

Film Review

THELMA AND LOUISE Directed by Ridley Scott; written by Kallie Khouri; released by MGM-PATHE, 1991.

Reviewed by Nancy Kaser-Boyd, PhD

Thelma and Louise has been variously described as a chase-adventure film with a neo-feminist message, and as "implausible," "preposterous," "dopey," and a "feminist exploitation film." It is likely that many viewers won't "get" the underlying meanings of this film and more likely that they will not understand the women's states of mind at the high points of this drama-made-comedy.

Its depictions are particularly relevant to psychologists because we are often faced with understanding extreme behavior and we often come up wanting.

This "women's road movie," as one reviewer described it, has many interpretations and likely many meanings for women and for victims. The plot is organized around a rape scene. Two Southern women set off on a short "vacation" to the mountains, each taking a break from a less-than-satisfying relationship with her male partner. The younger, naive Thelma, dressed in a stereotypically feminine manner gives Louise a gun she brought along for protection, but which she doesn't feel com-

fortable having. Thelma wants to stop at a roadside club. There the women are approached by Harlan and given an oblique warning about Harlan by their waitress. To Thelma, it looks like innocent fun, and she dances with great abandon with Harlan. Giggling and twirling, obviously delighted with this night away from her philandering, narcissistic husband, she becomes dizzy, and Harlan suggests they step outside. Harlan drops his Southern boyish charm and becomes sexually aggressive. When Thelma resists, he slaps her, calls her "bitch" and attempts rape. Louise appears with Thelma's gun; she convinces Harlan to let Thelma go, but Harlan taunts Louise with vulgar language ("bitch, suck my dick"). Louise impulsively shoots him.

Shocked and shaking, the two women argue about what to do. Thelma wants to call the police and tell them that it was self-defense. Louise insists that no one will believe them, that there is no evidence of rape, and she shot him after he had let them go. She speaks authoritatively, as if she knows. Clinicians, familiar with rape trauma syndrome, will guess from her reaction to Harlan's physical and verbal sexual aggression, her mistrust of the system, and her brittle characterization that she too has been a rape victim. "What she went through in Texas" is alluded to by the only sympathetic male figure, the police investigator, who checks out her background and puts two and two together. He is alone in understanding that Harlan's

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killing had to do with a victim's reaction to an emotionally provocative situation, where old, repressed feelings explode into behavior that is seemingly out of proportion to the situation.

Could the filmmaker know that most women who kill have been the victims of serious personal violence? Research on victims from a number of different types of trauma makes similar findings; there are similar effects of trauma on personality functioning. These may be the result of biological responses to overwhelming threat. We recall from Psychology 101 Hans Selye's work on the stress response. Clinical interview and research studies using standard psychological measures find victims exhibiting physiologic hyperarousal, disregulation of affect, psychic numbing, profound mistrust of others, and easily rekindled feelings of threat. Victims may go through alternating phases of emotional constriction (to avoid and deny the painful feelings from the assault) and phasic reliving of the trauma. Events that recall the prior traumatic event can call out all of the feelings associated with the original trauma. This may result in a gross

overreaction (in the view of an observer) to a situation (for example, Louise shooting Harlan) or to other forms of psychological deterioration. Louise knows that this can't be easily explained. She barely understands it herself. She has never dealt with these powerful emotions stirred by her own rape.

This film will likely have meanings at many levels for victims, and for those who work with victims, and for women in general who have felt harassed by male aggression. In one scene that likely has universal appeal to women, Thelma and Louise, in their travels across the roads of the Southwest, reencounter a truck driver who has been traversing the same roads. Twice before he has made offensive sexual gestures to them. They pull alongside of him and tell him they are "ready for action." After they politely attempt to educate him ("How would you feel if someone did that to your wife or your daughter or your mother?"), which leave him hostile and unrepentant, they blow up his truck.

Unfortunately, but probably appropriately, the film ends like the lives of so many of the victims we see.