority in order to protect the community from utter destruction. The gangster film offers heroes torn between integration that also magnifies resistance in 'organized' crime and envying the different compromised individuality under the rule of law. Finally the melodrama represents the paradigm in terms of desire with forbidden love set against conventional family values.

In these terms, *Thelma & Louise*, might be said to test out the capacity for a self-referential cocktail of genres to provide space for the return of the repressed feminine as the spirit of the depths. As western heroes, they are neither lone nor male. As gangsters,

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they take on J. D.'s deceptive charm and are unrealistically harmless. In melodramatic terms, their diverse relations with men are both underworld-dark (rape) and complicated with their final embrace suggesting a feminine soul-union in each other. Here again the text-ure of *Thelma & Louise*, anticipates the arrival of *The Red Book* with its summary dismissal of the traditional male hero, the picaresque journey motif, its humor, and its multifaceted feminine.

Moreover, both *The Red Book* and *Thelma & Louise* have ambiguous endings. A search on YouTube easily stumbles on an alternative ending to the film in which, somehow intact from the crash, the Thunderbird drives into the desert disappearing into infinity. Of course, this too can be read as symbolic in both senses. It could represent the freedom that both women discover in just 'going on' and each other in the final moments. In addition, as a Jungian symbol, the drive into the desert could indicate the unknowable mysteries of (human) nature in the liminal lands around death as underworld. The motif of vanishing into the desert at the moment of transcendence (the literal rising of the car standing for their conjunctio with each other and beyond) of course drives *Thelma & Louise* into that other road movie or open-ended narrative, *The Red Book*.

Jung did not finish *The Red Book* and nor did he publish it. Here the work is open, like the ending of *Thelma & Louise* to be read as pointing to an unreachable note of finality. We do not know how Jung might have continued and concluded *The Red Book*, and nor how finishing might have influenced his judgment on its circulation. In this the book challenges the reader to find a place for it outside conventional categories of address. Neither presented to us by its author a 'psychology' nor securely fastened to other disciplines such as theology and art, *The Red Book* is itself anomalous, provocative, underworld.

Thelma & Louise with its quirky humor on the lips of the underworld deserves to be understood, provocatively, as a prequel to *The Red Book*, published eighteen years later. We are, I suggest, like *Thelma and Louise* in the film, more alert, more alive to the feminine as Other for its brave expression of the spirit of the depths.

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