Guiding Questions

1. *Thelma & Louise* was made thirty years ago, and it caused quite a stir. Many people (especially but not only women) saw it as a rousing feminist manifesto. Others (not just men) found it strident (one reviewer described it with the phrase “toxic feminism”). Still others thought it was irresponsible as a feminist text because it provided no practicable solutions to the oppression of women. Do you fall into one of these camps? Do you think the terms of the debate have changed, or do they remain the same (is our reception of the film affected by the #MeToo movement, and/or other cultural developments since 1991)? Is it appropriate to judge the film as though it were a political tract?

2. How do you understand the representation of men in this movie? Do you think it is intended to be realistic? If yes, do you think it’s a fair depiction or “male bashing?” If no, what function do you think the stereotyping serves? (If the movie isn’t interested in a realistic depiction of men, what is it interested in?) Are all the male figures stereotypes? If no, which one(s) are realistically depicted? If yes, or if some are stereotypes, is the level of stereotyping the same in each case? How are the male figures in their stereotyping (or not) related to each other? (Consider Darryl the husband, Harlan the rapist, Hal the detective, Jimmy the boyfriend, JD the one-night stand, Earl the tanker trucker, the anonymous state trooper, and any others you find interesting).

3. Like many a road movie (and defining the subgenre we are considering in our series), *Thelma & Louise* revolves around its central pair. How do you see their individual characters and their relationship to each other as they change over the course of the movie? Thelma’s transformation seems particularly pointed (as she puts it in a very famous line towards the end of the movie “something’s crossed over in me”). What are the elements of her transformation and what brings them about? What do you make of Louise’s suggestion that Thelma hasn’t really changed (“gone crazy”), she’s just finally had a chance to express herself? What about Louise: does she change too?

4. What do you think about the juxtaposition of violence and humor in this movie? (If you’ve seen *Bonnie and Clyde*, is your reaction similar here, or are there ways in which it feels different?) What kinds of violence are depicted? Where and how is humor deployed? Where and how does it seem tied to violence and where and how not? What is the effect of the scene in which Thelma is laughing about the look on Harlan’s face when Louise shot him?
5. Why does Louise shoot Harlan? As she says, explaining the law to Thelma, “it wasn't self-defense.” (To which Thelma replies “The law is some tricky shit.”). Assuming that the movie doesn’t literally advocate for literal homicide in response to trauma, what is the point of underscoring this?

6. There are several striking stylistic choices in the opening credit sequence: the camera pans from flatlands to foothills (and the road pointing toward those hills, an image that reappears late in the movie); the image bleeds from black-and-white to color, and then seemingly from dawn lighting through to night; and the soundtrack features instrumental music suggesting a classic Western film, which is replaced by a country and western pop song as we transition from the opening sequence to the first scene (in Louise’s restaurant). What do you make of these choices? What kinds of expectation do they arouse in you? Are those expectations met or challenged as the movie unfolds?

7. As a self-conscious road movie this film includes a star automobile and a good deal of dialogue about the route and destination of the trip. What do you think about Louise’s ‘66 Thunderbird (why ’66, why a convertible, why light green)? What does she think and feel about it? After shooting Harlan, and having rejected Thelma’s suggestion that they go to the police, Louise not surprisingly repeats over and over that they have to (or she has to) figure out what to do. Why is Mexico the endpoint on which her deliberation lands? How do the two women describe that destination? The movie makes fairly clear why Louise wants to avoid going through Texas, but as Thelma says it's pretty hard to get to Mexico from Arkansas without passing through that state; and obviously their ending up at the Grand Canyon means that they have gone even further afield than avoiding Texas will fully explain. How do you understand this route? Why do they go so far West?

8. The scene featuring the Rastafarian bicycle rider is not in the script as written by Callie Kourie (and she didn’t like it). Arguably everything about this figure—not only his race/ethnicity and music and drug of choice, but even his clothes and his vehicle—seems incongruous, as though he’s wandered in from a different movie all together. Do you find this jarring or interesting? Why does he have no spoken lines? Do you think we’re supposed to understand the lyrics of the song playing on his Walkman as in some sense his voice, and if so how do you interpret these lyrics? (You can find the lyrics here.) What do you make of his blowing marijuana smoke into the trunk of the state trooper’s car? What does this scene add to the movie? Is it a comment on the cultural narrowness of the story and/or the genre? Is it just comic relief? Is it offensive (racist) itself?
9. What do you think of the ending of the film? (If you saw *Bonnie and Clyde*, and/or *It Happened One Night*, consider comparing the endings of these three movies.) Are Thelma and Louise committing suicide or escaping into a mythic immortality (and if those two readings seem related to you, how would you express the relationship between them)? The filmmakers shot an alternative ending (actually used in the initial test screening), in which rather than freezing on the frame of the car in flight, the camera follows its fall into the canyon (there are other important differences; if you’re interested, you can watch [here](#)). Especially given the alternative ending, the freeze frame seems important (even beyond its probable reference to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*). How do you understand it? How is it related to the Polaroid still (which flies out the back of the car as it takes off)? How about to the montage of clips that plays over the end credits (finishing with another freeze frame)? Why is Hal running in slow motion? This all seems to suggest deliberate meditation on motion and stasis; what do you make of that?