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15 December 2022

*Thelma & Louise* Through the Lens of Nietzsche's Misogyny

Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Western morality, religion, and philosophy has secured his place among the great historical thinkers. His work has had vast influence across cultural domains, notably on thinkers such as Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Carl Jung, Herman Hesse, and several others. Despite this deep cultural and philosophical influence, recent shifts toward feminism and gender inclusivity raise questions of Nietzsche's validity in a modern context. Like many others of his time, his perception of women was reflective of the patriarchal values that were—and continue to be—pervasive in society. Women were thus excluded from discussions of identity and the nature of existence, as they were not considered autonomous existential beings. However, the modern shift brought works of female reclamation of autonomy and identity, one of which being the 1991 film *Thelma & Louise*. Written by Callie Khouri, the story centers around two women who liberate themselves from traditional feminine roles by embracing criminality. While the film serves as a celebration of female liberation, it interestingly parallels several of Nietzsche's philosophies through a female perspective—despite his insistent exclusion of women. In this paper, I will review Nietzsche's philosophy and discuss how the film serves as both a feminist affirmation and critique of his work. I will also discuss the film as a statement-piece against the widespread misogyny fueled by men like Nietzsche.

Much of Nietzsche's applicable philosophy in analyzing *Thelma & Louise* stems from his concern of Christianity's collapse. With dramatic shifts in Western civilization, the centrality of Christianity in culture had begun its decline following the Enlightenment period and other strides

toward secularism. Christianity had once dominated virtually all aspects of society and spirituality; Nietzsche reasoned that the collapse of religion brought with it the collapse of all that was built on it.<sup>1</sup> With this demise of the Western world's old system of meaning, the door to nihilism opens and leaves individuals with a sense of meaninglessness and despair. Nietzsche considered this impending nihilism detrimental to Western society: "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism... our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe."<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche insisted the solution to this catastrophe lay in the rejection of perceived truth and knowledge. He was skeptical of metaphysics, and argued that the true nature of reality cannot be known; there are no objective, universal truths, just interpretations and "metaphors" made by human beings.<sup>3</sup> Thus, he considered the task of developing meaning a matter of the individual's subjective values, rather than collective and cultural experiences. The ideal individual has broken the bounds of socially constructed morality and inherited myths, and has instead created their own meaning of life through individual will. This ideal figure, exemplified in Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, can affirm life through embracing *amor fati*: the love of one's fate and "yes-saying."<sup>4</sup> Living beyond the structures of dogma and popular belief, this individual reaches their full potential in becoming who they truly are, guided only by the values they set unto themselves. This development of individuality and identity is further encouraged by Nietzsche as giving style to one's character, or viewing life as an "artistic plan."<sup>5</sup> Through these ideals, an individual can overcome the impending nihilism that results from the collapse of Western

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt (Cambridge: Hackett Publishers, 1997), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kamber, PowerPoint "Nietzsche on Thelma and Louise" (September 22, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 157.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 163.

Christianity. In the face of a deteriorating old system of meaning, a new system can be created on the basis of personal courage, will, and nonconformity. This is encapsulated in Nietzsche's encouragement: "live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors as long as you cannot be rulers and possessors, you seekers of knowledge!"<sup>6</sup> Through this, Nietzsche believed one can live authentically with self-determined fulfillment.

In this context, it is especially important to clarify Nietzsche's exclusion of women in his philosophy. Despite being an advocate for identity development and social-norm rejection, he held stark beliefs of male chauvinism that reflected traditional patriarchal values. In discussing a woman's role in society, he claimed:

Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman hath one solution — it is called pregnancy. Man is for woman a means: the purpose is always the child. But what is woman for man? Two different things wanteth the true man: danger and diversion.

Therefore wanteth he woman, as the most dangerous plaything. Man shall be trained for war, and woman for the recreation of the warrior: all else is folly.<sup>7</sup>

Through this sentiment, he strips women of existential autonomy and suggests their only purpose is reproduction. While men supposedly align with his theory of living dangerously with courage, he argues that women only serve as the producer of man or the "plaything" that entertains him. This raises skepticism of whether Nietzsche's philosophy can be applied to female-centered works, as he deliberately excluded women from his theories of existence. However, *Thelma & Louise* lends itself well to analysis through the lens of Nietzsche's work—particularly an analysis

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 161.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 48.

that takes into consideration the implications of his misogyny. I will discuss how the film serves as both an affirmation and critique of Nietzsche's work through a feminist lens.

In many ways, *Thelma and Louise* develop into the *Übermensch* framework proposed by Nietzsche. At the beginning of the film, the two women are living within the bounds of traditional female norms; Thelma is a housewife dominated and subordinated by her husband, and Louise is bound to her waitressing job and boyfriend, with whom she has an uncertain future.<sup>8</sup> Like many women of their time, they are expected to maintain limited aspirations and display feminine characteristics by being domestic and docile. Even so, Thelma and Louise come to reject these norms through embracing crime. They redefine femininity in their own terms, detached from social expectations of what a woman should be. While criminality has traditionally—in both society and the film industry—been presented as masculine, Thelma and Louise reclaim criminal behavior and render it central to their womanhood and nonconformity. In direct accordance with Nietzsche's encouragement, the two women experience liberation from the oppressive gender norms that strip meaning from their lives, particularly through “living dangerously” and denying socially constructed ideas of what is right and wrong. This process ultimately unlocks their potential in discovering their true selves, as they begin approaching life through their own will. As Thelma tells Louise later in the film, “you got something to go back for... something's crossed over in me, I can't go back, I mean, I just couldn't live.”<sup>9</sup> This statement serves as a pivotal point in the film, as Thelma reflects on how her life beforehand—the one dictated by others, rather than her own will—was inauthentic, and she has finally made strides toward discovering her true identity. Louise agrees with her, and it can be

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<sup>8</sup> *Thelma & Louise*, directed by Ridley Scott (Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991), [https://tcnj.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/view/action/uresolver.do?operation=resolveService&package\\_service\\_id=3385217160005191&institutionId=5191&customerId=5190&VE=true](https://tcnj.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/view/action/uresolver.do?operation=resolveService&package_service_id=3385217160005191&institutionId=5191&customerId=5190&VE=true).

<sup>9</sup> *Thelma & Louise*, 01:45:58.

assumed that she is experiencing a similar discovery of identity. Through these rejections of traditional femininity and social structure, Thelma and Louise very closely follow the framework of an ideal individual. They create an individualized system of morality, wherein crime is justified in the pursuit of liberation, and do so through following Nietzsche's core urges: live dangerously, give style to one's character, and become who you are.

Ironically, Thelma and Louise affirm Nietzsche only through denying his gender theory. They reject the collective values of society and find liberation through this, just as Nietzsche implied in his philosophy. However, the collective values Thelma and Louise reject are the same ones Nietzsche upheld—the ones that subordinated women and excluded them from his work. Had the two women maintained their lives within the bounds of traditional female roles, they never would have achieved fulfillment and identity affirmation; they would have succumbed to the meaninglessness ascribed by Nietzsche. Thus, the film indirectly suggests that, despite their exclusion from Nietzsche's relatively optimistic philosophy, it is still within women's power to reclaim it and become the "warrior," rather than the "plaything." In following his philosophy, however, it is necessary for women to reject his misogyny in pursuing liberation. Ironically, to affirm Nietzsche's philosophy, a woman can only do so through rejection of the gendered basis on which it was built.

Although the film points to a feminist affirmation of Nietzsche, it also can be used as a critique of his philosophy. The main negation emerges in the film's infeasibility for women in the real world. Realistically, there exist numerous obstacles faced by the modern and historical woman—some of which are presented in the film. Not only have women been a target for heightened and unjust violence,<sup>10</sup> but they have historically been dehumanized and existentially

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<sup>10</sup> "Fast Facts: Preventing Sexual Violence" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 22, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html>.

belittled. Suffrage for White women was not granted until 1919, and women of other disadvantaged groups did not receive this right until even later.<sup>11</sup> Along with inaccessible education and inequality in the workforce, women have been historically pushed out of spaces that fostered political and intellectual growth. Furthermore, coverture and expectations of reproduction and domesticity exemplify traditional ways in which women are stripped of their identity, and are considered only an extension of man. We see these obstacles manifest in the film through consequences faced by the characters. The main female characters are often punished or blocked from achieving basic goals: Thelma needing permission to take a trip, attempted rape when enjoying a night out, and manipulation when trusting male friends. The male characters conversely experience disproportionately lenient punishment, or no punishment at all, for explicitly wrong actions: Thelma's husband staying out late, Harlan's habitual assaults at the bar, the Trucker's misogyny, and J.D.'s thievery.<sup>12</sup> We consistently watch as men freely take charge of their lives and "live dangerously" without consequence, while women seem to be punished for merely rejecting domesticity. These obstacles raise two main questions in this discussion: Could the average woman, through history, realistically develop her identity when she is stripped of one in the first place? Or affirm life when she cannot receive justice for her oppression? We watch as Thelma and Louise successfully liberate themselves and explore their identities in a way that is consistent with Nietzsche's philosophy. However, the means through which they accomplish this is radical and may be unattainable for women in the real world.

Ultimately, the film suggests Thelma and Louise's liberation would not have occurred without radical detachment from their lives and social law. Thelma affirms this notion through her reflection on her assault, "that guy was hurting me. If you hadn't come out when you did, he

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<sup>11</sup> "The History of the Suffrage Movement," National Women's History Museum, accessed December 10, 2022, <http://www.crusadeforthetvote.org/history>.

<sup>12</sup> *Thelma & Louise*.

would've hurt me a lot worse. And probably nothing would've happened to him 'cause everybody did see me dancin' with him all night. They would've made out like I'd asked for it. My life would've been ruined a whole lot worse than it is now."<sup>13</sup> Thelma reasons that, had they never killed Harlan and embraced criminality, she would have never received justice, and her life would have been ruined. The film goes on to indirectly affirm Thelma's assumption, as Louise was supposedly sexually assaulted in Texas and never received justice. She appears burdened by the memory, refusing to discuss nor return to Texas—and seems to only experience some kind of justice through shooting Harlan. Through this, it is insinuated that women can never experience liberation similar to Thelma and Louise if they do not abandon the patriarchal society that entraps them. It seems that Thelma and Louise would never, and had never, received justice from the law or their patriarchal culture, so they could only achieve freedom through a radical abandonment of these forces. The film furthers this point through the presentation of divisive gender relationships. Throughout the film, all men seem to form a collective group against women, even the ones sympathetic to Thelma and Louise. This is especially evident when Hal, Darryl, and Max are sitting around a table, discussing Thelma and Louise's crime. Despite the serious subject matter and Darryl's loss of his wife, the men jokingly belittle the women in ways that "other" the female gender. For example, Max advises Darryl, "if she calls, just be gentle, you know? Like you're really happy to hear from her. Like you miss her. Women love that shit."<sup>14</sup> The men all laugh in response, potentially in collective mockery of women as a whole. This scene suggests that, ultimately, in a patriarchal society, a woman is never taken as seriously as a man; she is considered the lesser "other." In order to seriously affirm her life, she must take on the responsibility herself and reject the society that collectively subordinates her.

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<sup>13</sup> *Thelma & Louise*, 01:42:37.

<sup>14</sup> *Thelma & Louise*, 01:11:52.

Through *Thelma and Louise*'s radicalism, Nietzsche's philosophy is criticized on the basis of its infeasibility for real-life women. As discussed in the previous paragraph, *Thelma and Louise* would have never achieved liberation if they had not radically detached themselves from their lives and social law. However, it is fair to claim that it is not feasible for all women to embrace this radicalism. Some reasons for this infeasibility include financial insecurity, social obligation, family obligation, and possible issues to well-being from a detachment to one's known life. Thus, can we fairly hold expectations for women to follow Nietzsche's philosophy when it can be so difficult—or impossible—to do so? As discussed previously, the film points to the disproportionate lenience men experience by society and the law, making it relatively easy to “live dangerously” and explore one's identity on their own terms. Women are conversely met with several obstacles to this, including sexual violence, financial dependence, exploitation, as well as many other issues that disproportionately target women. While all women are subject to the oppression of patriarchal societies, it is exclusionary and unfair to paint every woman as capable of radical detachment from their life and the norms that shape them. In this sense, *Thelma and Louise*'s story is one of exception, rather than rule. While they successfully affirm Nietzsche's philosophy, the film suggests this would have been impossible without embracing radicalism and abandonment—they would have remained stuck in their oppressive lifestyle with no escape, as so many women often find themselves. Through the use of fiction, we see how women can succeed in a feminine reclamation of Nietzsche's philosophy. But through further analysis, we see that his philosophy remains exclusionary on the basis of its attainability for the average woman. A man's nonconformity is often praised and encouraged, while a woman may find it impossible to do so without harsh punishment, making Nietzsche's philosophy impractical and unattainable.



Along with affirmations and criticisms of Nietzsche, the film also serves as a broader statement-piece against the widespread misogyny fueled by men like Nietzsche. Upon release, the film received backlash for presenting men unfairly and unrealistically. This is an important critique to assess, as unrealistic portrayals of men undermine the strength of a feminist analysis applied to real world contexts. Throughout the film, male characters are often portrayed in a negative light as rapists, abusers, manipulators, and overall very aggressive individuals. When confronted about this, Callie Khouri, the film's screenwriter, responded:

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 court, as is the case with exploitation films, then just shut the fuck up.<sup>15</sup>

Khouri passionately defends her portrayal of men, arguing that cultural works of art exploiting women have dominated the film industry without criticism. Evidence supports her claim; a study on women on-screen found that 40 percent of young women were dressed in “sexy attire” and 35 percent were in nudity for Hollywood film appearances.<sup>16</sup> This sexualization carries into the real world, wherein 1 in 4 women have experienced some form of sexual harassment, with roughly half of rape survivors reporting assault as a minor.<sup>17</sup> When considering this, it can be argued that Khouri's portrayal of men is not entirely unfair—they are representative of the oppression women face in the real world. Khouri flips the narrative by providing female main characters

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<sup>15</sup> Kamber, “Nietzsche on Thelma and Louise.”

<sup>16</sup> “The Future Is Female? - USC Annenberg School for Communication and ...,” accessed December 11, 2022, <https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> CDC, “Fast Facts: Preventing Sexual Violence.”

who display traditionally masculine features: courage, criminality, and strength. The men in the film merely serve as side characters who are often portrayed negatively, similar to how female characters have historically been written. Nietzsche's misogyny reflects the broader misogyny that has been pervasive in society, wherein women may be viewed only as a "plaything" or disposable if not actively benefiting men. These sentiments have contributed to the history of female exploitation in film, which Khouri rejects in her portrayal of two liberated women. In a way that can be considered Nietzschean, Khouri refuses to conform to standard notions of femininity in film, and instead creates a new definition of womanhood that reflects danger and courage.

While existentialism has lost popularity in recent years, works such as *Thelma & Louise* continue to provide an avenue for its philosophical analysis. This film is particularly interesting in its feminist implications, which are a hallmark of society's collective shift towards inclusivity. While historical figures, such as Nietzsche, have displayed prejudiced and discriminatory beliefs in their work, their spots among history's intellectual thinkers have solidified. In realizing the value of their work, we can use modern methods of analysis to find ways of including historically oppressed groups in our teachings of existence and philosophy. *Thelma & Louise* exemplifies this through what can be considered a feminist reclamation of Nietzsche's philosophy, which has harshly excluded women in the past. This proves the film's importance in not only recent film history, but the broader discourse on nonconformity, philosophy, and women's rights.

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