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Abstract

This article will explore memory in the making a smartphone video essay titled *BFF Thelma & Louise: Tanya & Lucy Revisit 30 Years On.*The work combines new technology, and autoethnographic methods to investigate the impact of the cult film *Thelma and Louise*(Ridley Scott, 1991). The work reframes the film through an exploration of the personal memories of the filmmaker and her teenhood friend and asks why *Thelma and Louise* is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago.

*BFF Thelma & Louise: Tanya & Lucy Revisit 30 Years On*

<https://vimeo.com/557367461/d8b07c0b03>

*Thelma & Louise* (1991, Ridley Scott) is one of my favourite films. On its 30th anniversary I set out to make a video-essay/documentary through the lens of an iPhone SE smartphone, exploring my intimate memories of friendship and the wider cultural relevance and legacy of *Thelma & Louise*.

The short documentary is called *BFF Thelma & Louise: Tanya & Lucy Revisit 30 years On,* and is a tribute to the Hollywood movie and screenwriter Callie Khouri’s pioneering radicalism and imagination in creating the script and characters Thelma and Louise; two ordinary women who leave the men in their lives behind and embark on an empowering and transformative journey.

The documentary was born out of a series of practice based research workshops at London South Bank University with the filmmaker Kevin B. Lee, and inspired by Lee’s [*Explosive Paradox*](http://www.thecine-files.com/explosive-paradox-on-platoon/), part of the acclaimed [*Once Upon a Screen*](http://www.thecine-files.com/issue15-audiovisual-essays/) series of video essays produced in 2020 for [*The Cine-Files*](http://thecine-files.com/). The brief called for contemplations on a single formative childhood memory relating to a film and reflections on the viewing experience as well as the broader cultural context. The brief also asked for thoughts on a new understanding of the work, in the true fashion of a “coming of age” story.

*Thelma & Louise* was my instinctive choice. I hoped the process of making the documentary would help me to better understand the visceral response I had to the film on first watching it as well as why the film continues to resonate with me. I was a teenager, living in Telford, the town I grew up in, in the West Midlands when I first saw the movie. The memory of watching it with my best friend Tanya and the sinister events that ensued on our way home from the cinema in the summer of 1991 have stayed with me and impacted my life.

One of the complexities is in remembering the details of how I felt as a teenager but what stays with me is the joy and excitement that we both felt after watching the film. We were literally skipping home and felt empowered, like superheroes. But this feeling did not last as we witnessed first-hand the reality of everyday sexual violence and harassment, as faced by Thelma and Louise in the film. Tanya and I both had vaguely different memories of what happened on that walk home but we both remember the fear and the shock and a sense of powerlessness in that moment. *Thelma & Louise* continues to resonate with me and many women. It feels particularly relevant in the time of movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp that have highlighted the shameful reality of how so many women are still treated.

I wanted to return to the crime scene and construct the documentary around the place we had watched the film some thirty years earlier. Lockdown was beginning to lift in Spring 2021 so I returned to Telford with my children to visit my dad who still lives there. My dad and boys feature fleetingly at the beginning of the documentary as a way of representing the passing of time. I am now a mother, well into my 40s, and this documentary narrative like that of *Thelma & Louise* is female centred, so my male family members are on the periphery here to give space to mine and Tanya’s relationship and the significance of the film to us.

I think it was the first time that I had watched a film that depicted female friendship in a way that I recognised, rather than reproducing the female rivalry trope. We saw ourselves, even though we were teenagers in Telford, in Thelma and Louise and identified with their characters. It made me cognisant of what it means to be a woman, and shaped my future in terms of me discovering and embracing feminism. It inspired me to launch [Women in Screen](https://twitter.com/womeninscreen) and the [Trailblazing Women On and Off Screen conference](https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3Ascds%3AUS%3A0fc91670-5d2b-44b0-abee-b52ad672fffd#pageNum=1) series to champion women working in front of and behind the scenes in the film and media industries.

I combined documentary techniques of a personalised, presenter-lead format withpieces-to-camera, voice-over and a Zoom interview, alongside general views of the sixth form college we attended and the cinema we went to. The documentary was shot on a smartphone. This was, in part, a practical and logistical decision due to the Covid-19 pandemic but also an opportunity to embrace digital storytelling practices and test innovative smartphone technology. The autoethnographic methods employed to interrogate my personal memories of *Thelma and Louise* lent themselves to the intimacy of smartphone filmmaking.

The documentary also incorporates old photos to illuminate the deep connection between myself and Tanya, and home video footage filmed by my sister captures our happiness on camera as we sing in the car to The Monkees *(I’m Not Your) Steppin’ Stone*. The grey, small town backdrop of Telford juxtaposes with the vivid blue skies of *Thelma & Louise* as they take to the open road driving through wide vistas in their Thunderbird.

The ending of *Thelma & Louise* takes on particular significance for me, as it does for many women. In reality they are trapped and have nowhere to go but for me it provides a sense of hope. I choose to believe that Thelma and Louise continue to live. This is a gendered hope for a vision of freedom and what it should mean to live as a woman.