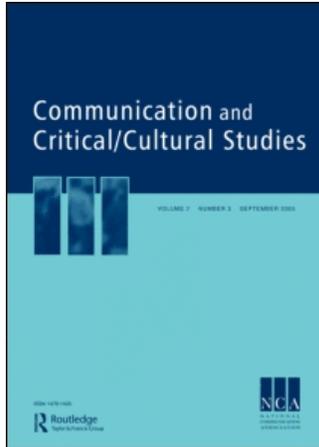


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# Rebel Citizenship and the Cunning of the Liberal Imaginary in *Thelma & Louise*

Michael Kaplan

*Through a reading of the critical reception of Thelma & Louise, this essay argues that contemporary feminist criticism would benefit by taking into account its often tacit presupposition of a liberal model of citizenship. Critics praise the film for challenging the normative masculinity of film genres or for subverting the phallocentrism of the symbolic order, failing to note that the women's gender rebellion serves to support liberal principles. Yet the variants of feminist theory the film supposedly stages understand these principles as alibis for phallocentrism. Such analyses of the film thus contradict the premises on which their authorizing theories depend.*

*Keywords: Liberalism; Citizenship; Friendship; Feminism; Film*

In a suggestive and insightful essay, Wendy Brown asks, “Where does the legacy of women’s subordination . . . live within liberalism when both social and sexual contract fade as constitutive factors and legitimating forces in liberal orders?”<sup>1</sup> Brown is chiding Carole Pateman for indulging in anachronism: tracking the emergence of the sexual contract in early liberal theory, Pateman

does not adequately inquire into . . . the legacy [of women’s subordination], the nature of its bearing on a time in which both liberalism and women’s subordination may well be sustained without contract. Instead, Pateman unconvincingly asserts this legacy in her accounts of contemporary sexist practices . . .<sup>2</sup>

Pateman’s thesis is unconvincing and anachronistic “because while such practices certainly abound, they are neither ubiquitous nor systematic—they do not appear *inherent* in liberal orders.”<sup>3</sup> Brown, then, sets about correcting this anachronism,

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arguing that “the legacy of gender subordination . . . is to be found not in contemporary contract relations but in the *terms* of liberal discourse that configure and organize liberal jurisprudence, public policy, and popular consciousness.”<sup>4</sup>

In a Foucauldian vein, Brown is interested not simply in the sexism of particular liberal theorists or liberal doctrine, but in the constitutive gendering of liberalism as a discursive formation. The non-systematic appearance of women’s subordination is, she concludes, a ruse, since “the attributes and activities of citizenship and personhood within liberalism produce, require, and at the same time disavow their feminized opposites, [so that] the liberal subject emerges as pervasively masculinist.”<sup>5</sup> But beyond encoding masculine subjectivity in its lexicon, how does liberal discourse *produce the ruse* of its non-appearance? What are the *rhetorical* operations by means of which the liberal political imaginary manages even to produce the opposite appearance, that of actively pursuing women’s equality despite being premised on normatively masculine citizenship? And if sexist practices persisting within contemporary liberal culture “are neither ubiquitous nor systematic,” should liberalism itself be credited with transforming patriarchy into an anachronism?

In what follows, I pursue Brown’s intuition concerning the discursive power of liberalism to organize “popular consciousness” by posing the question of the relationship between women’s subordination and liberal discourse somewhat differently. Rather than asking how liberalism permits or sustains the continued subordination of women (and sexual minorities), I ask what the persistence of this subordination reveals about the internal logic and rhetorical sophistication of liberal discourse itself. My wager is that framing the problem this way allows feminist inquiry to elucidate the resilience of liberalism in the face of a seemingly endless series of powerful critiques launched against it. If, as Brown insists, “feminism operating with unreconstructed liberal discourse is . . . trapped,”<sup>6</sup> liberalism’s discursive hegemony poses a formidable obstacle. In addition to feminism itself, every democratic project contending with this obstacle has much to gain by understanding liberalism’s rhetorical dexterity.

The case study for this investigation is Ridley Scott’s 1991 film *Thelma & Louise*, among the most widely debated American films in decades. This genre-blending story of female rebellion against patriarchal authority prompted hundreds, if not thousands, of popular and academic publications, which continue appearing to this day. Focusing enormous public and academic attention on the institutional problem and media representation of gender as a political encumbrance, the film occupies the nexus of a vast network of critical discourses concerning the politics of gender. It thus offers exceptional access to that nexus and its relation to the rhetoric of the liberal imaginary.

The release of the film prompted a strong, and strongly divided, reaction from commentators in the popular press, followed swiftly by a torrent of academic commentary.<sup>7</sup> Socially conservative critics feigned taking the film literally and chastised it for encouraging women toward violent rebellion.<sup>8</sup> More progressive critics praised the film for giving voice to female discontent. Meanwhile, the film succeeded financially, made the cover of *Time*, and attained the hyperbolic status of

“instant classic.”<sup>9</sup> It was debated whether the film is excessive in its depiction of women’s rage; whether it offered an appropriate model of female agency; and whether it was hopeful or despairing concerning women’s prospects in a masculine world. It was even debated whether or not the film was “feminist” at all—as were the character, state, and prospects of feminism itself.<sup>10</sup>

The film compelled such attention because it differs significantly from its feminist predecessors: in addition to articulating a complex critique of phallogentrism, its tragic conclusion and high degree of reflexivity raise questions concerning the political efficacy of the critical frameworks operative in it. Academic reception of the film has focused on its narrative strategies and effects, fascinated by its consonance with variants of feminist critique and treating it largely as a fortuitously apt popular articulation of theoretical insights. As such readings demonstrate, the rhetorical sophistication of the film’s feminism is indeed exceptional; it supports highly complex analyses as if it had been produced in accordance with the very theories marshaled to elucidate it. Yet while generally astute, the reception of *Thelma & Louise* stops short of asking how it is possible for the patriarchal culture depicted *within* the film to produce the potent and popular critique of patriarchy enunciated *by* the film. Focusing on the film’s concern with the politics and representation of gender, critics see no need to interrogate the rhetorical aspirations motivating its feminism.

I propose to take this additional step by subsuming the problem of gender within an interrogation of the film’s rhetoric of citizenship. The question of how feminism should best be constructed in practice or represented in the media to facilitate gender justice imposes another question: How should citizenship be imagined so as to deliver on the promise of democratic agency for everyone? Thus, if other critics have asked what sort of feminism the film depicts or how (well) it does so, I ask what sort of citizenship the film’s complex, sometimes conflicted feminism adumbrates—and with what consequences. I contend that *Thelma & Louise* represents a sophisticated attempt to produce feminism as an essentially liberal discourse, whereby feminism comes to function not as a potential challenge to, but as a powerful alibi for the liberal model of democracy. In effect, the film’s carefully designed feminist narrative is its rhetorical vehicle for underwriting the liberal model of citizenship. Precisely insofar as the film is fully committed to its critique of gender politics, it is not simply a feminist film but a cunning rationalization of liberalism.

The film’s thematics of resistance or subversion—praised by critics as exemplifying assorted theories of gender hierarchy—are paradigmatic of liberal citizenship, and examining gender hierarchy without taking this into account tends to reinforce liberal logic, potentially at the expense of gender justice. Absent an explicit articulation between gender and the presumptively liberal discourse of citizenship, the most radical feminist critiques are easily rendered complicit with the liberal model, and there is a triple price to pay for this. First, the elision of liberalism as the matrix within which gender hierarchy emerges obscures key aspects of the film’s rhetorical project, preventing analyses of the film from achieving coherence. Second, locating sexual difference at the foundation of the symbolic order and identifying the latter with politics generally—without regard to the rhetorical framework the prevailing

political imaginary itself supplies for managing the problem of power—tends to produce an agenda for cultural politics unnecessarily limited in its capacity to meet its own goals. And third, the indifference to the cunning of the liberal rhetoric of citizenship ultimately undermines the very premises of feminist and queer critiques, prompting them to misconstrue liberalism's signature features as terminal flaws.

For the liberal imaginary, subjugation *will have been obsolete*—officially disavowed, normatively precluded, its demise anticipated and thus prospectively accomplished—so that when, in practice, inequality proves widespread, it is to be contested from within a presumptively liberal model of democratic agency, which is thus fortified through an encounter with that which might otherwise productively destabilize it. This speculative temporal economy of liberalism's emancipatory promise is pivotal to the preemptive cunning of liberal reason. In staging its critique of patriarchy, *Thelma & Louise* enacts the *liberal fantasy of citizenship*, the aim of which is, in part, to preempt the challenge feminism poses to it—a challenge which, though articulated in terms of gender and sexuality, threatens to undermine liberalism's constitutive political cynicism, exposing its internal limits to critical scrutiny.

To understand how the film's supposedly exemplary feminist critique reproduces the conditions that limit its efficacy, it is necessary to understand the pivotal role played by the trope of rebel citizenship in the liberal imaginary, the film, and its reception. This reception can be sorted heuristically into “media-centric” readings organized around the challenge the film poses to conventional representations of gender, and ones focusing more directly on its challenge to masculine hegemony in the juridical and symbolic orders. Both approaches concern the film's stance on the subordination of women; they differ in the degree to which they accent the mediation of this subordination by cinematic conventions or institutional and linguistic structures. The latter group includes a small but disproportionately important cluster of readings which, following Judith Butler, see the film as advancing a critique of sexual difference itself. Accordingly, I will proceed in three stages. First, I will sketch an account of the liberal trope of rebel citizenship. Second, by examining key features of these reading strategies and their theoretical underpinnings, I will highlight the consequences of eliding the question of liberal citizenship for the resulting accounts of the film and for the critical strategies themselves. Third, I will at the same time indicate an alternative understanding of the film's rhetorical project in its relation to the liberal model of citizenship.

### **Liberalism and the Rebel-Citizen**

In Walter Benjamin's critique of the “philosophy of right” underpinning the liberal notion of sovereignty, the figure of the outlaw appears at once as the “universal” analytic counterpart to the hegemony on violence that is the *sine qua non* of the state *and* as the historically specific, paradoxical product of liberal democracy.<sup>11</sup> He argues that the figure of the outlaw acquires its critical force with the emergence of the juridical state. As Jacques Derrida explains, for Benjamin “European law tends to prohibit individual violence and to condemn it not because it poses a threat to this or

that law but because it threatens the juridical order itself.”<sup>12</sup> The outlaw comes to exert a certain fascination because

[the outlaw] is not someone who has committed this or that crime for which one feels a secret admiration; it is someone who, in defying the law, lays bare the violence of the legal system, the juridical order itself.<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin gives the example of the “right to strike . . . guaranteed to workers who are therefore, besides the state, the only legal subject to find itself guaranteed the right to violence.”<sup>14</sup> Of course, the state does *not* view this right as a right to violence, offering it rather as a placebo that provides a strictly circumscribed space for dissent that sustains the appearance of democratic accountability without troubling the juridical order. Benjamin, however, perceives a radical political possibility inherent in this concession: “if the strike persists, we have a revolutionary situation.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly, “[t]he state can hardly stand this passage to the limit,” for it threatens to transform the demand for specific concessions into a wholesale transformation of existing political arrangements.<sup>16</sup>

So, insofar as stable juridical arrangements entail sovereignty as legitimate hegemony on violence, the law effectively produces violence as such: violence always presupposes some set of political arrangements. For this reason, the (actual or potential) violence of the outlaw is a disavowed form of citizenship, an irreducibly *civic* orientation fundamental to the very juridical edifice that establishes its legitimacy by opposing itself to it. Liberal democracy is distinctive in directly postulating the citizen *as* rebel or outlaw, so that political *demands* capable of challenging existing arrangements are reduced to forms of *resistance* that leave these arrangements untouched.

Whereas autocracy could not tolerate open rebellion, liberalism’s innovation is to re-signify it, to bring its disruptive force under the purview of political negotiation: demands threatening state hegemony on violence take the form of political positions within a range secured by this hegemony. Thus, the right to strike is not a reluctant concession that risks spinning out of the state’s control, but the means by which liberal logic overdetermines the field of political struggle. A liberal order is legitimate because it *disavows all hegemony* on power. The citizens’ task is to hold those in power to this disavowal; citizenship consists precisely in the outlaw’s function of “lay[ing] bare the violence of . . . the juridical order.”

Liberalism’s innovation is to present itself as a critique of power, casting doubt on the legitimacy of every institution, structure, and discourse of authority. From a liberal perspective, it is never surprising that a given form of authority is dysfunctional, corrupt, self-serving, coercive, or otherwise suspect. Within the liberal imaginary, any social agent occupying the place of power is *ipso facto* a transgressor whose hegemony can never be fully legitimate precisely because it is a hegemony. Here we face a fundamental impasse. On the one hand, liberalism seems vulnerable to the revolutionary gesture whereby a partial demand is elevated into a wholesale refusal of the juridical order; on the other hand, it appears this vulnerability is a ruse, an apparently secret, subversive possibility in fact deliberately held out by liberalism

precisely as a way of enticing potential revolutionaries into assuming their prescribed place within the existing order. The revolution is already built in: neither the civil rights movement nor feminism, for example, has, despite lodging demands that once seemed entirely incompatible with existing social arrangements, come close to subverting the liberal order. How, then, are we to think political agency in its transformative dimension? Is there a way out of the deadlock embodied by the figure of the outlaw or rebel-citizen? This is finally the problem with which the liberal rhetoric of *Thelma & Louise* confronts those feminisms which, notwithstanding their internal complexities, continue to rely on this figure.

### Reception Strategies

While differing on the particulars of *Thelma & Louise's* genre genealogy, Marita Sturken, Jack Boozer, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, Manohla Dargis, Marsha Kinder, Leo Braudy, and Peter Chumo agree that the film works within the framework of the American myth of individualism, and that it is by re-purposing genre conventions that the film stages its critique.<sup>17</sup> Positing genre as the privileged site of phallogentrism, this mode of analysis determines it as the film's main target: "*Thelma & Louise* . . . overturns the masculinist bias of the road" movie and sundry other genres.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Glenn Man claims for the film the post-Mulveyan project of constructing "a new way of seeing, a new bearer of the look" that would "deconstruct traditional male structures" of cinematic representation.<sup>19</sup> And Cohan and Hark cite Timothy Corrigan's account of the road movie as an expression of "masculinist fantasies of escape and liberation."<sup>20</sup> But this fantasy is constitutive of the American dream's liberalism; the dream is liberal fantasy writ nation-size. Moreover, normative masculinity has never been the genre's untroubled *premise*, but rather *a problem* the genre would address. As Corrigan himself points out, road movies concern the "hysterical crisis" of normative masculinity in twentieth-century US culture.<sup>21</sup> To analyze *Thelma & Louise* in terms of its presumed challenge to the masculinism and heteronormativity of existing genres, it is essential to take account of the political crisis these genres already encode.<sup>22</sup>

The consequences of foregoing such an analysis become clear in efforts to read the women's friendship as a figure of ambiguous desire troubling the foundational status of sexual difference. Queer analyses of the film view the women's friendship as encoding a homoerotic bond capable of functioning as a ground of political agency. They argue that *Thelma & Louise* is to be read as a lesbian love story that deploys a rhetoric of camp and ambiguity to thematize the cultural leitmotif of associating homosexual bonds with death.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Lynda Hart claims that the ambiguity of gender made visible by the paradoxical figure of a biological woman whose desire mimics that of men but cannot be identical to it de-naturalizes gender and destabilizes cultural, juridical, and institutional norms that constitute patriarchal social relations.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Sharon Willis argues that "the film pries gender away from sexuality [and] makes the body into its own costume," in order to "stage a form

of drag based on a masculinity that aggressively displays its difference from an anatomical base.”<sup>25</sup>

Such readings seek to follow Judith Butler, who construes the distinction between “law” and “power” wherein the former is “discursively and performatively instituted . . . within the terms of” the latter.<sup>26</sup> Following her reasoning, to frame the analysis of *Thelma & Louise* in terms of the contradiction between “inside” and “outside” patriarchal law would be fundamentally misguided. Butler reproaches feminism for uncritically presuming a subject already produced as sexed/gendered within a “heterosexual matrix” that must be deconstructed if the sex/gender dichotomy is to cease operating as a disciplinary technique.<sup>27</sup> Since the heterosexual matrix achieves the appearance of coherence by rendering a plurality of practices, bodies, desires, etc., effectively illegible, conspicuous displays of gender insubordination undercut its premises.

Her political interest concerns the exclusionary production of gendered subjects through historically specific gestures of foreclosure at the level of language,<sup>28</sup> in light of her view that “foreclosure is the way variable social prohibitions work,” where such prohibitions are the primary locus of discursive political struggle:<sup>29</sup>

I . . . regard this horizon as a historically variable schema or episteme, . . . transformed by the emergence of the non-representable within its terms, . . . compelled to reorient itself by virtue of the radical challenges to its transcendentality presented by “impossible” figures at the borders . . . of its surface.<sup>30</sup>

This critical investment in schemas of exclusion raises the question: What happens when a hegemonic discourse sustains itself precisely by claiming to challenge just this sort of transcendentality?<sup>31</sup> Put simply, our relation to juridical, normative, or social prohibitions is not fully captured by reference to *linguistic* categories and structures, even if these are linked to particular historical conditions. It is essential also to interrogate the rhetorical framework governing this link. Specifically, liberalism itself proposes a rhetoric of subversion that must be taken into account by any political project launched under its régime. The public circulation and popular appeal of a female couple contesting the masculinity of the law and the hegemonic construction of sexual difference attest to the “possibility” of such a figure, belying claims of its transcendental epistemic foreclosure.<sup>32</sup> Hence the indispensable question of sexual difference and subordination should be the beginning, rather than the end, of analysis.

Indifference to liberalism produces in even the most sophisticated readings of *Thelma & Louise* distortions that inadvertently mark liberalism’s influence. Hart offers the most sustained and nuanced example of a reading informed by Butler. Her aim is “to understand how the lesbian functions as a structural dialectic of appearance/disappearance in the process of making women’s aggression visible,” since “[t]hese representations carry with them the weight of a culture that has made the lesbian and the female criminal synonymous by *displacing* women’s aggression onto the sexually ‘deviant’ woman.”<sup>33</sup> Turning on a Lacanian reading of the women’s friendship, Hart’s highly complex analysis falls prey to the rigid structuralism of its

psychoanalytic model and ultimately cannot give a coherent account of this friendship's political valence.

She thus inevitably abandons the implication of her own insight that the figure of the lesbian functions to dissimulate the *political* character of female aggression. When, ultimately, Hart insists that the women's final kiss is "too prolonged for friendship," she allows the lesbian subtext to subsume the manifest text: "Thelma and Louise are not criminals because they shoot a rapist, rob a store, or blow up a truck. They are criminals because they are *together*, seeking escape from the masculine circuit of desire."<sup>34</sup> So despite all intervening qualifications and modulations, Hart ends up equating the lesbian and the outlaw, wherein the only possible function of friendship is to figure an otherwise "unspeakable" revolt. Nothing is left of friendship itself, its political possibilities, or its specific narrative functions in the film. Hart thus falls into the very trap she identifies and criticizes, substituting lesbian desire for dissident female solidarity. Ironically, the compulsion to "find the lesbian" is itself symptomatic of the psychoanalytic procedure that identifies a de-historicized, structuralist model of heterosexist normativity with its historically specific articulation within liberal modernity.<sup>35</sup> Like Thelma and Louise, this critical strategy cannot escape its own constitutive detour.

The figure of the lesbian is not remotely subversive; it only attenuates the threat of civic agency and the politicization of grievance implicit in the trope of the aggressive woman—the possibility that, as a side-effect of feminist and queer critique, citizenship will be disarticulated from the anti-political figure of the outlaw. In its very disintegration, Hart's analysis demonstrates that the lesbian does not disrupt the patriarchal régime of representation; on the contrary, she *supplements* it, providing an expedient integral category to which to consign the woman who resists the circumscription of her agency. Insofar as patriarchy is itself a response to the paradox of liberal citizenship that sustains the illusion of extra-political agency by staging a contest over the missing phallus, the function of the liberal imaginary is obscured. The contingencies of gender and sexuality here facilitate and dissimulate the project of recuperating the liberal rebel citizen. We can discern this process at work in key moments in the narrative.

### **Liberalism and the Rhetoric of Anachronism**

The film's project of disarticulating liberal citizenship from the embarrassment of gender hierarchy turns significantly on a temporal distortion that has profound effects on the narrative, producing hermeneutic complications that cannot be solved if the figure of the rebel citizen is elided or construed as pertaining exclusively to phallogentrism. The problem concerns the valence of sexual violence in the film.<sup>36</sup> Here the alternatives are between reading such violence as indicative of patriarchy's persistence in what amounts to a "rape culture"<sup>37</sup> and reading it as part of the "backlash" brought on by feminist progress in hastening the disintegration of masculine privilege.<sup>38</sup> The film's project compels it to maintain both, mutually exclusive, premises: patriarchy persists in constituting the socio-symbolic space

occupied by both the audience and the protagonists; yet the audience is also positioned to renounce patriarchy as the defunct discourse of crude, impotent imbeciles desperately demanding their disappearing privilege.

Nowhere in the film is the cunning of liberal reason more clearly—and problematically—evident. Accordingly, several critics attempt to historicize the film and its media reception as the site of a cultural anxiety concerning female “identification” with masculine violence<sup>39</sup> and a paranoid fantasy of female revenge supposedly evident in contemporaneous Hollywood fare, such as *Black Widow* and *Fatal Attraction*.<sup>40</sup> But attempts to read the film in such terms reproduce the temporal distortion that undermines the coherence of the resulting analyses.

How is this “revenge fantasy” set in motion? The key moment is Louise’s shooting of Harlan. Why *does* she shoot him? Her act is a silent and silencing response to his provocation. After he defiantly declares, “I shoulda gone ahead and fucked her!,” Louise demands: “What did you say?” When he spits back, “Suck my cock!,” she responds by shooting. The irreducible *necessity* of her response must not be missed. It is *because she cannot speak*, as it were, that she must shoot. Since the antagonism between them concerns the phallus, it concerns power as a prerogative of representation. Critics consistently praise the film for “offer[ing] a potentially powerful critique of women’s everyday experience of rape and sexual harassment [by linking] sexual assault to masculine control over . . . language.”<sup>41</sup> Harlan’s provocation is thus double: at the level of enunciation, he insists on monopolizing the right to “name” the women; at the level of enunciated content, he identifies this right with masculinity.

But what are the rhetorical reasons for the insult Harlan hurls at Louise, and what are its effects? The film’s implied audience is supposed to dis-identify with Harlan, and, insofar as we occupy the spectatorial position offered us, to cheer Louise’s response. Clearly, in consonance with liberal universalism, spectators irrespective of gender are invited to assume a position of superiority with respect to Harlan, on two levels. First, “we” are not sexist—or, our sexism is not so *uncivil*. Second, Harlan’s crudeness is a marker of inferior social status. What we reject is not simply his sexism but, more urgently, his presumptiveness. While most of the characters in the film belong to the working class, Harlan’s social inferiority with respect to the film’s implied viewers is selectively marked by his insistence on asserting what more “sophisticated”—or civil—members of the polity actively disavow.

From the orthodox psychoanalytic perspective, Harlan’s incivility is a failure of *sublimation*, which is itself marked by social status: only those in a position to benefit from deferring their will to power by routing it through socially productive forms submit to it. Harlan does not expect an adequate return on his psychic investment; he perceives little benefit in the liberal bargain. His crudeness figures a “return of the repressed” will toward gendered supremacy—a luxury of direct expression ironically more available to those with less social capital to lose in the eyes of the “politically correct,” implicitly bourgeois symbolic order embodied by the audience.

Harlan’s incivility, then, encodes a temporal distinction. From the perspective constructed by the film, Harlan is “behind the times”: “we” have long since

assimilated the lessons of feminism. Harlan's failure or refusal to emit public signs of gender sensitivity appears *anachronistic*, whether because he and men like him have *yet* to catch on or because they are deliberately staging a "backlash."<sup>42</sup> The film's critique of "rape culture" thus functions to locate its implied audience in the aftermath of feminism.<sup>43</sup> The *untimely* extemporaneousness of Harlan's insult degrades him in our eyes, making his murder both acceptable and deeply satisfying. But it also antiquates him and the patriarchal system of which he is construed as a relic. His death is thus satisfying for a second reason: it encourages the presumptively liberal audience to take credit for progressing beyond patriarchy. This transaction exploits the social fact of sexual violence to cement collective identification with the women: outraged by Harlan, our vicarious endorsement of Louise's response renders us her accomplices.<sup>44</sup> Hence the importance of seeing that this identification is secured by a kind of blackmail centered, ironically, on the audience's investment in the very juridical edifice with which it might otherwise dis-identify on account of Harlan's incivility.

For the spectator, then, the process of sublimation is activated through the production of surplus enjoyment in seeing Harlan get what he deserves.<sup>45</sup> The audience has good reason to invest its psychic energies in derogating patriarchy: its investment will pay off by producing effective forms of social agency—the happy consciousness of "good subjects" of liberalism. Hating and sacrificing the vulgar "subject supposed to believe" (because direct belief is what vulgarity means) endorses the official Law of liberal equality that is to support the ironic stance from which the film assails patriarchy. This is the *beginning of the end* (which is therefore the beginning, again) of the film: what will have been found intolerable is the *contamination* of the Law by masculinity—but *not the form of law itself*. The film's critique of patriarchy is thus underwritten by the latter's putative divergence from the liberal ideal of equality: the law is not abstract enough; it secretly smuggles in a positive content.

Feminist, queer, and multiculturalist critiques of liberalism interrogate the disempowering effects of abstract universality on subjects burdened by contingent particular embodiments.<sup>46</sup> But the film demonstrates that such critiques are themselves subject to the cunning of liberal reason.<sup>47</sup> The murder of Harlan is to be justified, if at all, by reference to Louise's disenfranchisement and systematic silencing by this logic. According to the familiar feminist/multiculturalist account, it cannot be justified juridically because the law is, in its universality, effectively "masculine" or "phallogenic." This is so either because in place of true abstraction we have a secret particular content which comes to be "read" as its adequate embodiment,<sup>48</sup> or because true abstraction itself is "masculine" insofar as it establishes itself as "abstract" by marking positivity as "feminine."<sup>49</sup> As a result, Louise sees her fate as sealed in advance: in the context of liberal abstraction, there is no justificatory rhetoric she can produce, since, as a woman, she is already effectively an illegal, (over)embodied subject illegible within the idiom of universality. From the law's perspective, Harlan had done nothing to her, and his place in the interminable series of injurious acts perpetrated upon her under the aegis of liberal universality is a

priori insufficient justification for her act. She cannot be excused for attacking a particular agent of an unjust system. She might be excused for attacking the system itself, but it is a bitter irony that there is no discernible form of embodied agency adequate to the task of dismantling an abstract symbolic framework.

So the surplus enjoyment Harlan's murder produces is an instance of repressive de-sublimation, turning on audience dis-identification with markers of positivity. In order to accept Louise's act as just and even laudable—as a paradoxical example of *excess justice*—we must endorse the premises and logic that make her act appear necessary. In hating Harlan, we explicitly disavow patriarchy, even if we remain tacitly complicit with it. This disavowal decisively depends on the film's metonymic identification of patriarchy with his embodied positivity—his suddenly “ethnic” masculinity saturated by violence, vulgarity, and repugnant particularity. Yet we disavow Harlan in order to identify with a form of embodied particularity we are enjoined to respect precisely for its historical suffering. Our good conscience is thereby affirmed, but only at the cost of endorsing as necessary the *gap* between abstraction and particularity. Liberal universality is thus re-inscribed as the criterion according to which we can recognize Louise as an unjust victim of oppression and Harlan as the *contingent transgressor* of the principle of equality. Foreclosed thereby is the possibility that such transgression is not contingent but inherent to the abstract principle itself. It is only on condition that we ourselves violate this principle by accepting Louise as its adequate embodiment that we are able to indict Harlan and *enjoy* his murder.

What stuns Louise is not only the excessiveness of Harlan's arrogance but also the aptness of this excess. It literally renders her mute: there are effectively no words, no rhetorical resources, by means of which she might challenge the discourse he voices. We are thus back to the thesis that patriarchy operates at the level of language itself, a thesis that stipulates that linguistic phallogentrism constrains the available rhetorical resources but never asks how the regulative rhetorical framework—in this case, that of liberalism—in turn constrains patriarchy. In view of subsequent narrative development, we should consider this early gesture on Louise's part a grave error compelled by the film's polemical inflation of language over rhetoric.

Permitting herself to be interpellated by Harlan, Louise becomes complicit in her own subjection. The women then spend the rest of the film trying to escape both the law and their constitutive guilt as “bad subjects.” It is important to keep in view both levels of culpability here—as well as the overdetermined connection between them, which renders the discourse of criminality more than simply metaphorical. The solution would consist in discovering or developing a rhetoric of self-representation, of inventing a way they can speak. If the women's early failure is a failure of invention, then their subsequent rebellion is a rebellion against their own complicity in patriarchy. Hence the performative contradiction that results when critique focuses on the problem of gender while eliding the efficacy of liberal meta-discourse: within the logic of the diegesis, the women lack access to an adequate rhetoric, but as the film's very existence demonstrates, this lack is articulated from the perspective and in

the idiom of liberalism, which thereby precisely constitutes this “missing” rhetoric. The resulting impasse is what leads the film into a diegetic cul-de-sac.

If, as Luce Irigaray observes, “the girl does not know what she is missing when she discovers her ‘castration,’” then what has been *foreclosed* for her is the power of (self-) representation. This power is, of course, factitious, and patriarchy is a symbolic economy in which men are imagined to have “it” while women are imagined to *be* “it.” The feminist insight is that, insofar as “castration” qua foreclosure is the condition of meaning and subjectivity, women face a double burden. On the one hand, they must challenge masculine discursive hegemony; on the other hand, they cannot directly “seize the phallus,” as it were. This, however, is precisely the liberal formula: it is clearly understood that the place of power is constitutively empty, so to challenge any occupant of this place is the very definition of citizenship.

Hence, after Louise kills Harlan, she continues to speak to him, saying “You watch your mouth!” Later, Thelma cannot control her laughter as she recalls Harlan’s “reaction:” “Did you see the look on his face? He sure wasn’t expecting *that!*” The object of this comment is not only Harlan but, more urgently, Louise herself. Gripping the symbolic instrument of phallic power, Louise does not control it but is controlled through it by something as alien as it is intimate to her. She remains in its grip a moment after firing, addressing the man she realizes she has killed. This is a full display of Louise’s incoherent relation to the symbolic order. In fact, there is nothing in the film to indicate that the women ever cease to “read” the killing of Harlan from *the perspective of the liberal imaginary*. This is the passage they cannot accomplish, but not because of any ideological closure wherein patriarchy has colonized all socio-symbolic space. By rhetorical necessity, their fate is sealed diegetically when Louise refuses to go through Texas, because this prevents them from traversing their fantasmatic relation to the symbolic order by rejecting the liberal bargain.

It is thus important to differentiate the journey each woman takes from that of the other. Louise is the instigator whose crime automatically involves Thelma, and it is significant that Louise is the jaded one, experienced with the intricate ruses of power. Thelma is a simple-minded dupe; she does not quite know just how much of a victim she has been. Yet, it is Thelma who ultimately “drives” Louise: precisely because she is jaded, Louise is incapable of imagining a different relation to power. It is Thelma, whom Harlan’s assault and Louise’s intervention alert to her predicament, who will say “Something’s crossed over in me. I can’t go back.” Henceforth, Thelma’s understanding of the women’s situation will control the action.

Ultimately, the incommensurability of the women’s respective subjective stances at the end of the road allegorizes the rhetorical impasse. After all, why don’t they simply surrender? If, as several critics note, the journey is fantasmatic, it is because this “real” journey is simultaneously Louise’s fantasy, a fantasy in which she involves Thelma.<sup>50</sup> That is, the psychic drama in which Thelma has been conscripted is actually Louise’s. This is what enables her to retain a distance toward its governing logic, enabling her to help Louise through it. Nonetheless, the effort is short-circuited from the start by Louise’s insistence on the detour. In effect, the women’s suicide repeats this founding gesture: their leap into the canyon is itself a detour. Far from saving them from the

claws of the symbolic order, it destroys any possibility of transforming it. Finally abandoning fantasy, they manage only a limited intervention into the symbolic, in the mode of memory.

If the true revolution is to take place at the level of representation—if it requires changing the coordinates of the symbolic order—then there is nothing about arrest which would either prevent the women from accomplishing such an act or inescapably re-inscribe them within patriarchy. The film's project demands that they misrecognize the locus and nature of their problem, as evidenced in the way the space they traverse is heavily marked by Louise's fantasy concerning the masculinity of the symbolic order. All the thumping, squirting, and pumping machinery that saturates the physical environment renders palpable Louise's projections concerning the field of power. If the trip is a fantasy, then its mode of signification is to be approached from Louise's vantage. Yet it is a vantage the audience is incoherently supposed at once to endorse and to refute. We accept it as a truth to which Louise's experience testifies. Yet the very possibility of its public articulation in the mode of social critique refutes this truth—it means the symbolic order cannot be totally saturated by masculine power, and Louise's perception must be partial. This is a "feminism" that takes back with one hand what it gives with the other.

So Louise continues to address the dead Harlan not because she fails to grasp that he is dead, but because she never fully grasped that he was alive. Insofar as she heard him speak the familiar and frightening discourse of sexist power, she never heard him speak at all. Unable to distinguish between Harlan and his discourse, she was in effect shooting his speech. Knowing full well that this target she could not have killed, she continues to address it, insisting that it "shut up." The audience is interpellated into Louise's error—we, too, are encouraged to take Harlan for a subject who really believes, or directly embodies, the discourse of masculine domination.

But this is precisely the problem. From the film's own perspective, this particular discourse is effectively "dead," in the sense that it is *no longer* socially acceptable to enunciate it. Even Harlan resorts to it despite himself. Recall that he begins by trying to seduce the women in accordance with the proper norms of civility. He knows well enough not to assume the position of one who directly speaks patriarchal privilege. In this, he is the perfect counterpart to Louise: both see civility as a mere mask, an alibi for underlying "true" intentions which must be concealed inasmuch as they violate avowed social norms. This comports perfectly with those feminist accounts wherein the democratic promise of equality is a cynical ruse that sustains patriarchy under its aegis.

But why is this ruse *necessary*? After all, patriarchal relations could easily be secured by other alibis, such as those traditionally supplied by religion. Doesn't the democratic ethos precisely pressure patriarchal power, rendering it per se transgressive? And doesn't this pressure vitiate any ideological advantage to be gained by deploying the veil of equality? It is as if, from the moment liberal democracy announces itself, *patriarchy will have been obsolete*. If it persists, it does so *deviously*, against the explicit injunction of liberal universality. Consequently, it is not that liberalism remains secretly patriarchal, but that it *requires the undead corpse, the specter*, of patriarchy to retain its symbolic consistency, its ethical promise. The claim

that this promise cannot be fulfilled should therefore be reformulated: what cannot transpire is the recognition that it will have been fulfilled in being posited. What continues within liberalism is not patriarchy as such, but rather its semblance or simulacrum—not the persistence of an earlier order, but a fantasy of systematic power posited from within the liberal horizon itself. This is what makes it necessary to announce simultaneously the end of gender inequality and the ubiquity of patriarchy. Put simply, liberal democracy would be that which renders obsolete the various forms of disempowering inequality. As such, it absolutely requires the evidence of this obsolescence, which assumes spectral form: they must be defunct yet remain threatening. If the film is to succeed in its project of salvaging the liberal model, it must position Harlan as the undead relic of patriarchy, to which Louise continues to ascribe absolute authority.

Yet this requirement also exacts a diegetic price. In a telltale passage, Cathy Griggers claims that

*Thelma and Louise*, as a form of social satire, brings to . . . its audience's social consciousness a spectrum of negative stereotypes of men. These . . . include the . . . domineering husband, the . . . narcissistic lover, the rapist . . . , the irresponsible but sexually attractive . . . outlaw. . . , the "officer" (a man invested in authority), the infantile but aggressive truckdriver (the public sexual-harassment offender), the cold and punitive FBI officer (a bad imago of the Father/Law), and the paternalistic Detective Slocumbe [*sic*] . . . . This type, the sympathetic but paternalistic authority, turns out to be the most dangerous because he believes in his own ability to "do the right thing." . . . <sup>51</sup>

This gloss is exemplary in demonstrating what happens when the grammar of power obscures its rhetorical dimensions. The law might be intrusively paternalistic, but the liberal order presents itself as a *critique* of such paternalism. The privilege accorded such critique within the liberal imaginary is what makes possible this social satire in the first place. Moreover, it is central to the satire's rhetorical project to depict the law as patriarchal in order to determine citizenship as a tragic myth of rebellion.

These stereotypes are not simply ways of exposing the dependence of the corresponding forms of masculine subjectivity upon the systematic subjugation of women. These men do not become comically inept in the absence of women; they are *already* inept, lacking dignity, integrity, and genuine agency. They are masculine only insofar as they live in hysterical attachment to phallic fantasy—and this is evident irrespective of the women's actions. These two facts—the men's impotence and its priority in relation to the women's exposure of it—enable us to understand the actual function of this "social satire." The women's "revenge" cannot be understood as directed at men as more or less adequate embodiments of patriarchal law. Even the various law enforcement officers—the FBI agent, the highway patrolman, Slocumbe—operate as such only through a certain irreducible excess: the first two enjoy their authority too much, while Slocumbe thinks his own humanity exceeds the law's mechanical strictures. In other words, the first two rely on the law as the artificial support of, or alibi for, their fetishistic fantasies of potency, while Slocumbe

acquires his sense of agency by reducing the Law to the series of its specific enunciations. In effect, none of the male figures in the film is able to embody the agentic privilege supposedly granted to men under patriarchy.

Patriarchy, then, is not adequately understood if conceived exhaustively as masculine privilege. It is crucial to see that, under liberalism, we are no longer dealing with a political order in which power is legitimately distributed on the basis of gender difference, but rather with one in which gender difference is but one of a series of normatively obsolete forms of hierarchy given new life as specters—anachronistic structures deployed to produce effects determined by the new logic of power while retaining their old appearance. Gendered inequality and sexual violence obviously persist under liberalism, but their distinct new function presupposes, even as it undermines, the old: their determination as indices of a hegemonic power rhetorically ensures the credibility of liberalism as a discourse of resistance. No longer a symptom of power structure, the anachronism of sexual violence ironically lends coherence to a rhetoric organized around the premise of resistance to such structures.

This anachronism simultaneously supports a specific form of ideological dissimulation. Political energy is constantly directed at surpassing these outmoded, outrageous inequalities in the name of democracy, a gesture which sustains both the promise of liberalism and the alienation of political agency. When liberalism reflexively posits the emptiness of power, an essential misrecognition disappears: acknowledgment of the absence of any non-contingent principle legitimating the existing order amounts to the disintegration of this order. What is routinely glossed as “Kafka-esque” about modern legal bureaucracy is its diabolical arbitrariness—the palpable absence of any necessary bond among its demands, gestures, and procedures—which cruelly imposes onto the subject herself the burden of positing this bond. This is why bureaucratic subjects are always guilty: completing the juridical order, they become *responsible* for its efficacy.

Accordingly, when Louise refuses to go through Texas, it is ultimately not simply because of what happened to her there or because of her fear, however legitimate, of getting caught by the hyper-sexist Texas authorities. Whatever their merits, both reasons serve as alibis for another fear: the dawning awareness that omnipotent patriarchy is a fiction disguising the absence of authoritative order. This is the real reason Louise shoots Harlan: her act retroactively transforms Thelma’s rape into an instance of symptomatic, rather than arbitrary, violence. This is why killing him *makes her guilty* in a double sense—on the one hand, it legitimates the law’s response, imputing to it fearsome authority; on the other hand, it links Louise’s agency to symbolic efficiency. The consequence becomes clear at the film’s conclusion, when the actual impotence of patriarchy has become evident. The impasse the women reach is also double: on the one hand is the violent response they have succeeded in provoking from the law; on the other hand is their own guilt in having provoked it. The former serves as the final alibi of the latter: “Let’s not get caught” finally means “Let’s not acknowledge the impotence of the symbolic order.” Death is far preferable to subjective destitution, but for this very reason it fails to rise to the dignity of a transformative political act.

Thus, media responses that denounce the film's militancy, far from constituting a "backlash," tacitly cooperate in its nostalgic project of "returning" to a more reassuring form of struggle. The assertion that the film "goes too far" amounts to a call for a return to the imaginary time when "moral sentiments" could legitimately be deployed as the measure of justice. In this, critics are in full agreement with the protagonists. At the same time, the women's insistence—even in the course of their own violence—on respecting the rules of civility protracts the tradition of subjecting positive law to transcendental ethical precepts. The insistence on maintaining the appearance of appearance is a gesture destined to consolidate the fantasy of "the *man* behind the curtain."

To secure this basic claim concerning the inscrutability of patriarchy, the film must legitimate Louise's shooting of Harlan. As we have seen, it does so, first, by casting Harlan as vulgar and uncivil, soliciting audience disidentification. The generic category of "patriarchy" is instantiated by a particular figure of inferior status, and this is strictly necessary in order simultaneously to secure the metonymic representation (Harlan represents a genuine feature of patriarchal discourse) and to legitimate the shooting (for the audience as well as in narrative terms). It does so, second, by casting as constitutive a particular rhetorical ruse of patriarchal discourse: Harlan approaches the women through a redneck version of the chivalric code, which Louise correctly identifies as a lure designed to facilitate and justify the subsequent assault, itself staged as a good-faith effort to recoup the sublimatory "investment" of patiently following the rules in pursuit of that which Harlan perceives as an entitlement.

Staging the encounter between Harlan and the women in this way, the narrative effaces the moment of decision involved in Louise's act of violence. As a number of conservative critics eagerly pointed out, the shooting is unjustified. From the perspective of the narrative, however, the choice is not entirely, or even sufficiently, her own. As a rape victim, as Thelma's loyal friend, under duress and provoked by an act of hate speech she knows to be tacitly legitimated by a broader social and juridical logic of which it is an index, Louise is *compelled* to pull the trigger. Despite the politically unpalatable fact that to legitimate her act it would be necessary to discount her agency, a legitimating account might actually succeed in court. Conversely, we are to sympathize with Louise precisely insofar as her hand is forced by the diabolical cunning of patriarchy, and our sympathy is essential to justify the women's subsequent flight from the law. They cannot risk a juridical procedure because the deck is stacked against them from the start. But if there is any way to mitigate Louise's culpability, it would be by reference to "diminished capacity." However, the narrative must at all costs forestall the implication of "diminished capacity" for female agency. Hence the rhetorical conundrum: Louise is justified in her shooting insofar as Harlan instantiates a patriarchal discourse in the face of which she is impotent; yet the claim of impotence is her best chance to avoid punishment by patriarchal law. At the same time, her act counts as *resistance* only insofar as it is in some important sense deliberate. We sympathize with her because Harlan—and patriarchal discourse—*deserve* it.

The narrative thus both *presupposes* and *disavows* Louise's responsibility for this act. Responsibility is essential to legitimate the *killing*: as one who voices and

embodies the authoritative prerogative of patriarchal violence, Harlan *should* be killed, and this “should” has the force of an ethical injunction that in turn entails subjective responsibility—*someone* ought to shoot the vile cretin; “we” in the audience would do it if we could, and we enjoy a modicum of vindication when Louise does. Yet responsibility for the *act* must be removed from Louise’s shoulders, so that it can be traced to patriarchy itself. This rhetorical gesture is crucial, insofar as it instantiates and sustains one of the narrative’s central claims—the idea that patriarchy has insinuated itself into the very fabric of the symbolic order in a way that effaces any meaningful distinction between the speech of a particular male and the entire régime of legal representation. This is why Louise feels provoked in the first place: what she *accurately* recognizes in Harlan’s “Suck my cock!” is not simply his *own* bilious sexism but the authorizing reverberations of an entire political structure. And *this* structure she does mean to kill. The paradox of agency is here on full display. We endorse Louise’s act insofar as we concede the closure of the patriarchal symbolic order, but in so doing we must overlook this act’s status as an *act*, by definition irreducible to its causal determination.

This is important because already discernible here, in the moment that inaugurates the narrative and sets the terms of its development and the horizon of its critique, is a kind of self-subversion of the critical procedure associated with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Since commentators repeatedly extol the film for deploying this mode of critique, and for articulating it nimbly in narrative form, this self-subversion indicates an inherent limit of the theoretical framework underpinning this mode, a limit that coincides with the reduction of rhetoric to “language,” of the meta-discourse of citizenship to a mechanical grammar of power.

Clearly, in order to generate the women’s predicament, the film must pass through—in order to disavow—a moment of genuine agency. This moment of decision is strictly necessary: it demonstrates not that the women are deluded in attributing diabolical power to patriarchy, but that a belief in the devious coherence of power is itself ineluctable. Within the film’s rhetorical scheme, “patriarchy” secures this belief. Hence the fact that Louise’s act entails an irreducible moment of decision raises the question of her own investment in the patriarchal order. Yes, she tries to kill it; yet she knows that this is impossible. She may even suspect that the discourse of patriarchy is *virtually* dead, anachronistic, transgressive of avowed norms. This discourse cannot be killed not because it has successfully colonized the symbolic order but because this order is structured around the liberal conception of power as an empty place. The women’s belief in patriarchy has the virtue of lending this order the appearance of necessity; it seems to name this order’s secret grammar. By contrast, liberalism’s rhetoric of opposition to necessity seems to destabilize any grammar in which to ground agency. It is in order to restore her subjection as a condition of her agentivity that Louise shoots the presumptively dead discourse voiced by Harlan. By annihilating, momentarily, the self-evident facticity of its death, Louise resurrects the specter of patriarchy in relation to which the women can attempt to negotiate a measure of autonomy.

This further accounts for the necessity of continuing to observe the strictures of civility. Surely, as outlaws by virtue of their gender, the women are free to dispense with politeness. Indeed, codified courtesy should now appear distasteful to them insofar as they can no longer escape the recognition that solicitude is part of the patriarchal stratagem. This apparently inexplicable wish to continue belonging to the already distorted category of “humanity,” which, thanks to both Harlan and Slocombe, they *know* prefigures them as second-class citizens, is not simply an instance of camp deployed to deconstruct gender categories; it indicates the need to secure the illusion that some coordinating principle of social membership—that is, *citizenship*—stands behind it.<sup>52</sup> Civility implies a *reason* to be civil: it is the locus of the social bond, the discursive materialization of social totality.<sup>53</sup> The idea that this contract is patriarchal both consolidates its efficacy and promotes rebellious disidentification as the proper stance with respect to it—that is, liberal citizenship.

The women’s friendship must therefore be reconsidered. Insofar as Louise conscripts Thelma into her fantasy, the women function as each other’s points of transference. Louise will teach Thelma the “truth” about the patriarchal symbolic order; Thelma will make sure the women never risk direct confrontation with the absence of symbolic efficiency. The women’s friendship is the matrix of the confusion regarding the relationship between the film’s homoerotic subtext and its ideologically ambivalent manifest text. In its appropriation of genre conventions, the film appears to continue the tradition of determining citizenship as rebellion, so that the women’s friendship is to be read in terms of political solidarity and their death as the tragedy of a thwarted utopian hope. Such a thoroughly liberal reading deploys friendship to imagine an alternative principle of community, one that is only reluctantly political. We are then left to wonder if the rhetorical failure of this alternative is due to the intractability of patriarchy within liberalism or to the trope of rebel citizenship itself. On the other hand, read through an appropriation of Butler’s theory, the women’s friendship seems to encode an illegitimate form of desire which disturbs the smooth functioning of the ideological edifice almost by its very existence. Yet in order to attribute political efficacy to this figure of lesbian friendship, it is necessary to read the film’s ending teleologically as a symbolic victory—despite the women’s death and the absence of any subsequent change in the heterosexist order. These two perspectives, in turn, intersect in symptomatically aporetic readings of the film to produce the thoroughly ambivalent image of female friendship as a latent form of agency which is somehow both powerful and impotent, both beyond the frontiers of the symbolic order and concealed within them. Owing to a certain cunning of liberalism, for the critical perspectives thematized by the film, friendship as a model of revolutionary politics is a dead end.

## Conclusion

I have argued that reception of the film that confines its focus to the problem of gender misses the wider implications of the film’s political project, which consists in disarticulating phallocentrism from liberalism and recuperating the latter’s

anti-political conception of citizenship. The correspondence between the film's rhetoric and the critical strategies organizing its reception suggests that a revision of our understanding of the former should raise questions regarding the adequacy of the latter. To the extent that the film is treated as a popular articulation of current cultural critique, the limits of this articulation indicate corresponding limits of the critical strategies governing the film's rhetoric. It is finally the nature and implications of these limits that are at stake here.

Focusing on a series of specific political struggles—such as those involving race, gender, sexuality, or social class—it is easy to lose sight of the way the liberal project supplies the very language by which these struggles are conducted or constrained. Moreover, the discourse of liberalism, while certainly contingent, is not simply optional, since it represents a distinctive and structurally hegemonic imaginary solution to the elementary challenges of democratic governance. The crux of this solution is the anti-political stance for which liberalism is often berated.<sup>54</sup> Crucially, this solution is not only conceptual and institutional but also rhetorical. This is why liberal public culture is organized substantially around the paradoxical fiction of citizenship as an anti-political stance. That is, liberalism is not reducible to a particular enunciated content—or, as Brown has it, a lexicon—subject to logical strictures of systematic coherence and non-contradiction; it is an ongoing project that mobilizes diverse modes of enunciation for which the apparently irreconcilable impulses (such as a public commitment to equality and simultaneous practices of subordination) function as culturally and politically productive resources.

For this reason, critical media and cultural studies in general must urgently grapple with the way liberal discourse operates rhetorically to underwrite and overdetermine the hegemonic struggles taking place in liberal public culture. Currently, even political projects advanced from perspectives intrinsically hostile to liberalism—such as certain feminist ones—neglect the rhetorical obstacle liberalism poses for them. For the political struggles promoted within critical media and cultural studies to be effective, their advocates must take liberalism much more seriously. Just as liberalism is not one of a set of conceptual options, neither is it one of a series of interchangeable discourses. Modifying or dislodging it requires a nuanced understanding of its rhetorical efficacy—that is, of the way it both appears to solve complex problems of democratic cooperation and succeeds in securing its solution as contingent, elective, and (precisely) democratic. Insofar as the liberal project paradoxically deploys critique to cement its own fundamental premises, distinctions, and discursive logics, identifying and examining popular articulations of (say, feminist) critique ought to be the beginning, not the end, of critical investigation.

## Notes

- [1] Wendy Brown, "Liberalism's Family Values," *States of Injury* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 138.
- [2] Brown, 137.
- [3] Brown, 137, original emphasis.

- [4] Brown, 138, original emphasis.
- [5] Brown, 164.
- [6] Brown, 164.
- [7] In light of the film's extraordinary visibility, I will forego the customary plot summary.
- [8] Though outnumbered by sympathetic reviews, hostile critics were prominent and influential. The most widely cited are Joe Bob Briggs, "Mantrack," *Playboy* 41, issue 2 (1994); Fred Bruning, "A Lousy Deal for Women—and Men," *Maclean's*, 12 August 1991; Margaret Carlson, "Is This What Feminism Is All About?," *Time*, 24 June 1991; Richard Grenier, "Killer Bimbos," *Commentary*, September 1991; Richard Johnson, *New York Daily News* columnist, quoted in Richard Schickel, "Gender Bender," *Time*, 24 June 1991: 53; John Leo, "Toxic Feminism on the Big Screen," *US News & World Report*, 10 June 1991; Terrence Rafferty, "Outlaw Princesses," *New Yorker*, 3 June 1991; John Robinson, "The Great Debate over *Thelma and Louise*," *Boston Globe*, 14 June 1991; and John Simon, "Movie of the Moment," *National Review*, 8 July 1991.
- [9] Richard Schickel, "Gender Bender," *Time*, 24 June 1991.
- [10] The scrutiny prompted screenwriter Callie Khouri to aver that "[t]he issues surrounding the film are feminist, but the film itself is not." See Lizzie Francke, "Interview with Callie Khouri," *Guardian*, 9 July 1991: 17. The film was only the most recent, and not the most provocative, entry in a long roster of films challenging the social, cultural, and political marginalization of women. An exhaustive list would be lengthy, but earlier television hits such as *That Girl* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and films such as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), *Woman Under the Influence* (1974), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), *Norma Rae* (1979), and *Working Girl* (1988), presented no less audacious visions of female agency than the campy violence of *Thelma & Louise*. Indeed, Susan Faludi's list of 80s "backlash" films attests to the consolidation of Hollywood feminism years prior to the release of *Thelma & Louise*. Moreover, the theme of sexual violence as a symptom of structural patriarchy had become a staple of media feminism, reaching a kind of apex with *The Accused* (1988).
- [11] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986).
- [12] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority," ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992), 33.
- [13] Derrida, 33.
- [14] Derrida, 34.
- [15] Derrida, 34.
- [16] Derrida, 34–35.
- [17] Marita Sturken, *Thelma & Louise* (London: BFI, 2000); Jack Boozer, "Seduction and Betrayal in the Heartland: *Thelma and Louise*," *Literature-Film Quarterly* 23, issue 3 (1995); Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, "Introduction," *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1997); Manohla Dargis, "The Roads to Freedom," *Sight and Sound* 1, issue 3 (1991); Marsha Kinder, "*Thelma & Louise* and *Messidor* as Feminist Road Movies," *Film Quarterly* 4, issue 2 (1991–92): 29–30; Leo Braudy, "Satire into Myth," *Film Quarterly* 4, issue 2 (1991–92): 27–28; Peter N. Chumo II, "At the Generic Crossroads with *Thelma and Louise*," *Post Script* 13, issue 2. Similarly, for Yvonne Tasker the film revises the masculinism of action cinema (Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 134–52) and for Marleen Barr it verges on feminist science fiction (Marleen Barr, "*Thelma and Louise*: Driving toward Feminist SF," *Foundation* 53: 80–86).
- [18] Cohan and Hark, 11.
- [19] Glenn Man, "Gender, Genre, and Myth in *Thelma and Louise*," *Film Criticism*, Fall 1993, Vol. XVIII, No. 1. Sustained analyses of the gaze in the film are offered by Ann Putnam, "The Bearer of the Gaze in Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*," *Western American Literature* 27(4):

291–302 and Brenda Cooper, “‘Chick Flicks’ as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in *Thelma & Louise*,” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 23, issue 3 (2000): 277–306.

- [20] Cohan and Hark, 3.
- [21] Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 137–62.
- [22] Other critics situate the film within genres they see as already more congenial to women. Carol Clover, Linda Williams, Jacinda Read, and Hilary Naroni view it as a rape-revenge film. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 234; Linda Williams, “What Makes a Woman Wander,” *Film Quarterly* 4, issue 2 (1991–92): 28–29; Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000); Hilary Naroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005). Susan Morrison regards it as a woman’s film (Susan Morrison, “Pearl, Hilda, Thelma, and Louise: The Woman’s Film Revisited,” *Cineaction* 30: 48–53); and James Maxfield finds in it elements of noir (James Maxfield, *The Fatal Woman* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996). The strategy of such readings is to contest the masculinism of some genres by marshaling a countervailing series of others.
- [23] Cathy Griggers, “Thelma and Louise and the Cultural Generation of the New Butch-Femme,” *Film Theory Goes To The Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hillary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- [24] Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). In addition to Hart and Griggers, Barbara Johnson attempts a “disappointing” queer reading. See Barbara Johnson, “Lesbian Spectacles: Reading *Sula*, *Passing*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *The Accused*,” in *Media Spectacles*, ed. Marjorie Garber et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 160–66. Yvonne Tasker observes that *Thelma & Louise* was routinely appropriated as a lesbian film (*Spectacular Bodies*, pages 29, 134). Noting that many critics commented on its lesbian subtext, Marita Sturken argues that the film openly accommodates both straight and queer readings (*Thelma & Louise*, 77).
- [25] Sharon Willis, “Hardware and Hardbodies, or What Do Women Want?: A Reading of *Thelma and Louise*,” *Film Theory Goes To The Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hillary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 127.
- [26] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 38–9.
- [27] *Gender Trouble*, 5–6.
- [28] On this point, she is especially clear in her exchange with Žižek. See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000).
- [29] *Contingency*, 149.
- [30] *Contingency*, 149.
- [31] Butler has recently begun to take up a version of this problem. In particular, see Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Even here, however, she is more interested in the politics of kinship than in the possibility of decentering “defiance” as the privileged mode of political agency. (See pages 1–2.)
- [32] Butler would likely deny that her work authorizes such claims advanced on behalf of *Thelma & Louise*. Yet her focus on epistemic exclusion tends to accelerate (appropriations of) her work in the direction of a structuralism from which she seeks to distance herself.
- [33] Hart, 76.
- [34] Hart, 79.
- [35] In a variation on this theme, David Russell locates this compulsion in the popular media’s dismissal of the film as “too lesbian.” See David Russell, “‘I’m Not Gonna Hurt You’: Legal Penetrations in *Thelma and Louise*,” *Americana* 1, issue 1 (2002), [http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring\\_2002/russell.htm](http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2002/russell.htm) (accessed 20 August 2007).

Russell argues that the charge of lesbianism betokens popular anxiety about the women's ascension to what Lauren Berlant calls "diva citizenship" (in Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 1995)). Yet while he maintains focus on the rhetorical instrumentality of the film's lesbian subtext and is the only critic to give any prominence to the question of citizenship, he too praises the film in exuberantly liberal terms: "Thelma and Louise become patriots in a new revolution, that of activating and celebrating various identity positions outside the law."

- [36] The most sustained analysis of this issue is Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 121–53. The subject also figures prominently in: Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Martha McCaughey and Neal King, "Rape Education Videos: Presenting Mean Women Instead of Dangerous Men," *Teaching Sociology*, 23, issue 4 (1995): 374–88; Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2005); Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-revenge Cycle* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Spelman and Martha Minow, "Outlaw Women: An Essay on *Thelma & Louise*," *New England Law Review* 1281 (1992); Marita Sturken, *Thelma & Louise* (London: BFI, 2000), 61–69; and Shirley Wiegand, "Deception and Artifice: *Thelma, Louise, and the Legal Hermeneutic*," *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 22, issue 25 (1997).
- [37] Projansky, 9. While only a few critics explicitly focus on the question of sexual violence, most critics writing about the film understand the sexual victimization of its protagonists as a synecdoche of systematic subordination of women. See Dana Cloud, "The Therapeutics of Feminism: From Self-Esteem to Suicide," *Consolation and Control in American Culture and Politics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 119. Despite numerous differences, most commentators understand Louise's shooting of Harlan as a response to his assertion of masculine prerogative, which she regards as validated by law enforcement, legal procedure, and the "kind of world" the women inhabit.
- [38] The main exponent of this view is Faludi.
- [39] Willis, "Hardware and Hardbodies."
- [40] Griggers, "New Butch–Femme." Both films were actually released in 1987.
- [41] Projansky, 125. See n. 36 *supra* for a list of critics who express versions of this view. See also Cooper, 277–306. Projansky's claim that hers is one of only three "analyses of *Thelma and Louise* that directly address the sexual violence in the film" (152) implies that Harlan's assault of Thelma is rendered inconsequential in most readings. She claims that critics largely seek to identify forms of feminist pleasure in the film, at the cost of de-emphasizing the role of rape in facilitating such pleasure (123–24). Yet this line of argument, while certainly salient, overstates its case. Harlan's assault commonly provokes discussion of women's predicament in relation to the law and/or the sexist discursive régime of contemporary American culture. Such discussions invariably presuppose that Louise's culpability is mitigated by the assault (and her own experience of rape), so this event is hardly marginal to them. At the same time, the film ambiguates the issue by having Louise interrupt the rape and by having her shoot Harlan for re-asserting masculine prerogative. The effect is to shift the narrative focus from the *fact* of violence to its *inscription* within a larger social, juridical, and discursive framework. This is why so much ink is expended on questions of law, language, and representation, which are indispensable to grasping what the film has to say about the persistence of women's subordination, as well as the crucial but not dispositive role of violence in that subordination.
- [42] Carol Clover (*Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 135) makes a similar point regarding the deployment of "redneck" stereotypes in horror films as "a kind of universal blame figure . . . held responsible for all manner of social ills."
- [43] If, as Projansky has it, the film has a "postfeminist" dimension (133–37), the rhetorical function of rendering patriarchy as anachronistic is not to devalue or "post" *feminism*, which

must, given the film's overall trajectory, remain politically salient. Rather, it is to advocate the liberal model of citizenship as fundamental to any democratic project, including feminism. It is this strategic function of feminism in the film that, in requiring *both* the continuity and relegation of patriarchy, prompts Projansky to read it as "ambivalent," both feminist and postfeminist at once. An analysis that situates the film's thematic concern with gender in relation to its rhetoric of citizenship makes it possible to account for what otherwise remains an opaque and terminal ambiguity—a critical impasse that mirrors the one reached by the protagonists.

- [44] Wiegand is unusual in arguing that Louise performs a vigilante act of preemptive law enforcement: "Harlan is not killed because Thelma was in danger; he was killed because other women were and those women had no more legal protection than Thelma and Louise. Many viewers recognized this, many women viewers felt it, and they were therefore happy to see him dead." This reading directly positions the women—and the audience—as good liberal citizens, ones who abide by the rationale legitimating the law even when the law itself fails to do so.
- [45] As Projansky observes, "the film not only offers self-defense/vengeance as a viable response to sexual assault, but defines such actions as potentially pleasurable" (129). Yet the very possibility of audience pleasure presupposes that its members are not themselves under indictment for complicity in patriarchal oppression. This tacit exemption is one of the key indices of the film's presumptive liberalism.
- [46] The canonic version is Iris Marion Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship," *Ethics* 99, issue 2 (1989): 250–74. A prominent feminist version of the same argument is Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80.
- [47] Cf. Martha Nussbaum, "The Feminist Critique of Liberalism," in *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 55–80. Nussbaum accepts the liberal bargain, arguing that women gain more than they give up by pressing claims for rights and equality (e.g., on pages 69–71).
- [48] Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
- [49] Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 239.
- [50] The theme of fantasy figures prominently in Hart, Griggers, and Barr. Despite notable differences in the way they develop this theme, each critic tends to treat the two women as subject to the same fantasy.
- [51] Griggers, 137. My emphasis.
- [52] Slavoj Žižek demonstrates that social membership is *nothing but* this appearance of an obdurate social bond, sustained by the rules of etiquette. See Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 72–75.
- [53] Žižek distinguishes the "passage to act" from "acting out" as "entail[ing] . . . an exit from the symbolic network, a dissolution of the social bond" (139). The point is that it is a fundamental error to invoke the rules of the social game in order to call violators to account, since the violations are inherent to the rules themselves. Thus, when Thelma and Louise rely on the norms of civility to practice critical citizenship, this reliance vitiates the critique it appears to support.
- [54] For example, see Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) and Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).