

# Popular Film/Popular Feminism: The Critical Reception of the Rape-Revenge Film

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"The issues surrounding the film are feminist. But the film itself is not." Thus argued Callie Khouri, writer of *Thelma and Louise* (Francke, 1991: 17). Despite Khouri's claims, the critical reception of the film, nevertheless, centred quite explicitly on assessing the film's status as a feminist text, therefore suggesting that it is not, in fact, possible to separate the textual ("the film itself") from the extra-textual ("the issues surrounding the film"). Indeed, as Richard Dyer's work on film stars illustrates, extra-textual material such as star personas, reviews and publicity material play an important part in the construction of any particular text's meanings, particularly its dominant or preferred meanings (Dyer, 1979 and 1987). Traditionally, feminist analyses of mainstream texts have read "against the grain" of these dominant or preferred meanings in order to produce resistant feminist readings. Here, however, I want to read "with the grain" of these dominant meanings as they are inscribed in reviews of *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) in order to explore the ways in which they might produce popular, common-sense understandings of feminism.

There are several reasons for my choice of these particular films. Firstly, they deal with an issue (rape) which, perhaps more than any other, defined the discourses of early second-wave feminism. Secondly, given that I am concerned to explore the processes through which these discourses have been popularized, these films have been selected on the basis that they represent mainstream and well-known articulations of these discourses. Thirdly, these are the main films with rape as their subject which, I believe, generated a particularly revealing set of controversies during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Finally, my decision to focus on films from this particular period is driven by a desire to question the widespread characterization of this period as one in which, under the influence of the New Right, feminism was subjected to a conservative "backlash".

The controversy both films engendered and which was played out in reviews of the films suggests, for example, that feminism was not so much rejected or "over" (as the term "post-feminism" has often be read as implying), as undergoing a process of redefinition and transformation. This in turn can be seen as symptomatic of the wider struggle over meanings which characterized the hegemonic project of the New Right during the 1980s and early 1990s. Within this context, therefore, the dominant meanings the reviews produced and the understandings of feminism they constructed were always, in a sense, negotiated. As Jane Feuer, for example, has argued:

The eighties are emerging more and more as an incredibly hegemonic period; and yet we are also more and more able to sense contradictions that were played out in the culture ... It is the contradictions that enable us to see what

Stuart Hall and others mean when they characterize "hegemony" as a struggle over meanings, a process that is always ongoing even when (as during the mid-eighties) it seems as if one side has won a decisive victory. This is why it is important to look at the meanings under discussion as always being contested. (Feuer, 1995: 16)

For example, although, as I will show in my discussion of reviews of *The Accused*, radical feminist discourses of rape were often appropriated in the service of articulating a New Right agenda, this does not mean that they then simply became non- or anti-feminist. To claim as much would be to install 1970s radical feminism as the site of an authentic feminism against which such deformations can be measured. Rather, insofar as the meanings of feminism the reviews construct simultaneously depend on and disavow 1970s feminism, they are perhaps best seen as constructing an understanding of feminism which, in the historically specific sense of the term outlined by Charlotte Brunsdon, is simply post-(1970s) feminist rather than non-feminist (Brunsdon, 1997: 81-102).

Janice Winship has defined post-feminism as a popularized, de-politicized, common-sense version of feminism (Winship, 1985: 37; 1987: 149). This is clearly continuous with the ways in which, in appropriating radical feminist discourses of rape, reviews of *The Accused* construct de-specified, common-sense meanings of feminism. While, as I will show, these meanings can be seen as acting as a "cover" for dominant ideology and, in some respects, can even be seen as paralleling popular constructions of Reaganism, it is not my purpose to argue that they are simply *reducible* to dominant ideology. Indeed, my project here is not so much to evaluate the "politics" of those meanings as to understand the processes through which they are constructed (and, in fact, my general position is that the popularization of feminism, in disseminating feminist ideas beyond the ivory towers of academia, is to be welcomed).

The problems of installing "1970s feminism as the site of 'true' feminism" (Brunsdon, 1997: 102) become particularly apparent in reviews of *Thelma and Louise* where a version of 1970s radical feminism is invoked in order to either assert or deny the film's status as a feminist text. The failure of the reviews to reach any kind of consensus, however, suggests that feminism is not rigidly fixed or easily identifiable but a contradictory and contested terrain. Indeed, as I will argue in the final section of the paper, neither the politics of feminism *nor* the politics of the New Right are rigidly fixed or easily identifiable. Instead they are complex and interwoven terrains of struggle. As such, I will suggest that although the popular redefinitions of feminism articulated in reviews of *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise* may have taken place within the context of the political agendas and ideologies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, they cannot be seen simply as expressions of those agendas.

### ***The Accused***

Whilst the controversy surrounding the release of *The Accused* in 1988 circulated around its depiction of perhaps the quintessential feminist issue, and while the language and ideas voiced in reviews were clearly borrowed from feminism, the debate about rape the film engendered was not explicitly cast in terms of feminism (only six of the twenty-five reviews I surveyed directly referred to feminism). Furthermore, although almost half the reviews referred to the controversy the film had engendered, they actually revealed a remarkable consensus and consistency in their assessments of the film, suggesting that what was at stake here was the appropriation of feminist discourses in the service of articulating a set of dominant or preferred meanings. Yet, as I have pointed out above, insofar as the process of

appropriation involves both a dependence on, and a disavowal of, these discourses, what emerges is not a wholesale rejection of feminism, but a redefinition of it within the specific historical and political context of the late 1980s.

As I have already implied, for example, the reviews clearly relied on and articulated feminist discourses of rape. However, these discourses were rarely explicitly identified as feminist or contextualized in terms of a broader feminist politics. Thus almost all the reviews in one form or another "quoted" from the pioneering work on rape undertaken by radical feminists such as Susan Griffin (1982), Robin Morgan (1980) and Susan Brownmiller (1976) in the 1970s. This work centred largely on attacking various "rape myths" and on a definition of rape as about power or violence rather than sex. Thus Sean French's claim that, "contrary to the myth peddled in films like 'Straw Dogs'", *The Accused* represents rape as "an act of deliberate violence and violation that no victim would ever ask for or enjoy" was paradigmatic of the way in which reviews of the film tended to reproduce almost verbatim these central tenets of feminist thinking on rape (French, 1989: 42).

Virtually all the reviews, for example, commented on the way in which the film exploded the myth that victims of rape are "asking for it" or that when a woman says no she really means yes. Thus, Sue Heal writing in *Today* suggested that the film was "a powerful de-bunking of the adage that when a woman says No she usually means Maybe", claiming that the rape scene "blasted out of the water any myths that [Sarah] got what she deserved" (Heal, 1989: 26). Similarly, Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* claimed that "the argument of the movie is that although a young woman may act improperly ... she should still have the right to say 'no' and be heard" (Ebert, 1988). Some also commented on the way in which the film challenged the idea that men are simply unable to control their sexuality. As Margaret Walters argued in *The Listener*: "The rapists clearly aren't driven by uncontrollable lust (that surprisingly insistent excuse for brutality) they're *angry*. Sarah's blatant sexiness is a challenge, which they can only extinguish by humiliating and hurting her" (Walters, 1989: 32). Finally, of the reviews that offered a definition of rape, half, like Walters, defined it as about power or violence rather than sex, whereas the other half categorized it as spectator sport committed by men for men. John Marriott of the *Daily Mail*, for example, argued that the film successfully conveyed "the essence of rape as an act of violence" (Marriott, 1989: 30), whilst Roger Ebert went so far as to suggest that the film revealed even "verbal sexual harassment" to be "a form of violence" (Ebert, 1988). Thelma Agnew, on the other hand, claimed that the film represented rape as "a macho exercise, a display by men for men" (Agnew, 1989: 36).

What I want to argue, then, is that although the language of 1970s radical feminist discourses of rape is clearly in evidence in these reviews, it is a language that has been divorced from the politics from which it originated, not least because the language and ideas used here are rarely attributed to feminism or identified as specifically feminist. Moreover, despite the definition of rape as a matter of violence and power rather than sex, the reviews show little concern for the wider power relations that underpin and make rape possible. Thus while Suzanne Moore, in one of the few reviews to explicitly identify the film as feminist, claimed that *the film* "makes the smugness of the 'post' in post-feminism look decidedly questionable, if not downright stupid" (Moore, 1989: 16), *the reviews* of the film can actually be read as constructing an understanding of post-feminism, one that is rather different from that which Moore employs here. In other words, while the way in which the reviews de-politicize feminism is suggestive of a departure from 'traditional' feminism and thus of *post*-feminism,

their obvious *reliance* on feminism nevertheless counters Moore's understanding of the term post-feminism as implying that feminism is somehow "over".

Indeed, the absence of debate about the film's status as a feminist text suggests not so much that feminism is no longer an issue (as we have seen it clearly was, even if it was not identified as such) or even, in the words of Janice Winship, "that the feminist case has been won", but rather "that it goes without saying that there is a case" (Winship, 1985: 37). Consequently, reviews of *The Accused* construct an understanding of post-feminism that refers not to a break with feminism, but to the way in which, as Winship suggests, the "boundaries between feminists and non-feminists have become fuzzy" (Winship, 1987: 149). Moreover, according to Winship, this is largely due to the way in which "with the 'success' of feminism some feminist ideas no longer have an oppositional charge but have become part of many people's, not just a minority's, common sense" (Winship, 1987: 149). As I hope to have shown, this understanding of post-feminism as a de-politicized and popularized version of feminism is very much in evidence in reviews of *The Accused*.

The absence of debate about the film's politics and the common-sense meanings it engendered may also be attributed to the film's perceived "transparency". In other words, almost all the reviews referred to the film's apparent "realism", to its pertinence to "real life". Consequently the meanings of the film were understood as unmediated reflections of popular consciousness, rather than as specifically political constructions, and were thus presented as self-evident or common sense. This process is particularly apparent in Hilary Bonner's discussion of the film. Opening her review with the observation that opinions about the film "are deeply divided", she continued by pointing out that "some who see it say the girl was asking for trouble - and dismiss it as a feminist diatribe against men" (Bonner, 1989: 13). Her next sentence (and, indeed, the rest of the review) suggests, however, that the film was simply realistic rather than specifically feminist: "But Jodie Foster was so affected by merely acting the rape that she says: 'I blacked out, just as if it was for real'" (Bonner, 1989: 13).

In many of the reviews, references to the film's realism simply took the form of noting that the film was inspired by a real incident or of a reference to the rape statistics quoted at the end of the film. Elsewhere, realism was identified as a quality of the film itself. Iain Johnstone writing in the *Sunday Times*, for example, was amongst those who felt that the rape scene was 'vigorously real' (Johnstone, 1988: 10), whilst Nigel Andrews of the *Financial Times* (Andrews, 1989: 31) and Adam Mars-Jones of the *Independent* (Mars-Jones, 1989: 15) both commented on the film's documentary style. Others referred more generally to the film's "uncompromising honesty" (Mather, 1989: 18), "undoubted sincerity" (Malcolm, 1989: 21), or "honest, low-key intensity" (Johnstone, 1989: 7). More specifically, Dorothy Wade suggested that the film was "a fair and honest attempt to convey the grim reality of rape" (Wade, 1989: 5), and Stephanie Calman claimed it to be "a truthful film about violence against women" (Calman, 1989: 18).

Critics also frequently referred to events in the lives of the film's stars in order to point up its realism. Kelly McGillis's much-publicized admission of her own rape six years earlier was most often cited in this respect, although John Hinckley's pathological obsession with Jodie Foster also became an issue. Perhaps the most interesting example of this process is the way in which the headline of the *Today* review - "This is My Revenge Against the Animals Who Raped Me" - used McGillis's rape to construct the film as a real-life rape-revenge story (Willows, 1988: 29). Clearly, this blurring of fiction and reality is likely to be as much a product of the film's publicity machine as of the reviews themselves. Certainly, it is a line

that was toed by the film's stars. For example, as I pointed out above, Jodie Foster claimed in an interview that during the shooting of the rape scene "I blacked out, just as if it was for real" (Bonner, 1989: 13). What I want to suggest is that this emphasis on the film's realism, on its apparently transparent and unproblematic reflection of social reality, functioned to preclude the need for further questioning of (the representation of) that reality or the politics it articulated. This, in turn, worked to support the preferred meanings which the film's publicity put into circulation, meanings which, as I hope to show, actually had little to do with feminist discourses of rape (but which can perhaps be seen as a product of the way in which feminist characterizations of rape as a symbolic expression of power have tended to open it up to metaphorical appropriations). References to John Hinckley, for example, functioned to equate the rape of Jodie Foster in the film with Hinckley's assassination attempt on President Reagan seven years earlier. This had the effect of constructing rape not simply as a crime against women, but as part of a wider threat to the social and political order.

The film's production notes and video jacket are illustrative of these processes (see Appendix One). The video's front cover, for example, reproduces the film's publicity poster and features close-ups of Foster's and McGillis's faces shot in grainy black and white, a traditional signifier of realism. The text on the back cover, however, quite clearly demonstrates that the "real" issues that the film will deal with are not specifically concerned with rape (at least not as it is constructed in radical feminist discourses). Instead it asks:

What are the limits of justice? Of social responsibility? *The Accused* takes a powerful and thought-provoking look at human nature and individual moral conscience, and a judicial process that treats the victim like a criminal.

Jodie Foster gives a critically-acclaimed performance as the hard-living, fiercely independent Sarah Tobias, who is gang raped in the back of a neighbourhood bar. But that is only the beginning of her ordeal. Now Sarah finds herself battling the legal system, not once but twice, as she and her attorney (Kelly McGillis) go after both her attackers and the onlookers whose cheering fuelled and encouraged the assault.

Similarly, the film's production notes ask: "What is the responsibility of someone who witnesses a violent crime?"

Sarah Tobias is assaulted and nobody helps her. When she cries for justice, nobody hears her. Except one lawyer. Together, Sarah and Assistant District Attorney Katheryn Murphy bring to trial the people as dangerous as the men who committed the crime - the witnesses who let it happen. (Paramount Pictures Corporation, 1988: 1)

This is clearly not the language of 1970s radical feminist discourses of rape. Rather it is the language of popular morality which emerged in both Britain and America during the Thatcher and Reagan administrations of the 1980s and which was part of the broader political agenda of the New Right. As Elizabeth Traube observes, this agenda involved "shaping a style of right-wing populism designed to appeal to popular resentment of bureaucratic authority" (Traube, 1992: 18). This resentment was channelled, in particular, into a critique of liberal institutions such as the criminal justice system which, as Jane Feuer points out, was seen as placing "the rights of criminals above the rights of victims" (Feuer, 1995: 27). This critique was, moreover, part of wider attacks on the liberalism and permissiveness of the

1960s and 1970s, attacks which functioned to invoke fears of moral breakdown, of crime and delinquency, in order to assert the need for individual morality and responsibility. Stuart Hall's work on Thatcherism provides a succinct summary of these processes:

The 'cry from below' for the restoration of moral regulation took, first, the immediate symptoms of disturbance - rising crime, delinquency, moral permissiveness - and constructed them, with the help of organized grassroots ideological forces, into the scenario of a general 'crisis of the moral order'. In the later phases, these were connotatively linked with the more politicized threats, to compose a picture of a social order on the brink of moral collapse, its enemies proliferating 'within and without'. This is 'the crisis' experienced at the popular level in the universal, depoliticized, experiential language of popular morality. (Hall, 1988: 137)

This language was, thus, also the language of traditional common sense which, according to Hall, is "a massively conservative force, penetrated thoroughly ... by religious notions of good and evil, by fixed conceptions of the unchanging and unchangeable character of human nature, and by ideas of retributive justice" (Hall, 1988: 142). As we have seen, these are also the themes that *The Accused's* publicity material promoted.

What I want to argue, then, is that in taking up the preferred meanings suggested by the film's publicity, reviews of *The Accused*, frequently worked to construct the representation of rape in the film not as a specifically feminist issue, or even as an issue about gender in particular, but as a matter of popular morality, of depoliticized common sense. Indeed, this is hardly surprising, given the ease with which the issues feminist discourses of rape have put into circulation, and which the reviews took up, can slide into questions of morality and responsibility (is the victim "asking for it"?; do men have a responsibility to control their sexuality?). This process became particularly apparent in Dorothy Wade's review of the film which, despite being unusual in that it devoted a significant amount of space to the views of a feminist social worker, ultimately downplayed the specificity of rape and its significance in terms of feminism. Discussing our tendency to turn a blind eye to crime, she claimed that "the best thing about *The Accused* is the spotlight it turns on these passive roles that any of us may play. When we hear screams in the street at night and decide to do nothing, how much responsibility do we bear if a crime, *perhaps a rape*, is committed?" (Wade, 1989: 5, my emphasis). Adam Mars-Jones made a similar point, arguing that the film was "only secondarily about rape", the real issue being "the extent of a citizen's responsibility" (Mars-Jones, 1989: 15).

These understandings of the film's representation of rape clearly echo those put into circulation by the film's publicity. The production notes, for example, repeatedly describe Sarah's ordeal not as a rape but as an "assault" or a "violent crime" (Paramount Pictures Corporation, 1988). Thus the film is constructed as dealing with moral, rather than specifically feminist issues, as the film's screenwriter, Tom Topor, observes in the production notes: "The moral questions that this film raises could have been achieved by a different violent crime, a suicide or robbery" (Paramount Pictures Corporation, 1988: 3). These sentiments were reproduced almost verbatim in Tom Hutchinson's review, which also glossed over the gender politics specific to rape, identifying it instead as "a *moral* concern" and claiming that the film "touches a disturbing nerve in *both men and women* - that of a common humanity. Or lack of it" (Hutchinson, 1989: 36, my emphasis). Likewise, Stephanie Calman credited the film with reopening 'the debate about society's collective responsibility for crime'

(Calman, 1989: 18), and Victoria Mather of the *Daily Telegraph* proposed that the film was an indictment of a society "that is all too guilty of not 'getting involved'" (Mather, 1989: 18). The emphasis of American reviews was similar. Rita Kempley of the *Washington Post*, for example, argued that "Sarah's lack of good sense isn't on trial here, nor for that matter is male aggression. 'The Accused' addresses the accountability of the bystander" (Kempley, 1988), while Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* claimed that the responsibility of bystanders in a rape case "may be the most important message this movie has to offer" (Ebert, 1988). Indeed, Ebert even went so far as to suggest that Sarah too must "start taking responsibility for herself" (Ebert, 1988). Thus the reviews can be read as effecting a kind of ideological slippage whereby a feminist politics of rape is redefined according to a Reaganite politics of individual morality and responsibility.

Within the context of a Reaganite political agenda, then, feminist discourses of rape become de-specified and depoliticized and what emerges is an individualized, popular version of feminism. The part played by reviews of *The Accused* in constructing such an understanding of feminism is particularly apparent in the way in which they tended to downplay both the relationship and class differences between Sarah and Katheryn, thus emphasizing a Reaganite ideology of individualism and antielitism over the collective politics of 1970s feminism. Very few reviews, for example, referred to the different class backgrounds of the two female leads (the most decisive comment appeared, unsurprisingly, in *Marxism Today*), whilst those reviews that referred to the relationship between the two women tended to downplay any suggestions of solidarity between them. Thus Suzanne Moore argued that the film "refuses the easy option of setting up a false sisterhood" between Katheryn and Sarah (Moore, 1989: 17), Stephanie Calman claimed that their relationship is not "sentimentalized" (Calman, 1989: 18), and Beatrix Campbell suggested that the film illustrated "the difficulty of solidarity" (Campbell, 1989: 43).

What I think the representation of Katheryn and Sarah and their relationship does articulate, however, is the dialogue between popular understandings of the 1960s and the 1980s, between popular conceptions of collective political movements such as feminism and the politics of Reaganism. Sarah, for example, is clearly constructed as representative of the 1960s. In other words, she is represented as an independent, sexually liberated "hippy" who smokes marijuana, has crystals in her car, practices astrology and lives in a trailer park. Katheryn, on the other hand, is represented as the power-dressing, yuppie career woman who became emblematic of the 1980s. Not only was this dialogue taken up and played out in more general terms in reviews of the film, it was, as David Glover and Cora Kaplan have pointed out in their discussion of 1980s male crime fiction, "part of a general struggle in the eighties as to what should constitute the public memory of popular politics" (Glover and Kaplan, 1992: 216).

In her discussion of the cable television channel, Lifetime, Jane Feuer argues that the channel's mission "consists of rewriting 1970s feminism as 1980s female yuppiedom" (Feuer, 1994: 145). The critical reception of *The Accused* in the popular press would appear to fulfil a similar function. This redefinition of feminist discourses within the context of the right-wing ideologies of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations does not mean, however, that those discourses then simply become anti-feminist. Rather, many of these ideologies, particularly as they were popularly articulated through yuppie culture, can actually be seen as continuous with the goals of feminism. Feuer's summary of the key elements of Reagan-era yuppie culture as it was constructed in the media is suggestive of some of these continuities. Yuppie culture, for example, included elements such as "career obsessiveness, especially for

women", "emphasis on the two-career childless couple" and "equality for women; sensitivity for men" (Feuer, 1994: 135). Meanwhile, in Britain, as Julia Hallam has observed, "Thatcher's emphasis on 'enterprise' and individual success seemed to offer new opportunities for women as well as men" (Hallam, 1994: 176).

As I hope to have shown, then, the redefinitions of feminism that have taken place in the context of the political agendas of the late 1980s and early 1990s are perhaps best understood as post-(1970s)feminist rather than as "not feminist". Indeed, to dismiss such redefinitions as "not feminist" would not only be to see the politics of feminism and the politics of the New Right as mutually exclusive, rather than as interwoven terrains of struggle, it would be to suggest that there is some authentic feminism located in the past against which we can assess current distortions. Thus, as Glover and Kaplan argue: "Though searching for an objective truth about this past against which to measure present deformations is no longer a viable political or theoretical project, thinking politically and historically about the many versions of it now in circulation certainly is" (Glover and Kaplan, 1992: 216). In the following section I want to use an analysis of reviews of *Thelma and Louise* to illuminate and expand on this argument.

### ***Thelma and Louise***

While Katheryn and Sarah's relationship in *The Accused* was seen as representing "the difficulty of solidarity", there was no such equivocation about the relationship between the two female protagonists in *Thelma and Louise* - the film was almost universally categorized as a female buddy movie. Thus, unlike the controversy surrounding *The Accused*, the debates which circulated around *Thelma and Louise* tended to gloss over the film's representation of rape in favour of an emphasis on the women's relationship and their revenge. Moreover, the reviews explicitly set out to address the question of the extent to which this depiction of female violence and "sisterhood" could be seen as an articulation of a feminist politics. The question was, nevertheless, a contentious one. As Sharon Willis observes:

Within this framework, objections emerging from feminist and anti-feminist quarters took several forms. A range of critics took issue with the film's depiction of men. In a rhetoric clearly borrowed from feminism, but crudely reduced, they found the film guilty of male-bashing. (Willis, 1993: 120)

The question of the film's status as a feminist text thus tended to be posed in one of two ways, either in terms of popular conceptions of feminism, as in Charles Bremner's "Is *Thelma and Louise* a male-bashing movie?" (Bremner, 1991: 6) or in terms of popular conceptions of film, as in Joan Smith's "Can *Thelma and Louise* be billed a feminist tub-thump, the most right-on of road movies, or is it merely a masculine revenge fantasy whose buddies happen to be female" (Smith, 1991: 17). The latter question, then, was not posed in terms of feminism *per se*, but in filmic terms. In other words, what was at stake here was the extent to which male-defined paradigms of film making such as the road movie or buddy film were successfully appropriated for feminism.

Those that found the film not to be feminist tended to take the latter approach, appearing more interested in the filmic rather than social context of the film. Particularly indicative of this type of review was the way in which many of the critics took a distinctly *auteurist* approach to the film, commenting not only on Scott's visual style but placing *Thelma and Louise* in the context of the rest of Scott's *oeuvre*. More significantly, however, they also

assessed the film against an implied, but never defined, conception of what constitutes a political or feminist film, namely seriousness and realism combined with a rejection of the generic, structural and commercial constraints of Hollywood. Thus the film was frequently criticized for merely "copying male ways of doing things" (Usher, 1991: 30), for failing to depart from patriarchal paradigms, both in terms of the women's behaviour and particularly in terms of the film's use of Hollywood genre conventions. For such critics, then, the film was a straight copy of the male road/buddy movie which "simply spruces up a well-worn genre, placing repressed females where you expect macho males" (Geoff Brown, 1991), and in which "it is doubtful whether they play any roles that haven't been explored by men in buddy pictures" (Mars-Jones, 1991: 18). What appeared to be at stake in such responses to the film was a conception of feminism as about difference rather than sameness, both in terms of male and female behaviour and the representation of that behaviour and in terms of film making itself. Thus those that found the film not to be feminist, such as the *Guardian's* Joan Smith, argued that neither violence nor revenge films were the preserve of females or feminism and that the film was "little more than a masculine revenge fantasy in which the gender of the leading characters has been switched" (Smith, 1991: 17).

Yet a favourite criticism of *Thelma and Louise* was also to liken it to what is perhaps one of the most "feminine" of genres, the fairy-tale. Adam Mars-Jones of the *Independent* claimed that "this is fairytale territory, with a little social comment thrown in, and the logic is not strong" (Mars-Jones, 1991: 18), and Iain Johnstone of the *Sunday Times* suggested that "it's about as newsworthy as Goldilocks and slightly more so than Peter Pan" (Johnstone, 1991). Thus whilst the film's similarities with the road/buddy movie suggested that the film was too "masculine" to be taken seriously as a feminist statement, the comparison with fairy-tales and their perceived lack of logic or social importance suggested, somewhat contradictorily, that the film was also too "feminine" to be feminist. Furthermore, fairy-tales were invoked to suggest that the film was not feminist because it did not deal with real, everyday life. As Lynda Hart points out: "The *Time* cover story sought out feminist scholars to reassure readers that the film was 'not ... a cultural representation but ... a fairy tale'" (Hart, 1994: 73). This issue of the film's lack of verisimilitude was also taken up by several British critics. While Joan Smith of the *Guardian* argued fairly generally that "the dilemmas faced by the women in the film have ... little to do with real life" (Smith, 1991: 17), many critics took particular exception to what they saw as Thelma's irrational and unrealistic behaviour in consenting to sleep with a perfect stranger such as J.D. so soon after having been brutally sexually assaulted (Lawson, 1991; Walker, 1991).

Thus, in an attempt to circumvent the label "feminist", *Thelma and Louise* was categorized both as a straightforward copy of the male road/buddy movie and as an unrealistic fairy-tale. However, it was also argued that the film could not be taken seriously as a feminist statement because it was simply a *comedy*. For Adam Mars-Jones, then, the film was merely a "genial, slightly over-extended comedy" that was "very far from hard-line" (Mars-Jones, 1991: 18), and for Shaun Usher of the *Daily Mail* it was "too commercial, not to mention funny and exciting, for a mere sermon" (Usher, 1991: 30). The suggestion here, therefore, is that for the film to be taken as a genuine piece of feminist political film making it would not only have to be serious, it would also have to be "hard-line" or a "sermon", in other words, didactic.

If those that argued that the film was not feminist did so because they saw it as being no different from male paradigms, those that *did* take the film's feminism seriously responded by arguing that the film was feminist precisely because it *was* different. In other words, arguing that the film turned the conventions of the male buddy movie "neatly on their head" (Mick

Brown, 1991: 15), such critics claimed that this was more than a simple inversion of roles since the variations were made very clear. For example, Hugo Davenport argued that "the contrast with the competitive psychology of male friendship in buddy-movies is neatly pointed up when, halfway through, Louise weakens and Thelma grows stronger" (Davenport, 1991: 14), whilst Charles Bremner suggested that Thelma and Louise are different because they "operate by female logic, independent of men" (Bremner, 1991: 6). Furthermore, against those that claimed the film was not feminist because it was unrealistic and/or failed to deal with the problems faced by women in the real world, such reviews argued that, despite the sensational aspects of the film's depiction of violence, it dealt with "real, everyday sexual politics" (Davenport, 1991: 14). For example, Mick Brown pointed out that Thelma and Louise's violence serves to exact revenge "on behalf of womankind for years of sexual harassment" (Brown, 1991: 15). Manohla Dargis, on the other hand, argued that the film's depiction of male violence was not simplified but "pointedly woven right into the fabric of everyday life in the form of crummy jobs, oppressive marriages, injurious laws, and ubiquitous police" (Dargis, 1991: 22).

Thus those that found the film to be feminist also often referred to its impact on the extradiegetic world. For example, it was frequently pointed out that the film's reversal of gender roles functioned to consign men "to the parts that Hollywood usually leaves for women" (Bremner, 1991: 6), while the male stereotyping answered the way in which "women are routinely stereotyped in films every week of the year" (Davenport, 1991: 14). Furthermore, Mick Brown in the *Daily Telegraph* argued that "it is a tribute to the skill of *Thelma and Louise* that it should have provoked so much debate while remaining so funny, charming and utterly devoid of any heavy-handed polemic" (Brown, 1991: 15), and Hugo Davenport, also in the *Telegraph*, claimed that "the film is exciting, emotional, funny, beautifully acted, even liberating, and it never allows the drag factor of feminist dogma to slow it down" (Davenport, 1991: 14). These latter comments, however, while suggesting that the film articulated a form of "popular" feminism, shared with reviews that found the film not to be feminist, the assumption that "traditional" feminism was didactic, dogmatic and polemical.

Thus, despite the debate over *Thelma and Louise's* status as a feminist text, the conceptions of feminism on which this debate rested proved to be remarkably similar. For example, both sides of the debate constructed a version of feminism which emphasized "women's essential difference from men" (Whelehan, 1995: 67). They also relied on an understanding of feminist culture as that which resists "the male-stream definitions of art and culture" (Rowland and Klein, 1991: 296). Both, moreover, saw feminism as focusing on "the reality of women's experiences" (Rowland and Klein, 1991: 275) and on "material instances of women's subordination" rather than on theoretical issues (Whelehan, 1995: 79). Finally, they frequently constructed feminists as "extremist" (Whelehan, 1995: 78), or as "terrorists, trading in dogma" (Whelehan, 1995: 12), who saw men as "the enemy" (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1982: 65). Thus, although *Thelma and Louise* itself may not articulate any identifiable branch of academic/theoretical or movement/political feminism, the critical responses to the film, whether they found it feminist or not, appeared to rely for their assessments on the language of the radical feminism of the early 1970s. All the quotes cited above, for example, are taken from discussions of radical feminism. It is not insignificant that since this branch of feminism eschewed theoretical interventions in favour of direct action and campaigning that it was most ripe for popularization, therefore becoming part of the discourse of everyday life. As Imelda Whelehan points out: "Most people if asked to define feminism today would produce a definition which vaguely resembles the radical feminist agenda" (Whelehan, 1995: 86).

In relying on a definition of feminism which "vaguely resembles the radical feminist agenda", the press were able to align what they perceived to be the film's "male bashing" with feminism, whilst simultaneously denouncing it for being too extreme or for not being extreme enough. *Thelma and Louise* was thus widely criticized for its perceived "male-bashing". Joan Smith of the *Guardian*, for example, invoked a comparison between the film and Valerie Solanis's SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto (Smith, 1991: 17). Similarly, John Leo's now infamous *US News and World Report* review suggested that the film's anti-male bias constituted a fascist form of feminism (see Bremner, 1991: 6). When, however, such man-hating was seen to be compromised by the women's heterosexuality or the inclusion of "nice" men, the film's feminism was also considered to be compromised. Thus "Daws" in *Variety* argued that the film is not about "women vs. men" (i.e. feminism) because the women "can't seem to stay away from men" (Daws, 1991). In another register, however, a version of radical feminism was invoked to *support* the film's status as a feminist text. For example, Manohla Dargis interpreted *Thelma and Louise's* trajectory through the narrative as a consciousness-raising experience that leads them to a brief lesbian encounter (their final kiss), female solidarity (their clasped hands) and separatism (their drive into the abyss) (Dargis, 1993).

Somewhat contradictorily, then, in reviews of *Thelma and Louise* a version of 1970s feminism was invoked both to assert *and* deny the film's status as a feminist text. What I want to propose is that this simultaneous assertion and denial of the film's "feminism", combined with the way which individual reviews frequently both depended on, and disavowed, the tenets of 1970s feminism, suggests that what was at stake here was not an authentic feminist politics, but a negotiated version of 1970s feminism in which sisterhood and heterosexuality, angry women and nice men could coexist. Indeed, that the film relies on, and constructs, a *popular version* of feminism is actually implicit in Dargis' claim that "*Thelma and Louise* have *reinvented* sisterhood for the American screen" (Dargis, 1993: 92, my emphasis). What is more interesting, however, is the way in which, in her *Village Voice* review of the film, she situates the production of this popular version of feminism within the specific historical and political context of the 1980s. Here, Dargis asks:

What kind of feminism are we talking about anyway? *The Second Sex*? bell hooks? Andrea Dworkin? Susie Bright? Granted, *Thelma and Louise* sells a kind of feminism *brut*, inarticulate and inchoate. Yet after more than 10 years of Reagan, Bush, and the murky chimera of post-feminism how many can still speak the language of liberation with any assurance? ... If feminism is ever to be more than a historical artifact or lost utopia, it not only has to be reclaimed, it must be reinvented. (Dargis, 1991: 22)

These are, of course, rhetorical questions, to which, therefore, it is assumed we already know the answers. Thus, Dargis' argument reproduces the standard feminist understanding of the 1980s and the politics of the New Right as inaugurating a backlash against feminism, and of post-feminism as a period in which feminism is somehow over. The reinvention of feminism we find in films such as *Thelma and Louise* is consequently understood as representing a *response* to this backlash against feminism and as a way of countering "the murky chimera of post-feminism". Against these accepted understandings of the relationship between feminism and the New Right as essentially antagonistic and mutually exclusive, I want to argue that the popular redefinition or negotiation of feminism we find in films such as *Thelma and Louise* and *The Accused* and in the discourses surrounding them, was, in fact, a *part of* the wider hegemonic project of the New Right (insofar as hegemony has been characterized as

involving a *struggle* over meanings) and that it is in this context that the term post-feminism is best understood.

As I hope to have shown, for example, reviews of *The Accused* simultaneously invoke *and* suppress feminism. They invoke a common-sense, popular feminism and suppress a collective, political feminism. The reviews can thus be read as part of the struggle which took place in the 1980s to (re)define and appropriate the popular meanings of the politics of the 1960s and 70s. As David Glover and Cora Kaplan have argued:

Today the fate of the sixties-within-the-eighties is a notoriously important issue in the struggle for cultural and political meaning ... The hegemony of the New Right has involved a sustained attempt to monopolize the complex terrain of the popular, and in particular to drastically overhaul the social significance of the sixties. (Glover and Kaplan, 1992: 222)

The production of common-sense meanings is a vital aspect of this project. According to Gramsci, common sense "holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of the will" (cited in Hall, 1988: 8). Thus, as Stuart Hall has observed: "To a significant extent, Thatcherism is about the remaking of common sense: its aim is to become the 'common sense of the age'" (Hall, 1988: 8). It is, moreover, within the field of popular culture that the representation of common sense, of the taken-for-granted, finds its clearest articulation. Reviews of *The Accused* and the meanings of feminism they construct must therefore be understood within the context of the hegemonic project of Thatcherism and Reaganism. In other words, they view feminist discourses of rape through the lens of the individual populism of the Reagan era and, in so doing, construct a depoliticized, individualized, popular feminism which is then situated as part of a broader, hegemonic common sense.

Tania Modleski has defined post-feminism as the appropriation of feminist ideas for non-feminist ends and this definition would certainly seem to be applicable to my analysis of the way in which reviews of *The Accused* articulate feminist discourses (Modleski, 1991). Implicit in this definition, however, is the assumption that these discourses then simply become anti-feminist. In other words, post-feminism is understood in terms of the backlash against feminism which, it has been argued, began to emerge in the late 1980s. While the belief that the 1980s and the "patriarchal" politics of Thatcher and Reagan helped inaugurate such a backlash is widespread, I think this not only represents a somewhat simplistic cause and effect approach to the relationship between post-feminism and Thatcherism/Reaganism, it also fails to acknowledge the way in which the meanings which circulate around these concepts are rarely fixed, unitary and without contradictions. In some anti-Thatcher discourses, for example, Thatcher was constructed as a product of *feminism* and thus of the danger of giving women too much power. As such she was constructed as the *object* rather than the originator of a backlash against feminism.

In other words, although ideas about post-feminism have been produced and constructed within the context of Reaganism and Thatcherism and thus must be understood within this context, this does not mean that they simply reflect these ideologies. What, for example, does it mean when post-feminist icons such as The Spice Girls declare Margaret Thatcher as their heroine or when writer Natasha Walter claims Thatcher as the heroine of the "new feminism" described in her recent book of that name (Walter, 1998: 175)? Does it mean that post-feminism or new feminism simply endorse or reflect the intricacies of Thatcher's politics or

policies? Or does it mean that ideas about post-feminism and new feminism have been formed in the wake of *popular* understandings and representations of Thatcher and Thatcherism, understandings that have to do with individual female power and strength, the coupling of feminism with femininity ("The Iron *Lady*"/"*Girl Power*"), populism and the break with traditional ideologies that occurred under the New Right. These questions were, in fact, recently the subject of a fierce debate raging around Natasha Walter's book, *The New Feminism*. In a discussion between Walter and Hilary Cottam over whether Thatcher is indeed a heroine of the new feminism, Cottam retorts to Walter:

In embracing Margaret Thatcher you, like her, have merely substituted the individual for politics. You want to separate the personal from the political, but are we not then left with just an empty form of celebrity feminism facing a political vacuum? (Cottam, 1998: 4)

According to Jennifer Wicke, however:

Things look different ... if the celebrity sphere is not immediately vilified as a realm of ideological ruin or relegated to aberrant or merely "popular" practices. Rather, we must recognize that the energies of the celebrity imaginary are fueling feminist discourse and political activity as never before. (Wicke, 1994: 758)

The debate over Thatcher's status as a feminist icon is, of course, a case in point. As Cottam concludes her case against Walter "we must agree to differ and I will celebrate that you have opened this space because there is so much more to be done" (Cottam, 1998: 4). Far from suggesting that feminism is somehow "over" or "past", the struggle over the meanings of feminism apparent both here and in the debates surrounding *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise* suggests, as Janice Winship has observed, that "feminism no longer has a simple coherence around a set of easily defined principles ... but instead is a much richer, more diverse and contradictory mix than it ever was in the 1970s" (Winship, 1987: 149). As I hope to have shown, this is partly due to the way in which, as Julia Hallam points out in her survey of reviews of *Working Girl*, "feminism as a (contradictory and unfixed) subject position is widely circulating as an interpretative strategy amongst ... journalists" (Hallam, 1994: 190). However, I think it is also to do with the way in which those interpretative strategies have intersected in complex and unexpected ways with the hegemonic project and popular construction of Thatcherism and Reaganism. Suzanne Moore's feminist appropriation of the Katherine Parker character in *Working Girl*, for example, could equally be referring to popular constructions of Margaret Thatcher: "My sympathies were with Katherine - so completely set up as a male fantasy of a ball-breaking career bitch - that it's hard not to fall in love with her" (cited in Hallam, 1994: 189). To view the late 1980s and 1990s as simply a period of backlash against feminism or as a period in which feminism is over is thus not only to install the "simple coherence" of 1970s feminism as the site of an authentic feminism, it is to fail to address or understand the complicated and often contradictory ways in which the popular, the political and the critical intersect.

As the controversy surrounding *Thelma and Louise* shows us, for example, a film's politics exists as much in the discourses surrounding it and its impact on the social world as in the formal and thematic content of the text itself. Thus against Callie Khouri's insistence that "The issues surrounding the film are feminist. But the film itself is not", I hope to have shown that "the issues surrounding the film" cannot, in fact, be separated from the "film itself"

(Francke, 1991: 17). Eleanor J. Bader's *Spare Rib* review of *Thelma and Louise* is revealing in this respect, since her argument that the film's status as a feminist text was "problematic" because it relied on stereotypes of "feminists (they all hate men and wish them dead)" seemed to be hopelessly entangled in discourses outside of the film (Bader, 1991: 20). In other words, it can never be entirely clear whether the equation of feminism and male-bashing is a product of the film itself or of the critical and media discourses surrounding the film.

The controversy thus also demonstrates the way in which feminism is always discursively constructed, is never available in some pure or unmediated form. Therefore, both the reviews that attempted to read the film as an articulation of some authentic feminism, and those that attempted to detach the film from its discursive context and shift attention to the film as film, missed the point that neither film nor feminism exists in a vacuum. Consequently their attempts to conclusively evaluate the feminism of the film against some fixed, authentic notion of either feminism or political film making were doomed to failure. Rather, as the reviews themselves illustrate, film is one of the sites on, through and against which the meanings of feminism are *produced*. In order to fully understand these meanings and the way in which they are produced, we need to read films historically through the discourses surrounding them and to explore the complex ways in which such discourses intersect and negotiate with each other.

## Appendices

*One:* Clearly, *The Accused's* press book would be a better indicator of the preferred meanings the film's publicity machine attempted to put into circulation. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, there was no copy of the press book available in this country.

## Acknowledgement

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