



Watching *Thelma and Louise*: Using Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure Theory* for Interdisciplinary Learning

Krishangi Singh

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Maitreyi College, University of Delhi

Abstract: This paper would aim to explore the impact of using cinema as a means of encouraging students to pursue literary research by making it more accessible and relevant by correlating it with the popular culture via film screenings. With increasing permeation of popular culture in academic spaces, it becomes pertinent to inculcate methods such as film screenings in modern pedagogical practices which can allow students to understand abstract theoretical works in more relatable manner. For the purposes of this paper, I would share my experience of teaching Laura Mulvey's work, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which uses Freudian theory of psychoanalysis to argue about women's representation in Hollywood being male centric, by correlating it with Ridley Scott's seminal feminist film *Thelma and Louise*. In tandem with the theoretical analysis, I would be including my personal pedagogical experience of teaching in post-COVID-19 classrooms which have adopted hybrid mode of teaching with extensive multimedia technologies in online classes.

Keywords: popular culture, cinema studies, film criticism, cultural theory and feminist studies.

Introduction

Teaching-learning process took a significant shift during the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in severe travel restrictions and abrupt halting of the traditional classroom teaching. After a significant disruption, online teaching mode and hybrid classroom models which incorporated both limited physical classroom experiences along with digital lectures were resumed which provided a significant opportunity for both teachers and students to incorporate modern technology in learning process. In this paper I will attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the film *Thelma and Louise* was to my literature students by supplementing the

film with critic Laura Mulvey's theory of *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in order to equip the students with necessary feminist psychoanalysis theory for interdisciplinary learning in film studies.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the didactic process of incorporating film viewing in learning process of literature in academic colleges. The multimedia classroom is seen as a space where students have the opportunity to explore the world within the classroom space and engage in a more active learning process. In his essay, *Beyond the Clip: critical uses of film in the non-film courses*, Leonard Von Morze theorizes how using films in classrooms can result in deepening of student's critical interpretation of their culture and considers multimedia classroom as a space of opportunity, in which teaching students to write critically about their culture. Film viewing can thus become a powerful tool through which students' affective domain can be engaged and promote a more reflective attitude. The visually and audio immersive experience of cinema evokes deeper emotions and reflections in the viewer which can provide the ground model on which the teacher can build the critical analysis necessary for deeper understanding of the subject in question.

Methodology

This paper uses descriptive qualitative research method to analyze the changes observed in the teaching-learning process throughout the course to understand the impact of introducing films in a literature-based course. The goal of descriptive qualitative research is a comprehensive summarization, in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or a group of individuals. The rationale for selecting of this approach for the pedagogical research undertaken in this paper is that qualitative research provides the necessary design for closely describing the participants' experiences and allows straightforward descriptions of experiences and perceptions of participants without being tied in deeply theoretical context in areas where topic under research is relatively newer. This is particularly relevant in pedagogical research about learning under pandemic situation where both teachers and learners had to abruptly adapt to online learning modes. The learning process was assessed via multiple writing assignments as well as class-based group discussions which periodically measured the level of understanding of students regarding the course material. The paper also seeks to establish the relevance of using the film *Thelma and Louise* specifically to look at Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure. Not only does the film assist in providing the framework on which students can apply their critical assessments of Mulvey's theory, the film also assists in training the literature student to apply critical analysis beyond textual literature and opening the array of visual texts to their research.

Morze elaborates how viewing films in classroom helps students develop critical interpretation and actively involve students with their learning material. When using films in literature classrooms, instructional goals of reframing theoretical arguments in real life application, critical interpretation of popular media, reasoning and reflection upon the curriculum material are achieved. The students were asked during the course to consider the film in curriculum as a primary material which is central to understanding the theory at hand. The course was made more approachable via the two separate film screening held along with asking students to reflect upon their own experience of the film screening before engaging in rigorous theoretical discussions on Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory. The first screening of the film was held online where the students were asked to focus on the film without any preconceived notions on the subject which was followed by an online discussion to raise the themes they did not understand and make comments regarding their reflections on the film. The second screening of the film was held in physical classrooms on a projector after the students had gone through Laura Mulvey's essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. This screening of the film was followed by a guided discussion on how the essay holds relevance with regards to the film screened and students were asked to present their views on whether or not they agreed with Mulvey's assessment of the 'male gaze' in popular cinema.

According to David Ausubel and Donald Fitzgerald's meaningful learning theory, students should be made to interpret their newly gained experiences by correlating it to their prior knowledge to create a more meaningful learning process. This theory can be applied to literature classrooms where new critical and cultural theories can be correlated to the existing literature and cinema consumed by the students so as to enable them to understand abstract theories in a more relatable manner. This also allows the students to analyze the literature and cinema in their curriculum with fresh lenses provided by the critical theories while simultaneously making the critical theories more comprehensible as well. During the progress of this course, students were asked to view the film *Thelma and Louise* which is an American road-trip film featuring two women protagonists who go on to commit murder when one of them is sexually assaulted. It was relevant to make the students understand how their definition of road-trip cinema, often men centric, may differ from the film in curriculum.

Blended and online learning environments under COVID-19 lockdown provided teachers with significant challenges regarding the engagement as well as the assessments of learner. It became a crucial challenge to engage learners on online lectures in remote settings where it was no longer possible to read their facial cues or receive a direct response on them unless prompted. The economic hardships faced by families in India during the pandemic induced lockdown translated into limited digital access of students where many could afford enough

internet data packages to only attend the lecture but not switch on their cameras which requires more data consumption. This made the process of evaluation more challenging which was needed to make changes in instructional methods to meet the needs of the learners. To counter this challenge, the Continuous Formative Assessment model was applied to create an environment that keeps the learners engaged and provides the teacher period opportunities to monitor the learners' progress as well as opportunity to modify their method of instructions in order to maximize learning in online classrooms. W.J. Popham, expert on education studies, writes, "Formative assessment represents evidence-based instructional decision making. If you want to become more instructionally effective, and if you want your students to achieve more, then formative assessment should be for you (Popham 15). For the purposes of this course unit, assessments were held every month to ensure that the learners were engaging with the material effectively and the instructional pace was readjusted according to learners feedback to accommodate the gap between learner and instructor due to online learning process.

Roadmap for Coursework

The film *Thelma and Louise* was screened in the women's writing literature course at undergraduate level where basic theories of feminist criticism were part of the curriculum. The unit taught by the author contained Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* as the core reading material. Films were used by the author to increase students' abilities to identify and internalize the theoretical arguments made by Mulvey with regards to feminist psychoanalysis. At undergraduate level, the students were reading feminist theories for the first time in their coursework and it was their first introduction with theoretical terminology of feminist criticism and psychoanalytic criticism. In totality, two movie screenings were conducted which included two screenings, one screening of *Thelma and Louise* before reading Mulvey's work and one screening post the reading. Prior to screening of films, students were provided with a worksheet which contained brief descriptions of relevant feminist and psychoanalytical concepts in their digital classroom. The worksheet also asked them to detail their personal favourite road-trip themed film which they would like to talk about in class discussion, in order to understand how many students may be already familiar with this genre of films. The target of the worksheet was as following:

1. Pre-screening: At first stage of the course, the worksheet was aimed at guiding the students into a brief introduction of feminist criticism; introduce them to the new vocabulary that would be used in the essay from feminist and psychoanalytic criticism; clarify various cinematic terminology as the

- students have no prior knowledge of film studies; and discuss their perception and understanding of road-trip genre of films.
2. Engaging with the Essay: At this stage students were asked to read Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and write their summarization of the essay in their worksheets. This was followed by an online lecture on Mulvey's theory of 'male gaze' and how it functions in popular culture to create a masculine symbolic order.
 3. Final screening of *Thelma and Louise* : At this stage the students were asked to collect data from the film and write on their worksheet about the connections they can draw between the film and Mulvey's concepts.
 4. Post-viewing activity: Class discussion was held to evaluate students' understanding of the film and they were asked to present their views upon the difference in understanding of *Thelma and Louise* before and after correlating it with Mulvey's theory.

These various stages of engaging with worksheet while viewing films promotes timely learning where the student is interacting simultaneously with course material instead of remaining as passive audience to a film screening. The discussions held immediately after the screenings also helped the students to reflect upon the previously read feminist criticism and analyse implementation on the films.

Teaching Through Movies

The film *Thelma and Louise* was screened in the women's writing and course where I taught the background reading unit on feminist criticism. This curriculum was part of Bachelors of Arts English Honours degree taught in University of Delhi, India. It is important to locationally situate the students and the teacher as it provides the necessary cultural context regarding the cultural difference that would frequently be brought up during the progress of this course unit. Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, released in 1991, is an American road movie which centres on the emancipation of women from the oppressive regulations of patriarchal society under which the two protagonists of the film, Thelma and Louise, function. The film shows how roads are no longer male-only domains which is how historically road films have structured themselves. The archetype of 'men on the road' is broken where women are often only represented in passive roles. Shari Roberts argues that western road movies genre present stereotypical, shallow version of women where they are used as merely plot devices to further the development of the male protagonist, while themselves remaining stagnated. Women character in

such films figure as, “helpless, parasitic embellishments to a masculine genre” (Roberts 62). *Thelma and Louise* breaks such male envisioned tropes of women as caricatured femininity as the film follows the title characters, Thelma and Louise, who set off on a fishing trip to a friend’s cabin over the weekend. During their journey, Thelma is attempted to be raped to which Louise responds by fatally shooting the attacker, setting off a chain of events where they commit more crimes in order to escape the law, and in a larger sense, attempt to escape the patriarchal regulations binding them.

The tendency to view women characters as plot devices for male characters’ development is closely linked to Laura Mulvey’s theory of “the male gaze” which she described in her seminal 1975 work *Visual Pleasure* as the dominant trend in Hollywood films where women characters and films in general target to serve the male unconscious. Mulvey argues, “The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle of normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 837). Here Mulvey posits how the presence of woman on screen is charged erotically and the film narrative is more interested in what she is representing on screen, which is her sexuality, rather than the substance of the female character. In this manner Hollywood films serve the masculine unconscious as the majority of directors are men, speaking characters on screen are men and the gaze of the camera is also masculine while covering story lines which are masculine-centric. The masculine gaze of the camera encourages the spectators to identify with male characters rather than the women characters who are under-developed and receive significantly less screentime and dialogues. According to a 2014 study published by FiveThirtyEight, the data journalism website, analysis of 1794 films released from 1970 to 2013 showed that only half the films passed the Bechdel test designed to examine the gender bias prevalent in movie industry (Hickey 1). The test states that if the movie can satisfy three criteria – there are at least two women characters in the film, the characters have a conversation with each other, and that conversation is not about a male character- then it passes the Bechdel test. The results of the study thus state the reality of films continuing to be masculine-centric with women in films depending on men’s character for survival.

The gendered stereotype of women as the passive gender and men as the dynamic character becomes a stock feature of road films where the archetype of roads being exclusively male domain is perpetuated. Carmen Eraso writes that in both the Western genre of films as well as early Road movies, female characters are relegated to inert operation (64). He further argues that women are “allotted a passive status in minor roles as plot elements, a disrupting factor that triggers the action and calls for the male hero to restore order” (63). As contrast to the

average road film which focus on male characters, women-led road films stand out as a defiance of the genre expectation where men become the peripheral characters through which the development of women characters is observed. Lorraine Gamman argues for a production of “female gaze” by the use of female protagonists and creating more women-centred film narratives which may appropriate the patriarchal cultural constructions by viewing it through this women-centric gaze (15). Gamman further argues how the female gaze is not merely a subversion of the male gaze which sexualizes women but a displacement of the hegemonic patriarchal lens of looking at women, calling to dismantle the entire structure of such voyeuristic privilege which affords such power (16).

Keeping Gamman’s theorization as base, *Thelma and Louise* does exactly this redirection of male gaze. The film calls focus towards the larger representation of women in films and reality through this patriarchal lens and then goes on to redirect it away from the women characters to the men in film. The movie thus becomes the appropriate vehicle for the teacher through which the theory of visual pleasure can be disseminated in the classroom. *Thelma and Louise* directs the gaze of protagonists as well as viewers towards the men around them. Louise is a woman who refuses to be tied down by traditional gender roles of being a wife or even a girlfriend who would be tied to domesticity. Louise also possesses the skills to see through the façade of men around them, whether it is Harlan at the nightclub, the man who attempts to rape Thelma, or Jack, the hitchhiker who ends up robbing Thelma of her life savings. Throughout the movie, it is the male characters who push the two protagonists to commit criminal activities. The men in the film become the secondary characters who catapult the character development of Thelma and Louise and it is their development that form the central narrative. The two women’s desire to flee the patriarchal oppression of their everyday lives and the boredom of domesticity leads them on the road trip where they face the reality that being on the road in search of freedom does not translate into escaping the patriarchal oppression altogether, rather it brings the same oppression through different men they meet on the road. Their escape from both conservative patriarchy and the law is triggered by the men they encounter on the way who attempt to harass or violate them in one way or the other, justifying Louise fatally shooting Harlan, Thelma learning robbery from J.D. or their shooting the tires out and blowing up the truck of the truckdriver they encounter on their way who makes obscene gestures and lewd comments at them. When the truck driver asks Thelma and Louise if they “are ready for a big dick” (Scott 01:49), they decide to first confront and make him apologize before deciding to blow up his truck. Louise also first asks Harlan to quietly walk away and not look

back after disrupting his attempt to rape Thelma, it is only after his provocations that Louise decides to shoot him and silence him.

Thus, Thelma and Louise are slowly shown to cross over from the boundaries of both patriarchal social structure that puts them as objects to looked at and the legal structure which is also designed against them. They simultaneously break against both of them and refuse to surrender to the police knowing that surrendering to the legal process would also mean rehabilitating themselves in the conservative patriarchy around them which they so desperately seek to escape, they cannot opt into one without the other. They are no longer subject to male gaze but in order to escape this gaze they must become outlaws since existing outside the boundaries of patriarchy while remaining in a society designed to benefit men is not possible. At the incident of rape attempt on Thelma when Louise ends up shooting Harman, Thelma first argues that they should simply go to the police and narrate the entire incident instead of fleeing so that they do not have to be in conflict with the law. Thelma proposes that they go to the police and “tell ‘em what happened” (Scott 23:06). Louise however is more attuned at understanding that the society functions through the male gaze and is clear in stating that they “don’t live in that kind of world” (Scott 23:14) where police would simply believe a woman’s claim on being raped especially after people saw her dancing with him “cheek to goddamn cheek” (Scott 23:17). Lynda Hart writes, “ Thelma naively believes that simply telling the “truth” will exonerate them. Louise has to teach her that the symbolic order is a masculine imaginary” (Hart 435). Thelma and Louise can no longer be a part of this masculine symbolic order, and going to the police which functions within that order cannot be of help to them, leaving them only with the option to drive off the cliff as a part of their suicide pact.

Contextualizing American Films for Indian Learners

Teaching films and texts from American literature to Indian learners is a relatively complex task given the difference in socio-cultural practices of the two societies. The level of political and social freedom afforded to men and women in American society as compared to Indian is significantly divergent. Both societies have history of marginalizing various sub groups within their culture, people of colour in American society have suffered abuse and discrimination for generations; In India people of marginalized caste communities have been discriminated against and subjected to atrocities for centuries. However, what lies common between the two societies is their discrimination against women. Gender based crimes and discrimination have existed in both cultures. According to the Global Gender Gap Index rankings of 2022 measured by the World Economic Forum,

India stood at 135th ranking out of 153 countries while Unites States of America ranked at 27. The Global Gender

Gap Index is defined as, “a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracking their progress over time. The index benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, education, health and political criteria...” (8). Thus the study points towards significant gender based discrimination existing in both nations which would further impede access to education, health and political empowerment. The problem of gender based discrimination can thus be seen as a commonality between both nations.

This lived reality of discrimination and violence against women existing in India is important to mention as it underlines the fact that the students being taught this course were able to understand the oppression being faced by the two protagonists in the film as well as the central argument of Mulvey’s essay. The students were not only able to empathize with the predicaments faced by Thelma and Louise but were also inquisitive about the social freedom afforded to the two characters that enabled them to embark upon this road trip as the social condition of women in 1990s American society was still more progressive than that of majority of Indian women even till date. Student A made the observation during class discussion post film screening, “The way Thelma and Louise dressed and the fact that they were able to travel by driving alone is so radical by itself. We still cannot spend the night out away from home as our parents’ would never allow it, forget taking a road trip”. Several other women students mentioned how they would not be allowed to travel at all and only hoped to do so post being married. Student B from this class said, “American women can at least be independent enough to travel alone, the part where Thelma is worried about how to tell her husband about her road trip over the weekend is the part that felt most relatable. I would probably go through the same anxiety if I had to ask for permission at home to travel like this”.

The discussion held post film screening of Thelma and Louise centred on drawing tangible connections between the women centred narrative of the film and how it functioned with reference to Mulvey’s male gaze theory. Majority of students in class were found to be able to more closely engage with Mulvey’s theory post the film-screening as compared to the first analysis of the essay submitted by them pre-screening. The students were directed to debate whether they agreed with the film’s key theme that in order to escape the male symbolic order, legal system must also be broken as the two function in tandem. While many students stated that they agreed with the film’s premise of Thelma and Louise indulging in criminality in order to find any possible escape from patriarchal oppression and domestic boredom they dealt with in their everyday lives, few students disagreed and argued that Thelma and Louise were only likeable and relatable till the point their actions were in response to their harassment by men they met. The students argued that their use of force later in the film against the police

officer who stops them was unjustified and could not be seen as a feminist expression of dismantling the masculine social order. Student C remarked, “How is the violence in second half of the film fetching Thelma and Louise any freedom from patriarchy? It seemed that they were simply enjoying their limitless and lawless freedom rather than striving for any higher feminist emancipation”.

Steve Cohan argues in his text, *The Road Movie Book*, argues how there exists an historic absence of females in road movie genre which promotes a “male escapist fantasy linking masculinity and technology” (Cohan 2). Traditionally the genre of road narratives are associated with masculine pursuit of individual transformation and liberation against the cultural norms, rarely providing space for women characters to exercise the same agency. Shari Roberts argues how road films have increasingly come to depict the search for new personal and national identities.

Final Conclusions

When teaching abstract and complex theoretical readings in academic colleges with increased use on modern technology, it becomes pertinent to create a classroom dynamic where students are able to utilize the technical resources fully and are encouraged to bring their own understanding of the world to the classroom.

This paper claims that the use of films is useful in teaching non-film based literary courses as it allows more comprehensive involvement, assessment, creative discussions and holistic evaluation of students. It is important for teachers to prescreen any film they intend to share with the classroom and prepare the students for the film screening by providing them the necessary background information on both the literary course as well as the film. The paper demonstrates that it is not necessary to restrict the film screening to only films that directly correlates to the reading material but to also include films in the course through which students may gain better conceptual understanding. These secondary films could be a part of the popular culture or have significant socio-cultural connection to the students, allowing them to find the film more relatable. The paper shows how implementing this method of film screenings along with regular classroom discussion and worksheet-based activities can result in ensuring a better learning outcome for the students.

While film screenings come with significant advantages, teachers are reluctant to introduce this method in their classrooms due to the greater time demands and the requirement of technical equipment for such film screenings. Yet, as the this paper shows, film screenings allow students to make more significant connections between theory in text and real life situations where these academic theories become practice. This also provides

the students with encouragement to pursue academic work with more rigour by showing them the impact such theoretical work makes on the culture around them.

Works Cited

Ausubel, David P., and Donald Fitzgerald. "Chapter V: Meaningful learning and retention:

Intrapersonal cognitive variables." *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 31, no. 5, 1961, pp. 500-510.

Cohan Steven and Ina Rae Hark. *The Road Movie Book*. Routledge

1997, http://www.123library.org/book_details/?id=67391. Accessed 21 Oct. 2022.

Eraso, Carmen Indurain. "'THELMA AND LOUISE': 'EASY RIDERS' IN A MALE

GENRE." *Atlantis*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2001, pp. 63–73. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41055009>.

Accessed 31 Oct. 2022.

Gamman Lorraine and Margaret Marshment. *The Female Gaze : Women As Viewers of*

Popular Culture. US ed US ed. Real Comet Press 1989.

Hart, Lynda. "'Til Death Do Us Part: Impossible Spaces in 'Thelma and Louise.'" *Journal of the History of*

Sexuality, vol. 4, no. 3, 1994, pp. 430–46. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704353>. Accessed 31 Oct.

2022.

Hickey, Walt. "The Dollar-And-Cents Case against Hollywood's Exclusion of Women." *FiveThirtyEight*, 1 Apr.

2014, www.fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-dollar-and-cents-case-against-hollywoods-exclusion-of-women/.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." *Feminism and film theory*. Routledge, 2013. 57-68.

Popham, W. James. *Transformative assessment*. ASCD, 2008.

Roberts, Shari. "WESTERN MEETS EASTWOOD Genre and gender on the road." *The road movie book*.

Routledge, 2002. 61-82.

Scott, Ridley, director. *Thelma & Louise*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991.

Von Morzé, Leonard. "Beyond the clip: Critical uses of film in the non-film course." *Human Architecture:*

Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge, vol. 6, no.1, 2008.

World Economic Forum. "Global Gender Gap Report 2022." *World Economic Forum*, 13 July 2022,

www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/.