THE WOMAN'S FILM, THE NEW WOMEN'S CINEMA, AND
THE WOMEN'S BUDDY FILM

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way in which the representation of women's friendship in Hollywood cinema is ideologically constructed: first in the classical era of the woman's film; second, in the 1970s renaissance of the woman's film as a genre, known as the "new women's cinema"; and third, in a very recent group of films of the late 1980s and early 1990s that can be thought of as a generic hybrid of the woman's film and the male buddy film of the 1970s. Each of these three periods is marked by unique characteristics relating to the way in which female friendship is figured; and certainly there has been an advance in the variety of women's roles generally, and of depictions of female friendship specifically, in Hollywood over this sixty year period. And yet there has not been a great deal of change in the degree to which patriarchal discourses—in relation to concepts such as marriage, family, home and career—delineate the scope and meaning of these representations of women's friendships in accordance with dominant ideology. This thesis traces an increased ideological openness or ambiguity across time; but a coherent feminist discourse does not emerge in Hollywood's depiction of women friends either in tandem with the women's movement of the 1970s, or in our contemporary cinema's female buddy films. What has changed is the socio-political climate in which such films are received, rather than simply the films themselves.
The first chapter outlines the depiction of friendship between women in the two historical eras in question, pointing to the degree of change in the woman's film from the 1930s and 1940s to the 1970s. In the second chapter, I examine Robin Wood's schemata of the male buddy film of the early 1970s, and evaluate his notion of this generic cycle's ideological progressiveness. The third chapter applies Wood's model of male buddy films to three female buddy films of the 1990s: *Thelma and Louise*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Leaving Normal*. The fourth chapter proposes the concept of a "backlash" buddy film through a sustained textual analysis of *Single White Female*. And in the fifth and final chapter, I return to theoretical problems of establishing textual meaning in popular film that have been raised by each of the preceding chapters.
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PREFACE

In order to limit the field of films to be examined and the range of theoretical questions to be addressed, I have chosen to confine my primary textual analysis to mainstream, Hollywood films. This is partially to avoid comparisons which are not only unfair, but critically unnecessary, as it seems fairly evident that independently produced, stylistically avant-garde, overtly feminist films depicting women's friendships are going to be "better," ideologically speaking, than their Hollywood counterparts. While there are certainly points of correspondence between the Hollywood films I examine in detail and "foreign" (in this context, read "not American") or non-mainstream films by women—such as Daisies (Vera Chytilova, 1966), La Vie Revee (Mireille Dansereau, 1972), L'une chante, l'autre pas (Agnes Varda, 1977), Entre Nous (Diane Kurys, 1983), La femme de l'hotel (Lea Pool, 1984), I've Heard the Mermaids Singing (Patricia Rozema, 1987), Loyalties (Anne Wheeler, 1987) and Daughters of the Dust (Julie Dash, 1992), to name only a few—making such comparisons often leads to a simple dismissal of the more mainstream films as necessarily ideologically regressive or complicit, due to their codes of realist illusionism. Rather than vilifying dominant representational practices and visual pleasure in narrative cinema, I will attempt to trace change (or a lack thereof) in representations of women's relationships within such mainstream filmic practice. By concentrating on Hollywood film, I am acknowledging it as the most widely accessible and most popularly frequented cinema. And as a "technology of gender" (to use de Lauretis' term), the popular cinema is of vital interest to feminist inquiry into gender oppression in social reality.
Janet Thumim takes this last statement as the premise of *Celluloid Sisters* (1992), her sociological study of the popular cinema in Britain between 1945 and 1965. While Thumim's work suffers from several methodological problems and makes a number of assumptions which cannot be verified, I would like to point out one such assumption which has direct bearing on this thesis. Thumim selects the films she analyses based on the top box office performance for the years of the post-war period in question, reasoning that these films had the greatest role to play in constructing feminine identity and women's social roles during this era. Ultimately, she concludes that the representations of women that these films offered were complicit with patriarchal definitions of women's nature and social roles, or that those female characters who transgressed such roles were severely punished. Thumim also suggests that topics of social importance to women's real lives during that period—divorce, careers for women, education for women, etc—were ignored or trivialized by the cinema of the period, in accordance with patriarchy's needs surrounding such issues (1-35).

But by selecting examples of popular cinema in terms of the biggest box office successes, however, Thumim tends to belie the (possible) variety of representations of women available to women movie-goers of the period, because the "hits" were not the only films accessible at the time. Female spectators may have also attended "women's films" which to some degree addressed their concerns, offered alternative visions of women's roles, and which even became moderate commercial successes, but which did not become box office "hits" because of men's lack of interest in such films. I don't have evidence of this type of variety on British screens for the era in question.
(although Brandon French's *On the Verge of Revolt* [1978] discovers a great deal of such variety, at least in Hollywood films of the 1950s); but by extension of Thumim's method, the types of representation of women available in the 1990s would be reduced to those found in *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1994), *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990), *Wayne's World* (Penelope Spheeris, 1992), and so on. Such "hits," however, do not begin to represent the choices available to cinema-goers today. While many women must have seen *Wayne's World* in order for it to become such a huge commercial success, this does not mean that these women could not have or did not see less "popular" (in box office terms) films, such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet 1991), and perhaps enjoy them more than the blockbuster films.

Thumim also explicitly states that she assumes, for lack of evidence to the contrary, that the box office hits she analyses garnered audiences whose gender balance reflected the national demographics of the period in question. Thumim further claims that films are made popular insofar as they meet social needs, allowing the creation of meanings which are "useful" or "pleasurable" to their audiences (1-35). Having assumed that women made up approximately half of the audience of box office hits between 1945 and 1965, Thumim proceeds to look for ways that women could have found use value and pleasure in patriarchal gender representations that were not in their interests. Once again, I have no evidence to suggest that she is necessarily wrong about the gender mix of the audience of the films she analyses, but extending her methodology to this time period, it would be fairly safe to assume that the audiences of the blockbuster films of the 1990s mentioned above deviated from national demographics, both in terms of age and gender. That is, more
(younger) men than (older) women went to see *Wayne's World*. And conversely, many of the films I propose to examine may reach an audience substantially different than demographic norms, likely drawing more (older) women than (younger) men, as determined not only by the appeal of a female-centered storyline but also by generic affiliations (many are melodramas or "women's films," in the traditional sense). When one is considering the ideological influence of a film in representing female experience, being unpopular with male audiences is not the same thing as being unpopular altogether, yet numerically speaking, this may amount to the same thing. This gender bias of audiences must be accounted for, in terms of the way films address their spectators, and the pleasures or uses which a film may serve.

I have chosen films, then, which are not necessarily top box office hits (although some are), by the topic they address, specifically, women's friendship. This means, of course, that I am not making any claims for these films as representative of popular cinematic experience of gender representation as a whole, as Thumim does. And I do not intend to provide statistics of audience demographics or box office receipts for the films I consider, but instead wish to point out the variety of gender representation they offer cinema consumers, often as alternatives to the number one box office hit.

In this way, this thesis points to the emergence of the women's buddy genre as a sign of a greater "popular" emphasis on women's stories and experience, as an alternative to most mainstream film production, which historically and currently addresses the male audience, phallocentrically conceived of as a neutral standard of popular taste, undifferentiated by gender. It is not, however, a sociological celebration of women being
recognized as a specialized commercial market in an increasingly competitive industry (for this is what the emergence of the female buddy "genre" in the 1980s and 1990s, like the new women's cinema [Kuhn 125] of the 1970s before it, largely signifies). The simple existence of films addressing a female audience and depicting friendships between women, while certainly a promising sign, does not guarantee that they will address feminist interests. Readings of individual films will not be uncritical, and in most cases will highlight their cultivated ambivalence, the lack of an articulated feminist project or any defined, ideological awareness. In assessing the limitations of these particular manifestations of the women's buddy genre, I do not expect the formal disruption or stylistic radicalness of feminist avant-garde cinema, but diegetic "radicalness" (i.e. feminist political awareness depicted as part of the story) is conceivable, yet seldom realized.
CHAPTER 1
Female Friendship Onscreen
From the Classical Hollywood Cinema to the New Women's Cinema of the 1970s

During the past fifteen years, there has been a notable increase in the number of mainstream Hollywood films that depict the relationship between two or more women as a central point of narrative interest. The types of relationships that the female protagonists develop in these films are many and varied: familial (Crimes of the Heart [Bruce Beresford 1986], Hannah and her Sisters [Woody Allen, 1986], and Postcards from the Edge [Mike Nichols, 1990]) or professional (Nine to Five [Colin Higgins, 1980], Agnes of God [1985], and Working Girl [Mike Nichols, 1988]); as friends (Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean [Robert Altman, 1982], Bagdad Cafe [Percy Adlon 1988], and Beaches [Gary Marshall, 1988]) or as lovers (Personal Best [Robert Towne, 1982], Lianna [John Sayles, 1983], and Three of Hearts [Yurek Bogayevicz, 1993]). While the majority of such films fall within the generic boundaries of the traditional woman's film (Terms of Endearment [James L. Brooks, 1983], Just Between Friends [Allan Burns, 1986], Immediate Family [Jonathan Kaplan, 1989] and Steel Magnolias [Herbert Ross, 1989] are examples of typical tear-jerkers), many strong relationships between women (friendly or adversarial) have also cropped up outside of classical, melodramatic forms. Swing Shift (Jonathan Demme, 1984), The Color Purple (Steven Spielberg, 1985), A League of Their Own (Penny Marshall, 1992) and Bad Girls (Jonathan Kaplan, 1994), for example, are all period pieces in
addition to being a wartime comedy, the screen adaptation of a famous novel, a
historical sports film and a western, respectively. *The Accused* (Jonathan
Kaplan, 1988) is a courtroom drama; *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1984) is a "true
story" biopic; *Black Widow* (Bob Rafelson, 1986) is a mystery/thriller; *The
Witches of Eastwick* (George Miller, 1987) is a weird mixture of comedy,
fantasy and horror genres; while *Private Benjamin* (Howard Zieff, 1980),
*Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1985), *Outrageous Fortune*
(Arthur Hiller, 1987), and *She-Devil* (Susan Seidelman, 1989) are all comedy-
adventure films.

The relatively large number of these films (those listed above are
representative rather than exhaustive), the greater variety of types of female
relationships depicted, and the diversity of genres in which such relationships
are central suggest a marked departure from the way in which women's
relationships with each other have historically been represented (or under-
represented) in mainstream cinema. For those liberal feminist critics who are
primarily interested in evaluating female roles in film as "positive" or "negative"
portrayals of women, implicitly measured against the critic's personal sense of
feminist progress and female identity in the real world, the expansion of recent
cinema's treatment of women's relationships is, in and of itself, a political
advancement of sorts:

[W]omen will be victims and avengers, reckless, sexy, puritans,
radicals, and up-tight bitches, dippy dames and morose
modernists, their very diversity a guarantee against stereotype.
For every stereotype there's a counter-stereotype and the story of
women can no longer be reduced to a recitation of evils. [...] We
want nothing less, on and off the screen, than the wide variety
and dazzling diversity of male options. (Haskell 402)
Whether or not the representations of female relationships offered by the individual films of the 1980s and 1990s actually constitute an ideological improvement on their (more rare) historical counterparts is a matter of critical debate. Many critics have pointed to the general neoconservatism of Reagan-era Hollywood films and to the anti-feminist "message" presented even (or perhaps especially) in those films which are specifically about women and women's issues (Palmer 246-279, Vlasopolos 118, and Wood 206-7, for example). Notwithstanding the (probably justifiable) characterization of the films of the 1980s, such as the most universally lambasted example, Terms of Endearment, as "reactionary" (Vlasopolos 118), the depiction of women's relationships in contemporary cinema has, in fact, expanded and evolved since the classical period. The question remains, however, not only how the film texts themselves have changed, but also, how the (female) audience today is addressed by these texts, and invited to makes sense of and find pleasure in such representations as are offered. Specifically, I shall consider the cinematic representation of friendship between women: first, as such friendship was figured in classical Hollywood cinema; second, its continued development during the resurgence of woman's films in the 1970s; and third, the most recent stage of its evolution, as presented in the emergence of a group of female buddy films in the early 1990s. While the portrayal of women's friendships in mainstream cinema has superficially evolved in accordance with the demands of the changing times, the ideological framework (socio-political "progressiveness" or "conservativeness") which determines how we are invited to understand these portrayals, has not shifted dramatically across the three time periods in question. This is to say that, as a group, modern films centrally
depicting friendships between women do not indicate a coherent feminist discourse to a significantly greater extent than do their historical counterparts.

It is reasonably common for modern critics to decry the lack of positive representations of female friendship in the classical Hollywood cinema, as compared to the innumerable films of various genres—war films, westerns, gangster films, action-adventure films—that portrayed the unambiguous friendship and professional solidarity among men. In *Celluloid Sisters*, a study of the most commercially successful films in Britain during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Janet Thumim notes that in direct contrast to the importance accorded to marriage in films of the period, very few films addressed "the equally universal experience (for women) of female friendships. Representations of *any* friendships between women are rare; friendships carrying narrative significance are almost entirely absent" (182-3). This is doubtless the case, in the popular cinema of both Britain and North America, if one is to define the depiction of friendship between women in the same way one would define friendship between men. Marsha McCreadie, for example, confirms this absence of women friends from the classical American movies by disqualifying certain female relationships from constituting friendship because they do not conform to the type of camaraderie and solidarity that often defines male friendship in the genres mentioned above:

Yet women—in movies as in life—have been on their own without even the one symbolic friend to strengthen their individual position. The Gish sisters, Lillian and Dorothy, may have clung desperately together at moments, but theirs was a bonding of fear, not a planned attack on life. Rather than pairing for mutual benefit, most relations between women have been destructive rather than constructive, as both the early film *The Women* ([George Cukor,] 1939) and the more contemporary *The Group* ([Sidney Lumet,] 1966) show. (McCreadie 39)
Judith Mayne, however, identifies two broad categories of feminist criticism (which she initially distinguishes in chronological terms), the first of which addresses the types of "images of women" offered in film, while the second attempts to "read against the grain" of the presentation of those images to discover ideological disturbances: "If the early stage [of feminist criticism] was concerned with the absence of real female experience from the screen, the later stage would consider how that 'absence' might better be understood as repression or displacement" (Women 23). It is precisely the type of film that McCreadie mentions that points to the repression or displacement of female friendships, through such negative representation. In a society in which women were taught to value heterosexual romance leading to marriage, and then expected to remain confined to the home caring for children (even as the numbers of both single and married women in the work force steadily increased), there could be little narrative motivation for stories simply about women's friendship, as such friendships were considered, at best, "inconsequential alongside the altogether weightier business of securing a husband" (Thumim 184).

Instead of portraying loyal friendships between women, classical Hollywood film often depicts bitter rivalries between women, usually in competition for a man. More than one central female character does not often appear except within the woman's film of the thirties and forties, and it is thus most often within this genre that women's friendships reveal themselves negatively. Haskell suggests that the woman's film can be reduced to four thematic categories, which she terms "sacrifice, affliction, choice, competition" (163). And, not surprisingly, it is within the last category, competition, that
critics "reading against the grain" have discovered the repressed presence of female friendship:

Frequently, when the rivalry between two women takes place over a man's affections, the relationship between the two women is far more foregrounded than either of the women's relations to the man in question. In Old Acquaintance ([Vincent Sherman,] 1943) a requisite love triangle operates, but the intense and complicated friendship between [Bette] Davis and Miriam Hopkins provides far more dramatic fodder than the attraction to the man. (Mayne Cinema 132-133)

Other examples of melodramas featuring women's rivalry—for men, maternal influence, or even career—include: The Female of the Species (D.W. Griffith, 1912) with Claire McDowell, Mary Pickford and Dorothy Bernard; The Old Maid (Edmund Goulding, 1939) with Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins as her evil cousin; The Great Lie (Edmund Goulding, 1941) with Bette Davis and Mary Astor; Mildred Pierce (Michael Curtiz, 1945) with Joan Crawford as the long-suffering mother ultimately pitted against her own evil daughter, played by Ann Blyth; A Woman's Secret (Nicholas Ray, 1949) with Maureen O'Hara and Gloria Grahame; All About Eve (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) with Bette Davis and Ann Baxter competing for supreme position in their career; Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, 1959) with Lana Turner and Sandra Dee as mother and daughter in competition for mom's man; and, more baroquely, Whatever Happened to Baby Jane (Robert Aldrich, 1962), in which Bette Davis victimizes her crippled sister, Joan Crawford, closely followed by Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte (Robert Aldrich, 1965), in which Olivia de Havilland victimizes her cousin, Bette Davis.

In some versions of the rival films, the female adversaries are both played by the same actress in a dual role (inaugurated by Mary Pickford as
both the sweet, beautiful Stella and her ugly, murderous servant, Unity Blake, in *Stella Maris* [Marshall Nelan, 1918]), often playing twins, one of whom tries to take over her sister's identity, and, of course, steal her sister's husband or boyfriend in the process: *A Stolen Life* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1946), starring Bette Davis, and *The Dark Mirror* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), starring Olivia de Havilland, are examples of this subgenre. The rivals in films of this kind, although played by the same actress, are just as sharply contrasted as the heroine and villainess of the films listed above, one being sweet and good, the other treacherous and amoral. The narrative of "competition" woman's films almost always privileges the position of one of the women over the other, who is in turn justly punished for her wickedness in keeping the deserving woman away from her rightful place in the man's (or child's) life. In other words, the contrasting characterization of the women and the film's narrative resolution work to establish a prevalent sense of justice or tragedy as the viewer's response, which determines the "preferred meaning" of the film as a discourse on femininity and female relationships. And usually that preferred meaning involves a patriarchal lesson (or warning) about the proper attitude women should have toward their (potential) roles as wife, mother or career woman.

I use the term "preferred meaning" above to distinguish between the meaning that the text itself seems to present the viewer (unless the viewer actually misreads the film by failing to notice or understand the significance of information provided, she can have no doubt as to which twin in *The Dark Mirror*, for example, is the "good" one, according to the numerous mutually supportive discourses that the film provides about the protagonists) and the actual—potentially transgressive—meaning and pleasures the viewer may take
from the film experience (she recognizes that the evil twin is criminal and possibly insane, but nonetheless identifies more strongly with her as someone who has been made to feel inadequate her whole life by her sickeningly perfect sister). Thumim discusses the British film, *The Wicked Lady* (Leslie Arliss, 1945), which stars Margaret Lockwood and Patricia Hunt as competing friends, as a narrative which ultimately privileges the sweet, innocent Caroline (Hunt) over the cynical, sexually aggressive Barbara (Lockwood), by rewarding Caroline with marriage to the man she loves and by ultimately punishing Barbara with rape, being rejected by the man she loves, and a lonely death. Thumim cites the following exchange of dialogue between the women in summary of the different ideological positions they represent:

*Barbara:* When you're married you can have everything you want. You can fill this house with amusing people. You can go to London and become a famous hostess.
*Caroline:* Oh, I don't think Ralph would care for that.
*Barbara:* A clever woman can make her husband do as she likes.
*Caroline:* But if a woman really loves her husband she'd rather do as he likes.
*Barbara:* Still the same self-sacrificing little ninny. (Thumim 121)

Certainly the preferred meaning of the film would advertise the dangers of Barbara's transgressive lifestyle, and warn women to follow the safe and happy route of wifely submissiveness advocated by Caroline. But Thumim also cites evidence that most women seem to have preferred the character of Barbara, enjoying her wickedness more than the dull character of Caroline, and even emulating some of her features: one viewer recalled that Margaret Lockwood's beauty mark "was something new, we all started to add them with eye pencil"; and another said, "her adventurous role made every woman feel she would like to be a wicked lady. My mother, like many others, bought the fashionable
'Wicked Lady' style hat" (R. McWiggan and A. Morrow in Thumim 167). Even the preferred meaning established in the film's title—there is no doubt as to which heroine is "wicked"—is overturned by one viewer, who said she preferred to see Barbara as "a thoroughly bold woman, rather than wicked" (P. Burgess in Thumim 122). Another viewer reported she, "liked the contrast between the good and bad women, [and] liked the bad one best," while still another commented that, "even though she was evil, I enjoyed the woman scoring over the males" (D. West and R. Gardner in Thumim 122). This last remark in particular suggests that the narrative resolution of the film—despite its terrible consequences for Barbara—does not necessarily negate the impression of her 'scoring over the males' or the pleasure the female viewers derived from her transgressive behaviour.

Thus, while criticisms of the classical Hollywood cinema's portrayal of "friendships" between women—as non-existent, competitive, adversarial, or negative in some other way—are certainly well-founded in relation to the preferred meaning of the texts in isolation, the viewers' pleasure in watching two (often two of the most powerful) female stars struggle, even against each other, to fulfill their conflicting desires may have nothing to do with the morality tale offered by the film's patriarchal discursive strategies. Mayne points to the foregrounding of the women's relationship over the heterosexual couple's as a possible site for such transgressive pleasure (132-5); and Haskell similarly suggests that in many of these "competition" films, "the women [fighting over a man] will discover, without explicitly acknowledging it, that they prefer each other's company to his" (164).
And there are other genres of film outside of the 'competing-for-a-man structure' that did (albeit infrequently) allow for the depiction of women's friendships in a manner that textually privileges them as (at least partially) positive. During the war, for example, there were films that concentrated on groups of women, either waiting in solidarity back home for their husbands (Tender Comrade, Edward Dmytryk, 1943) or going off to join the war effort as volunteers (Cry Havoc, Richard Thorpe, 1943). Backstage musicals also create a narrative situation in which two friends (Dance, Girl, Dance, Dorothy Arzner, 1940) or groups of women performers, living and working together (Stage Door, Gregory La Cava, 1937), provide each other with moral support and camaraderie as well as some healthy competition. And, of course, some of the most unambiguously positive representations of loyalty and friendship among women are found within the gold digger genre, including films such as The Greeks had a Word for Them or Three Broadway Girls (Lowell Sherman, 1932), Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Howard Hawks, 1953) and How to Marry a Millionaire (Jean Negulesco, 1953). Haskell says of Rosalind Russell and Marilyn Monroe in Gentlemen, "the two girls, strutting their wares, command awe much like two renowned gun-fighters" (258); and of the gold digger genre in general, she says:

With more zeal than self-pity, in contrast to the 'fallen-woman' confessional films of the thirties, the gold digger didn't hesitate to use her assets to get ahead and to assert some control over her life. Not for her the nine-to-five hours of the salesgirl or the longer ones of the executive. Largely through the support of her pals, the 'female community' established to outwit men rather than to compete with each other, she has the backing and confidence to do her number. This is one of the few genres and occasions where there is a real feeling of solidarity among women. (Haskell 145)
It would seem that although representations of friendship among women (in the thirties, forties and fifties) are rarely constructed as completely positive (i.e. ideologically desirable), and even then, only as a poor second choice until marriage becomes available as an option (and usually a marriage that will redeem the gold digger from her materialistic ways through a poor but true love), it is still possible for female viewers to enjoy the central "friendship" among the women characters without necessarily accepting the diminishment or negation of that relationship in favour of the "happy ending" in the narrative's resolution. But in spite of this possibility to "read against the grain," the viewer nonetheless recognizes the film's power to discursively establish what exactly does constitute a happy ending for the female characters (in almost all cases in this period, that is marriage), to construct the "preferred meaning" against which all other meanings and pleasures will be deemed oppositional.

The existence of a readily identifiable preferred meaning is one of the elements (in fact, the most important) separating the films of the classical period discussed above from the woman's films of the mid to late 1970s, which appeared after a decade of cinema that did not explicitly address the women's market. On this subject, Judith Mayne suggests:

When we read Hollywood films of the 1940s against the grain, there is a process of genuine discovery at work, a sense in which the apparent innocence and transparence of the film image is revealed to be something else altogether. With the contemporary cinema, however, something has changed. It seems curiously inappropriate to propose a reading of these films against the grain, since so often this conforms quite closely to the spirit in which the films have been produced, exhibited, and received. A dominant trait of the contemporary American cinema is its seemingly overt recognition of diversity. Modern films seem to promise something for everyone.... (Mayne Women 35-36)
This group of films, which includes *A Woman Under the Influence* (John Cassavetes, 1974), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Martin Scorcese, 1975), *Julia* (Fred Zinneman, 1977), *The Turning Point* (Herbert Ross, 1977), *Girlfriends* (Claudia Weill, 1978), *An Unmarried Woman* (Paul Mazursky, 1978), (according to some) *Coma* (Michael Crichton, 1978), and *Starting Over* (Alan J. Pakula, 1979), for example, was dubbed the "new women's cinema" by Annette Kuhn in 1982 (Kuhn 125), and disparagingly described by Haskell as a "trickle of feminist-inspired movies" (375). Most critics agree with Kuhn's original assessment that the most salient common feature of these films is the "extreme ambiguity of the[ir] politics and address...as part of an attempt both to cater for newly defined audiences and maximize box office appeal" (Brunsdon 123-4). Kuhn argues that although the New Hollywood cinema of the 1970s is generally prone to a lack of traditional narrative closure, the new women's cinema is even more likely to adopt such strategies of openness, as it would otherwise risk alienating some potential consumers of the films by taking up a coherent position in relation to the women's issues raised, that is, by overtly articulating a clear "preferred meaning" vis-a-vis feminism: "Films whose address sustains a degree of polysemy—which open up rather than restrict potential readings, in other words—may appeal to a relatively broadly-based audience. Openness permits readings to be made which accord more or less with spectators' prior stances on feminist issues" (Kuhn 129).

While the heroines of both *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *An Unmarried Woman* are depicted as having supportive female friends, critical response to these friendships has been divided. Many critics find that Alice's friendship with Flo is the best thing about *Alice*, and thus fault the film for
according too little attention to this relationship, compared to Alice's eventual romantic involvement. Critical response to the friends in *An Unmarried Woman* is less consistent, some praising the portrayal of more 'ordinary' types of women or the "profemale" quality of the group's friendship (Kolker 137), while others quite harshly complain that "the three buddies, or, rather, biddies, ...function as a chorus almost as unfortunately as do the grotesques in Lina Wertmuller's *The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Night Full of Rain*[1978]" (Mellen 534). And a similarly mixed reaction has greeted *Julia*, *The Turning Point*, and *Girlfriends*, the three new women's films that depict a female friendship as the central, almost exclusive, topic of the film's narrative. While certain of these films have been praised by individual critics, they have just as frequently been characterized as reactionary. Joan Mellen, for example, reads *Julia* as suggesting that "friendship between women is dangerous," due to the narrative's implication of a possible lesbian relationship between Lilly and Julia, coupled with the text's overly vehement denial of this possibility (533). Mellen also states that "far from friendship, *The Turning Point* posits a natural enmity between women" (533); that the film is "reactionary" in suggesting that career and marriage must be mutually exclusive, and that in choosing between the two, the film privileges "the tired cliché that more happiness resides in the home" (526). While Molly Haskell does not seem to like this film (or the other new women's films featuring women's friendships) much more than Mellen, it is interesting to note that Haskell reads the "message" of the film in exactly the opposite way, suggesting that "where earlier movies had forced women to abandon their careers in favour of marriage, the newer movies, like the Bancroft-MacLaine *The Turning Point*,
took the side of the career woman" (390). This type of widespread critical
disagreement speaks to the new woman's cinema's dogged refusal to establish
a preferred reading, either "reactionary" or "progressive," in relation to the
feminist issues of the seventies (e.g. career versus marriage) represented in
these films. Instead, as Kuhn suggests, the narratives maintain a structured
ambiguity "on the verge of incoherence in their eagerness to speak
simultaneously to as many ticket-buyers as possible" (Brunsdon 5), allowing
viewers to select a meaning from the text in accordance with their "prior
stances on feminist issues" (Kuhn 129):

Julia illustrates this point quite well: while lesbians may be free to
read the film as an affirmation of lesbianism, such a reading—just
as it is not ruled out—is by no means privileged by the text.
Girlfriends works similarly with regard to the question of feminism.
On its release, the film was widely received as charming, warm,
amusing and likeable. It was not regarded as threatening largely
because, despite its status as a female 'buddy' film, it does not
demand a reading as a feminist film. Nevertheless, at the same
time, the 'buddy' structure can equally well justify a reading of the
film in terms of woman-identification" (Kuhn 129).

Kuhn thus concludes: "Whatever possible identifications it offers to those who
choose to make them, new women's cinema cannot in the final instance deal in
any direct way with the questions which feminism poses for cinematic
representation" (129-30).

This group of "feminist-inspired" films depicting female friendship is the
most recent historical precursor for the group of female buddy films that I shall
discuss in chapter three. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that many of
the critics of the new women's cinema mention the similarity of some of the new
women's films to the male buddy films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as
Kuhn does above in relation to Girlfriends. Whereas Kuhn suggests that the
film is unthreatening "despite its status as a female 'buddy film'" (129, my emphasis), other critics have linked the term "buddy" to what they see as stronger textually determined meanings in the films. Although a more fully developed hybrid of the male buddy film and the woman's film emerged only within the last ten years, much of the critical discourse surrounding the new women's cinema wrestles with the idea of the "buddy" influence on the depiction of women's friendships, probably due, once again, to the extreme ideological incoherence or ambivalence found in both types of films. Joan Mellen brings up the sexual ambiguity of the male buddy film as it relates to what she sees, at best, as an unnecessarily confused depiction of the nature of the two women's friendship in Julia (532). Mellen also feels that these new women's films rely too much on the "clichés of the male buddy film, as in the cat fight between Maclaine and Bancroft. To some degree they return to the ideology of the woman's picture wherein women are competitive and hostile toward each other, inherently incapable of sustained friendship" (535). Kolker, on the other hand, characterizes the women's relationships in Alice and An Unmarried Woman progressively, as "a special response to the 'male-bonding' or 'buddy' films," insofar as the former do not need to "deny males" or be "antimale" in order to be "profemale," in contrast to the way in which male buddy films have historically marginalized and mistreated female characters (137). While the idea of the politically threatening potential of the female buddy film; of the sexual ambiguity that buddy films can accommodate or create; of the disjunctive conflict between generic conventions of male buddy films and the ideology of the woman's film; and of the progressive potential of shifting female characters to the centre of the buddy film genre have all been
alluded to in relation to the new women's cinema, these films nonetheless have very little to do with the "progressive" narrative paradigm of male buddy films, which I shall outline in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 2

A New Genre: From Male Buddies to Female Friends

The emergence in the 1980s of a group of films which concentrate on the relationship between two female friends can be understood as stemming from two seemingly contradictory generic trends of the 1970s: the "new women's cinema" (Kuhn 135), mentioned in the previous chapter, and the (male) buddy film. In terms of generic affiliation, the new women's cinema, as Kuhn's dubbing of these films suggests, has strong ties to the traditional melodrama or "woman's film;" whereas the buddy films of the 1970s usually represent a variant of traditional "male" genres, such as the Western or action-adventure film. And while many feminist critics are not entirely enthusiastic about the ideological implications of the new women's cinema (Brunsdon 119, Geraghty 138-145, Haskell 375-381, Mellen 525), they are generally far less ambivalent about the extreme sexism or misogyny inherent in the buddy films of the same period. Robert Phillip Kolker, for example, states that, "The 'buddy' film is explicitly antifemale, denying women (and its latent homosexuality as well), celebrating male victory over the bothersome other" (137).

But while the new women's cinema and male buddy films seem diametrically opposed in many ways, they can be seen as embodying similar ideological impulses, albeit expressed through completely different techniques and aimed at different movie audiences. Throughout his book, Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan (1986), Robin Wood discusses these films of the seventies as representing a gesture toward (but never a full realization of) greater ideological "progressiveness," which he implicitly defines as a loosening of traditional gender roles, coupled with the displacement of traditional,
heterosexist notions of sexual orientation in favour of the recognition of "constitutional bisexuality" (222). In spite of their particular ideological limitations (which Wood acknowledges and which I shall discuss below), Wood considers both the films of the new women's cinema and the male buddy films as mapping a route toward such progressiveness—as raising the possibility of challenging or problematizing traditional ideals—before being quickly answered by the extremely conservative or even reactionary generic trends of the early 1980s.

Like most critics writing on the films of the new women's cinema, Wood bases his evaluation of the films' progressive success in relation to the general ideals of feminism as a political movement. Indeed, Wood argues that it is the absence of any acknowledgement within these films of an organized, women's movement which most severely limits their potential as feminist texts (202-3). He notes that any inclusion of "feminism" as a discourse in Hollywood films is contingent upon the complete repression of "politics" in favour of its more personal dimensions (Wood 202). In other words, the films of the new women's cinema do not address the oppression of women as a group, and instead depict individual women who feel constrained by their personal circumstances (Wood 202). Wood explains that this failure to implicate the larger social structure of patriarchy which determines women's "personal" circumstances demonstrates Hollywood's traditional reluctance to take a radical position vis a vis the existing social order: "A social problem, explicitly stated, must always be one that can be resolved within the existing system, i.e. patriarchal capitalism; the real problems, which can't, can only be dramatized obliquely, and very likely unconsciously, within the entertainment movie" (202).
As evidence of the ideological limitations of the self-declared "feminist" content of the new women's cinema, Wood compares the common structure of two of the most discussed of these films, An Unmarried Woman (Paul Mazursky, 1978) and Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (Martin Scorsese, 1974). In both films, the central female character loses her husband and attempts to pursue a career while raising a child alone. And each of these heroines ultimately finds, "a non-oppressive male to whom she can relate on equal terms and with whom she develops a satisfying, if troubled, relationship" (Wood 204). While the commonalities of the two films' plot trajectories may suggest a growing sense of importance being accorded to some of the problems women may face under patriarchal society, Wood points out that this shared structure—particularly the films' resolution—"defines the limits of the ideologically acceptable, the limits that render feminism safe" (202-203). According to Wood, feminism is rendered safe in these two films through the heroines' ultimate return to a stable, heterosexual relationship based on personal "equality" between two individuals, rather than a politically conscious "liberation" from such conventional (narrative and personal) closure:

The films share a certain deviousness. On the explicit level, both preserve a determined ambiguity, refusing to guarantee the permanence of the happy ending. Yet the final effect is of a huge communal sigh of relief: the women don't have to be independent after all; there are strong, protective males to look after them. Their demand for independence is accordingly reduced to token gesture.... The "nonoppressiveness" and the "equality," though heavily signaled, are also extremely problematic, existing purely on the personal level in terms of sympathetic individual men and never clearly examined in terms of social positions. (204)

It is not necessarily the fact of a film ending in marriage or its equivalent state to which Wood objects, however. It is, rather, the fact that such an
ending is so often seen as the only viable conclusion (in Hollywood and in life) for any story centred on a woman protagonist (even a story with "feminist" pretensions), in order for the story to be considered "happy" or fully resolved. While Girl Friends (Claudia Weill, 1978) also resolves itself with one of the title characters getting married and that relationship displacing the friendship of the two women, Wood notes a key difference in this film's discursive attitude towards these events, as compared to other films of the new women's cinema:

*Girl Friends* presents marriage as patriarchy's means of containing and separating women.... [P]redominantly comic in tone but taking up the themes (marriage vs. career, etc.) of the "woman's melodrama," [the film] ends on a note of regret at the formation of the heterosexual couple rather than the traditional glow of relief and satisfaction" (Wood 212).

*Girl Friends* thus wins Wood's (partial) praise as "the only American commercial movie [he] can think of that explicitly calls marriage as an institution into question, as opposed to admitting that there are unsuccessful marriages" (211), despite the fact that it, like the new women's cinema as a whole, does not explicitly recognize women's oppression as a group or "the existence of a political women's movement" (Wood 211).

Wood considers the progressiveness or feminist achievement of the new women's cinema to be extremely limited and "precarious," noting that the small gains made by these films in the seventies were quickly dismissed by the eighties' "antifeminism" (206). He discusses the narratives of this latter trend in film as those which "teach the woman to be fully complicit in her own oppression" (206); in which "the principles of feminism [are] reduced to the demand to participate in the violent rites of masculinity" (206); or which "[use] a woman to denounce other women" (207). Wood suggests that feminism's
impact on Hollywood can best be observed, not positively, in the films of the new women’s cinema, for example, but negatively, in:

a massive retaliation (ranging from the shameless grossness of the mad slasher movie to the far more insidious reinstatement of compliant women to their safe, traditional roles enacted in films like An Officer and a Gentleman and Terms of Endearment) that testifies at least to the magnitude of [feminism’s] threat (Wood 208).

Many critics have come to regard the emergence of the male buddy film as part of this retaliation or "backlash" against the second wave of feminism, as these films unapologetically dispense with the traditional narrative importance of women altogether, rather than attempting to deal with their changing social positioning during the 1970s. Wood, too, recognizes that the popularity of these buddy films may in part stem from "the contemporary 'heterosexual' male audience’s need to denigrate and marginalize women" (230), as a response to the threat feminism poses to patriarchal order. But he also suggests that these films speak to this same audience’s "unconscious but immensely powerful need to validate love relationships between men" (Wood 230). This latter appeal to "straight" male viewers is more radical and potentially more liberating, for Wood, as the homoeroticism of (some) buddy films defies dominant sexual identity as it is naturalized in social practices such as mainstream cinema, and points to an "innate bisexuality," or at least foregrounds its cultural repression (Wood 1). In other words, while Wood acknowledges that buddy films can be considered as part of the negative reaction against feminism's challenges to the traditional values of a male-centred society, he contends that these films in some ways support such challenges to dominant ideology, by equally rejecting the dictates of "normality," as represented by ideals such as marriage, family
and home (227). Wood suggests, in fact, that the motivating premise of the buddy film is not the male relationship in and of itself, but rather, the absence of "home" (227-228). "Home" is to be understood here as a locus of traditional values which define and stabilize the patriarchal order. And as Hollywood cinema has traditionally constructed women as representatives of "home" in general, and of the possibility of closure and a "happy ending" through marriage in particular, it is hardly surprising that they are relegated to marginalized roles in these stories of male social rebellion.

Wood cites *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) and *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) as the movies which initiated this cycle of buddy films; and *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (Michael Cimino, 1974), *Scarecrow* (Jerry Schatzberg, 1973), and *California Split* (Robert Altman, 1974) as later examples of this trend. With certain exceptions or variations, these films share six traits which Wood identifies as integral to the buddy genre (227-229). The first of these commonalities is the journey motif, which is either overtly depicted and thus provides the structure of the film's action (in *Butch Cassidy*, *Thunderbolt*, and *Easy Rider*, for example), or is implied, in that the film's single setting (Las Vegas in *California Split*, and New York in *Midnight Cowboy*) is representative of a stage in an undepicted journey (Wood 227-8). The importance of the journey in each case, however, rests on the fact that it either "has no goal or its ostensible goal proves illusory" (Wood 228).

A second characteristic that the buddy films share is the marginalization of women in the story. Wood notes that of the six films he discusses, only *Butch Cassidy* has a semi-central "leading lady" (Katharine Ross), and even
she disappears from the narrative part way through the protagonists’ journey (228). More often, female characters "are merely present for casual encounters en route, 'chicks' for the boys to pick up and put down" (228). According to Wood, the importance of this marginalization of women in the buddy films is that it disallows the possibility of “woman-as-wife to provide a happy end” (228).

Wood additionally suggests that the casual encounters the women provide also function as a confirmation of the buddies’ heterosexuality, or more accurately, as a denial of their homosexuality. This denial is often overdetermined in the films through a third characteristic they share: the presence of an explicitly gay character, who is presented as a villain or a clown (Wood 229). These overtly homosexual characters (in Midnight Cowboy, California Split, and Scarecrow, for example) "[have] the function of a disclaimer—our boys are not like that" (Wood 229). Wood asserts that the insistent sexual conquest of minor female characters and the negative depiction of gay characters in these movies support (more strongly than any literal or symbolic intimacies between the buddies) a reading of the films as, "surreptitious gay texts": "by finding it necessary to deny the homosexual nature of the central relationship so strenuously, the films actually succeed in drawing attention to its possibility" (Wood 229).

A fourth trait which the buddy films share is the absence of home, where home is "understood not merely as a physical location but both as a state of mind and an ideological construct, above all as ideological security. Ultimately, home is America..." (Wood 228). Wood suggests that the ideological crisis represented by the lack of "home" in these films is the product of the collective
loss of confidence in America as "home" following the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal. He later goes on to suggest that the concept "home" could equally be termed "normality." What is absent(ed) from these films, then, is not only "home" as a site of ideological security, but also the fundamental elements of the patriarchal social order which constitute "normality": "the heterosexual romance, monogamy, the family, the perpetuation of the status quo, the Law of the Father" (Wood 229).

Perhaps the most obvious way in which the standards of "normality" are thwarted in the buddy films is through their fifth shared feature, the narrative focus on what Wood calls "the male love story" (228). Buddy films, by definition, are about a relationship between two men, and this relationship is always at the centre of the films' emotional core. This narrative focus on two men "stands in direct opposition to the usual account of the Classical Hollywood text in terms of the happy ending in heterosexual union, promising the continuance of the nuclear family" (Wood 228). If buddy films disallow the "normal" closure provided by heterosexual marriage and the beginning of a family, the consummation (or even the continuation) of the buddies "aberrant" relationship is in turn disallowed by the circumscribing conventions of Hollywood, which nonetheless demand some kind of "safe" closure. It is for this reason that so many of the buddy films share a sixth (and final) characteristic: the ultimate death (or severe debilitation) of one or both of the male buddies (229). Wood suggests that the generalized "collapse of confidence in normality" (241) during the seventies allowed American film—"a cinema by men and primarily for men" (230)—to create a genre, the buddy film, with appealing:
male protagonists, identification figures for the male audience, the efficient socialization of whose sexuality can no longer be a given. The characters themselves are, of course, without exception social outcasts, voluntary dropouts; frequently criminals, they have placed themselves outside the pressures of patriarchy, which are all that stand in the way of the recognition and acceptance of constitutional bisexuality. They are also the protagonists of films made within an overwhelmingly patriarchal industry: hence they must finally be definitively separated, preferably by death. The films belong not only to social history but to social progress. (Wood 230)

There are, obviously, inherent difficulties for feminist critics in deeming the marginalization and/or mistreatment of women in a group of films as part of, or even as in support of, any kind of "social progress." A film which is "liberating" for men, in that it attacks patriarchal values which limit men's options (in relation to gender or sexual identity), is not necessarily liberating for women, of course. And the buddy movie's dismantling of the viability of the concept of "home" and all the social constraints it implies is certainly not a progressive step for feminism if the women are given no choice but to stay behind—at home, and embodying "home"—and are thus excluded from participation in, or benefiting from, this abandonment of traditional social roles. Buddy films might ideally celebrate a homoerotic defiance of dominant gender and sexual roles, while critiquing the patriarchal social order's placement of men in relation to women. But in reality, they more often seem to self-indulgently glorify the tragic rebellion of two men against the rules of a world they themselves have created, while blaming or abusing women along the way, because women have been constructed under patriarchy as representatives of the social rigidity which the buddies (who are dropouts or outcasts) have come to resent.
Similarly, it is difficult to say unequivocally that all of these films can be read (except "against the grain"², in terms of their structured ambiguities or moments of incoherence) as suggesting the "progressiveness" of disposing with or rejecting "home," as Wood implies. In fact, although Wood makes a convincing case for the inherent textual "progressiveness" of Thunderbolt and Lightfoot through sustained analysis, it seems to me that most buddy films of this period could more probably be read as being deeply imbued with a sense of regret for the passing of better (i.e. more ideologically stable) days; as despairing of the absence of "home"; and/or as disillusioned by the disintegration of America's traditional values and gender roles. Certainly, there is a strong sense of loss and nostalgia in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and a great deal of cynical, male youth-angst informing the buddies' journey in Easy Rider, for example, neither of which can be easily explained as celebrating the collapse of normality as "progressive." But I do not intend to argue with Wood's general premise, case by case, for each of the films he mentions. I am merely suggesting that Wood's discussion of the buddy films' more conservative qualities is somewhat more forgiving than thorough. And if the regretful tone of Girl Friends toward the eventual marriage of one of its protagonists defines its ideological progressiveness for Wood, it should follow that the tone of regret for the loss of "home," which informs many of the buddy films, should equally define their ideological limitations.

I nonetheless agree with Wood's overarching claim that this pointed absence of home/normality (regardless of the films' apparent discursive attitude toward that absence) places the buddy films of the 1970s within a cycle of (albeit limited) social "progress," akin to that of the new women's cinema's
somewhat ambiguous (re)examination of home/family and women's place within it. And just as these latter films were displaced in the 1980s by what Wood terms "Hollywood antifeminism," so the ideological fissures created by buddy films (which both invoked and disowned the possibility of constitutional bisexuality) were quickly cemented over by the far more conservative films of the early 1980s, which overtly depict gay love relationships (Wood 237-244):

The background to the 70s buddy movies was, we have seen, the collapse of the concept of home, with all its complex associations; the background to the 80s gay movies is, precisely, its restoration and reaffirmation, an operation that makes clear the extent to which the restoration of home is synonymous with the restoration of the symbolic Father. (The Father may either forbid or permit; the permitting is just as authoritarian as the forbidding.) (Wood 241)

Wood discusses *Making Love* (Arthur Hiller, 1982), *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982), and (more peripherally) *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983) in this light. He mentions some positive aspects of these films' depiction of homosexuality, but ultimately finds them complicit with dominant ideology's insistence on definitively separating homosexuality from heterosexuality as necessarily oppositional "tendencies," and its insistence on ranking these two opposed sexual orientations in a hierarchy of liberal "values" which place the heterosexual man in a superior position, aligned with the symbolic Father (Wood 242):

[T]he ultimate and insidious ideological function of these films is to close off the implications of a threatening, antipatriarchal bisexuality that were opened surreptitiously in the 70s['] buddy films. (Wood 243-4)

I have considered in some detail Wood's views on new women's cinema, male buddy films of the 1970s and the more ideologically conservative
films that he feels have supplanted them in the 1980s, because I wish to return to his arguments to establish the parameters of debate in subsequent chapters. His analysis (I believe, accurately) points to a general shift from the tentatively contestational cycles of film in the 1970s to the unambiguous glorification of dominant ideology in mainstream films of the Reagan era. But while this latter type of movie-making has by no means disappeared (or even been counter-balanced, for that matter), the reality of commercial film production of the last ten years may not be as completely bleak as Wood’s description of the relentlessly oppressive early eighties might suggest. Published in 1986, Wood’s book preceded the burgeoning of a group of films in the mid to late eighties and early nineties that deal with the relationship between two female friends as the emotional core of the narrative, and which have as much in common with the generic formula of Wood’s buddy films as they do with the melodramatic concerns of the new women’s cinema.

In a chapter titled "Female Bonding," in her 1990 book on the portrayal of women in films of the 1970s and 1980s, Marsha McCreadie notes that "an extraordinary occurrence took place in the mid-1980s: women, for the first time in popular media, started to underpin rather than undermine each other" (39). *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols 1983), *Swing Shift* (Jonathan Demme, 1984), *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985), *Crimes of the Heart* (Bruce Beresford, 1986), *Hannah and her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986), *Just Between Friends* (Allan Burns, 1986), and *Outrageous Fortune* (Arthur Hiller, 1987) are among the films she reviews as examples of this "female bonding" (McCreadie 39-53). The feminine rapport depicted in these films can be thought of as at least superficially different than the relationships between women in the classical
period of Hollywood cinema, in that the women are not necessarily contrasted in order to establish a dichotomy of good and evil, and there are a greater number of admissable ways that narrative dilemmas may be resolved. For example, in recent films in which women share a man, the loyalty between the women can sometimes supercede the relationship with the man. This is not to say, however, that such plot diversity necessarily acts as an ideological corrective to the woman's film of the thirties and forties. In contrast to the majority of the films listed above, which could easily be viewed as variations on traditional family melodrama, *Outrageous Fortune* "served as an analogue for future films about women 'buddy' teams" (McCreadie 53), and thus inaugurated the recent generic hybrid between "women's films" and "buddy films."

The emergence of women's buddy films, or female friendship films, as I shall sometimes call them, seems to offer the possibility of reopening the ideological fissures created by the new women's cinema and male buddy films, in relation both to "women's issues" and to "home" as a matrix of hegemonic discourses. The combination and modification of these two movements of the 1970s suggests the additional potential for recent female friendship films to supercede some of the ideological limitations ascribed to their constituent genres by Wood (and other critics), as discussed above. In particular, the idea of replacing the male buddies with women holds out the possibility for a more explicitly feminist critique of patriarchy, as well as avoiding the misogynistic impulses that have drastically undermined the male buddy films' progressive critique of dominant ideology. But it is also possible, of course, that such generic blending might expose or reproduce different (perhaps unique) ideological problems altogether. While certain female buddy films indicate the
potential progressiveness of this new genre, as a group they have failed to realize their promise of a popular feminist discourse. In the next chapter, I shall discuss the strengths and weaknesses of three recent female friendship films in a point by point comparison of the "progressive" elements of Wood's buddy film model, as a means of demonstrating how this progressiveness has been recast in relation to the woman's film, and in some cases, diminished as a result.
Notes to Chapter 2

1. I shall discuss the notion of the "progressive" or "reactionary" text and the critical usefulness of such appellations in chapter 5, but in the meantime, provisionally make use of such terms as they relate to Wood's discussion of the films at hand.

2. There are, of course, theoretical (as well as linguistic) problems associated with attributing "intended meaning" or "voice" to a film text itself, or even to its real or implied author; but extricating inherent meaning or discursive voice from the text and attributing it to the will of a critic (as phrases such as "reading against the grain" imply) or individual audience members can be equally problematic. I shall return to these issues in more depth in chapter five.

3. *Outrageous Fortune* itself can only be considered as indebted to the "woman's film" in that its protagonists are both women and begin their relationship in romantic competition for the film's villain. It is nonetheless more accurately a road movie and a comedy-adventure film, which are almost always cast with male heroes.
In describing the absence of leading female roles, heterosexual romance, and the woman's film from American movie theatres during the late sixties and early seventies, Molly Haskell suggests that this absence can also be seen as a (sexist) appropriation, as male buddy films began clawing back much of this traditionally "feminine" territory:

> It is the rapport between Newman and Redford in *Butch Cassidy* rather than between either one of them and Katharine Ross, that has all the staples—the love and loyalty, the yearning and spirituality, the eroticism sublimated in action and banter, the futility and fatalism, the willingness to die for someone—of women's fantasies as traditionally celebrated by the woman's film. (Haskell 187-8)

Recent female buddy films equally employ the same-sex dynamics that Haskell describes above, but at the same time, these films cast women as friends, and thus allow for the reappropriation of some of the emotional terrain of the woman's film within films for women. But unlike modern versions of the woman's film, such as *Beaches* (Gary Marshall, 1988), *Steel Magnolias* (Herbert Ross, 1989) and *The Joy Luck Club* (Wayne Wang, 1993), female buddy films distance their heroines from the tear-stained settings of family melodrama, and instead place them within (a modified version of) the narrative paradigm that I have outlined in the previous chapter. While no cinematic practice or formula remains progressive for all times or for all audiences (and it is certainly problematic to consider many of the sexist strategies of the original male buddy films as 'progressive' in any case), three films of the 1990s, in combining elements of the woman's film and the buddy film, attempt to capture
a spirit of adventure and social rebellion akin to that of the male buddy films of twenty years ago.

*Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991), and *Leaving Normal* (Edward Zwick, 1992) each tell the story of a friendship between two women that in some way transgresses society's (patriarchy's) values and/or behavioural strictures. In all three films, one of the heroines leaves her physically or verbally abusive husband and joins her friend in a comic-tragic adventure of some kind, ultimately leading to the two women's explicit commitment to each other and to a radical change in their lives' previous trajectory. In *Thelma and Louise*, two friends go away for a weekend fishing trip without the knowledge of Thelma's husband or Louise's boyfriend, but when the women kill a man who tries to rape Thelma, they decide not to return home or face the police, and instead go on a desperate crime spree and joyride toward freedom in Mexico, finally deciding to drive off a cliff to their deaths rather than be taken in by the surrounding forces of the law. *Fried Green Tomatoes* is about a middle-aged housewife, Evelyn, who listens to an old lady's mysterious tale (presented intermittently in flashbacks over the course of many visits to the lady's nursing home) of the adventures of two young women friends, Ruth and Idgie, who were suspected, many years ago, of murdering Ruth's violent, estranged husband, in the old woman's hometown. The old woman, Mrs. Threadgoode, reveals that although neither of the women actually was guilty of the crime, Idgie did conspire to conceal the murder, and even cooked and served the body in the cafe that she and Ruth ran together. Evelyn is enthralled by the story, develops a friendship with Mrs. Threadgoode, and decides to take her out of the nursing home to live with her,
finally suspecting that her elderly friend may be none other than the aged Idgie. In *Leaving Normal*, Marianne, a confused young woman who has just left her abusive husband, meets Darly, a cynical older woman who is abandoning her present life to travel to property she has inherited in Alaska. They tell one another about the many mistakes they have each made in the past, share numerous strange encounters and twists of fate along the road, and after much emotional turmoil, they decide to stay in Alaska and make a home together.

In addition to sharing these similarities in plot elements, however, these three films also correspond in similar ways to Wood’s itemization of the thematic characteristics of the male buddy film. With the exception of one of the features (found in only three) of the male buddy films—the presence of explicitly gay characters as a disclaimer for the central buddies’ relationship—the three female buddy films in question propose some version of each of the six other elements that Wood identifies, although the female films sometimes resolve the contradictions that these elements suggest in a different way. For example, although I have just stated that none of the women's buddy films presents an explicitly gay character as a means of stressing the heterosexuality (or denying the possibility of the homosexuality) of the heroines, *Leaving Normal* does make reference to homosexuality in a manner that creates the opposite effect to that of its overt representation in some male buddy films. When the two women spend the night at Marianne's sister's home, in the bedroom of her young son, they laugh at the over-determined "masculine" decor of the room (complete with a bedspread with a giant professional wrestler on it) as revealing the parents' fear that their son could one day be gay. Darly says, "This place has 'please god, don't let my son be a fag' written
"all over it," to which Marianne replies, "Well, I'm not sure if spending the formative years sleeping under a large, sweaty wrestler will do the trick."

While not necessarily affirming homosexuality, it is the heterosexual, paranoid parents (rather than a gay character) who are portrayed here as "villains" or "clowns." This type of rather ambiguous "progressiveness" informs the female buddy films' stance on many aspects of Wood's argument, as I shall outline below.

**BUDDIES AS OUTCASTS**

One characteristic that all three female buddy films share with the original buddy films is the status of the heroines as criminals, dropouts or social outcasts. While Thelma and Louise begin as unextraordinary, law-abiding American citizens (a housewife and a waitress, respectively), they very quickly become fugitives from the law, wanted for the shooting of the rapist, Harlan. They continue to add to their crimes, committing armed robbery to pay for their planned escape to Mexico, locking a state trooper in the trunk of his own patrol car to prevent him from radioing in their license plate number, and blowing up a tanker truck when the sexist driver refuses to apologize for his harassment of the women. Of course, unlike the criminals of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, for example, Thelma and Louise are only circumstantial criminals, and the film frequently exploits the discrepancy between their extreme actions and their conservative, law-abiding nature for comedy. After Thelma holds up the convenience store, for example, she and Louise laugh with exhilaration about putting some distance between themselves and the scene of their last crime; but when Thelma throws one of the miniature bottles of Wild Turkey out of the car, Louise reprimands her for littering. Similarly,
when they take the state trooper captive, they apologize for their actions, explaining that this sort of thing would normally be quite unlike them. When Thelma instructs Louise to shoot out the patrol car’s radio, she shoots the stereo system in the car, not realizing that Thelma meant the police radio; and although they are holding the policeman at gunpoint and have already stolen his beer and his belt (for the ammunition), Louise nonetheless asks him if she can trade sunglasses with him, rather than just taking them.

*Thelma and Louise* encourages us to see its heroines as not really being criminals, and uses these comic devices to construct the film’s central irony, which informs the tragedy of the ending. Because the extremity of the women’s crimes has been comically deflated, and thus come to seem understandable, charming or even heroic, the severity of the police reaction to them, in contrast, seems completely unwarranted. Surrounded by a vast number of police cars, with the SWAT team holding them in their rifle sights and a helicopter hovering over them, Thelma remarks, "It looks like the army," and Louise asks, "All this for us?" The sympathetic cop, Hal, who has been following the circumstances of the women’s flight from the law, sums up the attitude encouraged by the film’s discursive strategies when he pleads with the FBI agent in charge, "How many times, Max? How many times these women gonna be fucked over?" In this way, the film invites us to share the women’s perspective on events, and to see them as victimized outcasts rather than criminals *per se*: they feel that they are forced to become fugitives from legal and social order, based on Louise’s past experience with the lack of justice for rape victims, which is alluded to throughout the film.
Fried Green Tomatoes also portrays its heroines (of the flashback buddy story) as dropouts from polite society, and holds out the possibility, until very near the end of the film, that Idgie may also be a murderer. Even as a child, Idgie does not fit into her place in the family, as she refuses to dress and behave as a demure little girl should. As a young woman, she leaves her family home and adopts a rambling lifestyle, drinking, gambling and fighting with the men in a speakeasy on the outskirts of town. One night, she and Ruth get drunk together there and play baseball in the dark, and on another occasion, the two friends jump aboard a train and steal the food aboard, throwing it from the boxcar to the poor people living in the shantytowns along the tracks. After Ruth leaves her husband, Frank, she and Idgie open a cafe together, in a time when women did not work outside the home, let alone run their own businesses without men, and further defy public opinion in a town full of Klansmen by serving blacks there, too. And they also befriend other social outcasts, including their black employees and the poor, town drunk. Although Idgie stands trial for murder and is only acquitted based on the local preacher providing her with an alibi that we know to be false, it is ultimately revealed that she helps to dispose of the body in order to protect one of her black servants, Sipsey (who killed Frank to prevent him from kidnapping Ruth’s baby), from the racist justice system of a small, southern town. In this way, Ruth and Idgie are presented as extraordinary individuals whose relationship and transgressive behaviour stand as a challenge to the repressive values of their social milieu.

In Leaving Normal, while Marianne and Darly are not exactly criminals or outcasts of society, they are both rootless dropouts running away from a string of failed marriages, jobs and homes. Marianne traces her failures on a map,
pointing out the places where she left college, left the army and left her three marriages, before meeting Darly. Darly has just quit her job at a sleazy bar on a note of bitterness and animosity. She tries to give a female coworker a gift, as an apology for having slept with the woman's husband, but her gesture is coldly rejected. And we later learn that the place in Alaska that Darly is returning to is the scene of what she takes to be the worst failure of her life: her abandonment of her baby daughter at the town hospital many years ago. As the two women travel together, they meet other marginal characters, such as the two misfit truck drivers, one of whom weeps reading Steinbeck novels, and the fat, downtrodden waitress known as "Sixty-six," who gets fired from her miserable job, and briefly joins the buddies on their trip. The film thus presents Darly and Marianne as dropouts, insofar as they are among life's comic-tragic, aimlessly drifting victims and losers. In this way, all three female buddy films roughly correspond to Wood's argument about the marginal social identities of the male buddies.

MARGINALIZED MEN

Another commonality among *Thelma and Louise*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Leaving Normal* is that all three films marginalize men in a manner reminiscent of, but by no means as extreme as, the male buddy films' marginalization of female characters. In *Thelma and Louise*, there are a number of men that play reasonably pivotal parts in the drama, but many of these characters are depicted very negatively—almost as caricatures of the worst aspects of what is traditionally considered masculinity—and all are very quickly left behind as the narrative progresses, with the exception of the police officer, Hal. Thelma's husband, Darryl, is an idiotic, verbally abusive salesman
who bullies his wife to the point that she finally decides to leave for the fishing trip without asking his permission, because she is sure he will not allow her to go. When she tries to call him at four o'clock in the morning, after having been attacked by Harlan, Darryl is still not home from his "sales" meeting. When she does reach him by phone the next day, he yells at her, ordering her to return home immediately; and when she tries to explain what's going on, he stops listening to her to watch an exciting play of the football game on television.

Thelma tells the hitchhiker, J.D., that Darryl prides himself on being infantile, and Louise concurs that Darryl has a lot to be proud of. When the women lock the state trooper in the trunk of his car, he pleads with them not to kill him, as he has a wife and children. Thelma tells him: "Be sweet to them, especially your wife. My husband wasn't sweet to me and look how I turned out." Darryl is thus shown to be a patriarchal bully, and not a viable alternative for Thelma to return to.

Louise's boyfriend, Jimmy, is far less negatively depicted, although he is shown to be reluctant to make the commitment to Louise that she desires. Part of her plan in going away for the weekend is to make Jimmy wonder where she is and realize that he misses her. When she calls him and explains that she is in trouble and needs money, he asks if he can bring it to her. But he hesitates when she asks him if he loves her, so she suggests that he just wire it to her. Jimmy decides to come in person, however, bringing not only the money Louise requested, but an engagement ring too. Louise tells him that his fear of losing her is not a good reason to get married, and that while she did want a commitment from him, she does not want it under these circumstances. Jimmy offers to go with her wherever she is heading, promises to keep her
whereabouts secret, tells her to keep the ring, and wishes her happiness. While Jimmy is thus presented quite sympathetically, his presence in the narrative does not impinge on the central relationship between Thelma and Louise. When Thelma says she would understand if Louise wanted to make a deal with the police, since she has someone to go back for, Louise assures her that "Jimmy's not an option."

J.D. provides a casual sexual encounter for Thelma during the night that Louise and Jimmy end their relationship. His body is fetishized in this scene in the way that women's bodies are usually treated in Hollywood films. But while the women in male buddy films function as "'chicks' for the boys to pick up and put down" (Wood 228), and J.D. would appear as a correlate to this element in the female buddy films, it is not J.D. but Thelma who is ultimately "put down" by the experience. The sex itself is portrayed as consensual and thoroughly enjoyed by both of them—at one point, Thelma asks J.D. to stop, and when he does, she reinitiates—but Thelma's sexual pleasure (which she did not enjoy with her husband) is followed by the revelation that J.D. did, nonetheless, take advantage of her, by stealing all the women's money. When the detective, Hal, learns about the theft, he blames J.D. for the escalation of the women's crimes: "There's two girls out there that had a chance—they had a chance—and now you screwed it up for them." In this way, J.D. provides more than a assurance of the protagonists' heterosexuality—the standard function of sexual encounters with women in the male buddy film—in that he is presented as yet another male character who ignominiously pushes the women toward their eventual tragic fate.
While the rapist, Harlan, is undoubtedly the most horrific male figure in the film, other despicable (if comic) male characters include the FBI agent, Max, who advises Darryl to speak to Thelma gently and lovingly on the phone, since "women love that shit"; the married tanker truck driver, Earl, who makes rude sexual remarks and gestures to the women each time their paths cross; the state trooper, who Louise describes as "a Nazi"; and the other police officers staked out at Darryl's home, who read *Boudoir* magazine. Hal is perhaps the most ambivalently presented character in the film. While he laughs at many of the other men's coarse remarks about women, he seems sensitive to the women's motives for being on the run, telling Louise that he knows what happened to her in Texas; but this conversation is also responsible for the police's success in pinpointing the women's position, as he keeps Louise on the phone long enough to trace her call. He squeezes J.D. for information about the buddies' planned destination, "so there's a small chance I can actually do them some good." But even if we believe that he is genuinely concerned about the women's safety, as he seems to be in the last scene of the film, his actions do not "actually do them some good," but instead lead to their deaths. As an individual, Hal is presented reasonably sympathetically; but as a representative of the law, he is part of the system of male power that has constrained and victimized the heroines throughout the film, and which the women have (fatally) resolved to elude at any cost. *Thelma and Louise* thus presents its male characters in such a way as to deny the possibility of heterosexual romance providing narrative closure, a function Wood suggests in relation to the marginalization of women in male buddy films. But it also goes even further, in terms of ideological "progressiveness," by subtly suggesting
that the men are collectively responsible for the women's tragic fate, as an (albeit crude) expression of the film's understanding gender oppression.

*Fried Green Tomatoes* similarly portrays most of the male characters in somewhat villainous or marginal roles. Buddy, Ruth's first love and Idgie's beloved older brother, is an unproblematically "good" male character, but he dies at the outset of the film. Ruth's husband, Frank, on the other hand, is presented equally unproblematically as evil: he is a lecher, a wife-beater, a Klu Klux Klan member, and a child abductor. Although the local sheriff, Grady, offers Idgie a chance to leave town when she is charged with murder, both he and the out-of-town investigator are depicted in an overall negative manner, due to their racism and their patriarchal censure of Idgie and Ruth. Men who have been marginalized by institutional authority, however, are shown to be the supportive friends of the two women: Big George, the black man who is also charged with Frank's murder; and Smokey Lonesome, the town drunk/vagabond, who helps protect Ruth's baby. Most surprising is the depiction of the town's preacher, who is extremely disapproving of Idgie and Ruth's behaviour throughout the film, but who nonetheless lies to the court (he brings his own Bible to swear on, which turns out to be a copy of *Moby Dick*) to provide Idgie with an alibi for Frank's murder. There are no "casual encounters" with male characters provided in this story to act as an alibi for the nature of Idgie's relationship with Ruth, which is far more strongly depicted as romantic love than the female buddy relationships in the other two films. But while the possibility that Ruth and Idgie are also lovers is not actively denied through the sorts of devices that Wood describes in the male buddy film, neither are they overtly confirmed to be lesbians.
Evelyn's husband, Ed, in the framing narrative, is another unsympathetic character in the film. Evelyn has been attending classes in an attempt to improve their marriage, but Ed seems oblivious to both her efforts to please him and to her growing dissatisfaction with the relationship. She asks him if they could go away together to Florida, like they did when they were first married, so that they can spend some time alone together. Ed, missing the point, continues eating his dinner in front of the sports on television, protesting that they are alone together right now. He pushes her out of the way when she blocks his view of the screen. And when Evelyn asks if he would still be watching TV if she were wearing nothing but cellophane (a joke suggestion of her friend, Missy, for spicing up a marriage), he says, "No honey, I'd probably be checking you into a loony bin." As Evelyn begins to find other interests—in work, exercise, and especially her relationship with Mrs. Threadgoode—Ed complains that there is no dinner waiting for him when he comes home. Later Evelyn tells him how much she cares for Mrs. Threadgoode, and that she wants to bring her to live with them. When Ed objects, she pleads with him, trying to persuade him that he won't have to do anything to help, as she can even pay for any new costs, now that she is working. But Ed's final word on the matter is, "Evelyn, it's never going to happen. Forget about it." In this way, Ed is portrayed not as evil, but as a stereotypically insensitive husband who acts as an obstacle to the women's friendship, which is presented as more important than the marriage to Evelyn's happiness.

*Leaving Normal,* like *Thelma and Louise* and *Fried Green Tomatoes,* contains a relatively large number of secondary male characters, compared to the women's roles in male buddy films. And while many of these men are, once
again, depicted as crude or violent, or pushed to the fringe of the dramatic action, *Leaving Normal* is far less harsh in its characterization of men than the other two female buddy films. Marianne's most recent husband, Kurt, is a violent man, who slaps his new wife across the face for having the audacity to rearrange some of his possessions. Yet later in the film, he does the "decent" thing by sending Marianne her engagement ring to Alaska, as she requested, and even forwards her mail. Another male character who is less than sympathetic is the man in the bar in Alaska, who recognizes Darly as a former stripper, and propositions her. She finally agrees to sleep with him for $500, but when she breaks down sobbing about her abandoned daughter, his lasciviousness changes to concern. He gives her $200 (although she has bargained herself down to nothing, buying information about the false daughter, and she has not fulfilled their sexual contract) and he asks her whether she has someone to go to, or a place to stay.

Darly and Marianne also get picked up while hitchhiking by a pair of truck drivers, Leon and Harry. The older man, Leon, is crude and lustful, offering Darly a mug with a picture of a topless woman on it. But Leon's truck driving sexual machismo is comically undercut and made to seem silly rather than threatening, when he reveals to his nephew, Harry, that his wife is the only woman he has ever slept with. Harry is idealized as a painfully sensitive man, crying as he reads *The Grapes of Wrath*, and saying grace to a possible god before eating at the diner, just in case he does exist. While Darly finds this corny, Marianne is enchanted, and Harry remains a love interest for her throughout the film. He slips his book into her pocket in the diner with a dedication to her written inside the cover, and later writes to all the Marianne
Johnson in Wyoming, hoping his love letter will somehow reach her. When she writes back, he drives hundreds of miles out of his way to bring her a bouquet of flowers (D.O.A.), and then immediately leaves again, in order to return to his trucking route. While Marianne elects to stay in Alaska rather than leave with him, the implication is that their relationship will nonetheless continue in the future, and heterosexual romance may one day supplant the primacy of women's friendship depicted in the film. This type of fairy-tale closure is actually played out within the film, when Sixty-six, the waitress searching for her one true love in life, in one evening meets and gets engaged to a Canadian millionaire, and drives off with him in his limousine to "live happily ever after," as Darly puts it. While the film's presentation of this event and others as fantasy fulfilled could be read ironically as suggesting a skeptical attitude toward such ideals, Leaving Normal, unlike the other two female buddy films, seems to depict the women's friendship as less important and less permanent than the ideal of heterosexual romance and marriage, as part of its generally more conservative discourses on femininity, which I shall discuss in more detail later. The way male characters are portrayed in Leaving Normal is thus decidedly at odds with what Wood considers "progressive" about the marginalization of women in the male buddy film.

A FEMALE LOVE STORY

The extent to which men are marginalized in these female buddy films is related to their status as female love stories, a third shared characteristic of the films. Wood points to the progressiveness of the buddy love story as placing a same-sex relationship at the emotional centre of the film, and thus standing in opposition to the classical Hollywood cinema's de rigueur closure: marriage as
a happy ending (228). *Thelma and Louise* explicitly dismisses marriage as an option for narrative resolution, as both of the women have ruled out the possibility of returning to their less than adequate previous partners, and J.D. is ruled out as a candidate for romance by his treachery, as I discussed above. When Louise's male boss at the diner learns that she is talking to Thelma on the phone, he tells Louise to ask Thelma when she will run away with him. Louise retorts that it won't be this weekend, since Thelma is running away with her. And indeed, the two women do run away together, driving toward a life of imagined freedom in Mexico, loving and supporting one another during the difficult times they share en route. The friends display a rapport similar to the one Haskell describes above in relation to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, including "the willingness to die for someone" (187). As their situation under the law goes from bad to worse, Thelma tells her friend, "Louise, no matter what happens, I'm glad I came with you." When the women decide to "not get caught," to "keep going" even though they are at the edge of the Grand Canyon, they kiss, and then hold hands as they drive to their deaths.

*Fried Green Tomatoes*, even more overtly, presents itself as a love story between women, without necessarily implying a lesbian relationship between its heroines. The friendship between Ruth and Idgie is a passionate love, beginning in Idgie's childhood and later being consolidated during the summer that the women spend together—bee charming and skinny dipping—prior to Ruth's marriage to Frank. Their relationship from this point develops more in accordance with an initially star-crossed, then fulfilled, romance. Idgie takes Ruth's marriage as a betrayal of their relationship, and swears she will not see her again. But Mrs. Threadgoode's narration tells us that "curiosity got the
better of her," and Idgie drives to Georgia to see Ruth, discovering when she does that Frank has been beating her. Idgie wants to confront Frank, but Ruth tells her that if she really cares about her, she will leave without doing anything, and Idgie complies. Once back in Whistle Stop, Idgie continues to refuse to dance with or to marry her most persistent suitor, Grady.

After Ruth's mother dies, Ruth writes to Idgie, enclosing a passage from the Book of Ruth: "And Ruth said, "Whither thou goest, I will go. Whither thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people."" Idgie comes to rescue Ruth, and when Frank hits Ruth, Idgie attacks him violently, threatening to kill him if he ever touches Ruth again. As they leave, Ruth discards her wedding ring, and Idgie cries out in joy, "Towanda, the amazing Amazon woman." Ruth was pregnant at the time of her rescue, and she and Idgie raise her son, Buddy Jr. (named after Idgie's dead brother), together. Ruth suggests at one point that perhaps she and the baby should leave, so that they won't stand in the way of Idgie "settling down," but Idgie replies, "I am as settled as I'll ever hope to be." And when Ruth is asked by the prosecutor at the murder trial why she left Frank and went away with Idgie, she does not mention her husband's abuse, but instead answers, "Because she's the best friend I've ever had and I love her." In this way, the relationship between these two women is presented as mutually desired, permanent love. On her deathbed, Ruth tells Idgie that she should settle down, if she can find someone who can beat her at poker, thus indicating her wish (as a dying spouse might) that Idgie try to find love again.

Evelyn responds to the romance of the story of Idgie and Ruth, and gradually develops a deep affection for Mrs. Threadgoode. In times of
emotional crisis throughout the film, the older woman has provided her with the companionship, understanding and loving attention that her husband has not. And this relationship between the two women eventually comes to displace Evelyn's relationship with her husband as the emotional core of her life and of the film's embedding narrative. When Evelyn mistakenly believes that Mrs. Threadgoode has died, she sobs to the nurse, who is removing her things from the room, "She may be just another patient to you, but she was my friend and I loved her." In an effort to persuade Mrs. Threadgoode to come and live with her, Evelyn tells her that she is the reason that she gets up every morning. Mrs. Threadgoode, in turn, tells Evelyn that she has reminded her about what the most important thing in life is: "Friends, best friends." This last scene in the film takes place in the deserted town of Whistle Stop, where Evelyn notices a fresh jar of honey on Ruth's grave, with a note reading, "I'll always love you — The bee charmer." This scene suggests that Mrs. Threadgoode is Idgie, and that she has indeed found a new friend to love and live with, as she had loved Ruth.

In contrast to Thelma and Louise and Fried Green Tomatoes, Leaving Normal does not resolve itself as decidedly as a love story between women. Certainly, the film focuses on the story of the two women's travels and troubles, and the friendship they develop; and to this extent, the 'buddy' structure of the film is unquestionable. But the emotional core of the film really has less to do with the development of that relationship as an end unto itself, and more to do with the promise of healing and redemption for the two misguided heroines. This redemption is represented in the building of the symbolic home on the barren foundation of the property Darly has inherited, in order to prove that
they are ready to commit to the stable values (of blood family bonds, of a long-term marriage) that each has lacked in the past, before they can be considered emotionally qualified to move on to the real relationships that they have been secretly craving throughout the film. For Marianne, this is accomplished through the promise of ideal marriage, in the person of the perfectly sweet truck driver, Harry, as I mentioned earlier. And for Darly, this is accomplished by coming to terms with her guilt for having abandoned her daughter as an infant, and by taking the first steps to try to contact her, instead of running away from her pain, as she did in the past. Marianne does provide her with the emotional support she needs to effect this change, but Darly's heart clearly belongs first and foremost to the lost daughter, not Marianne. In this regard, it is interesting to consider how closely Darly's narrative trajectory corresponds to that of the traditional woman's film, as outlined by Anca Vlasopolos, rather than to that of a buddy film:

The principal feature of the woman's film is that it focuses on a female or on a number of female heroes. ... The drama reveals a mythic dimension, which is the source of its power and tenacity as a genre, and which provides a filmic and worldly parallel to a kind of Paradise Lost and Regained, with women squarely at the center. [...] The myth of temptation, fall, suffering, and redemption has immense resonances for members of a predominantly Christian culture. Eve transgresses by intruding into masculine territory, either by her behavior—polyandrous, sexually aggressive, sexually adventurous—or by her ambition for a career, for power, or for worldly goods that can be used to manipulate men rather than to nest. Eve falls and begins her suffering. Her travail appears as inner turmoil and/or societal censure. Eve is redeemed from the brink of catastrophe (often represented as divorce or single-woman loneliness) by reintegration into society, which follows her refeminization. (Vlasopolos 116)
Darly ("Eve") has come to Alaska (after many years of "inner turmoil") hoping to find her daughter there ("Paradise Lost"), thinking that the girl's father, Joe (from whom she inherited the property), may have claimed the child and raised her there after Darly left the town (Eden) years ago (the act which constitutes her original "fall" or "transgression"). But when she gleans from the unfinished state of the property that Joe left town at the same time she did, and is later humiliated by the judgmental hospital nurse (representing "societal censure") from whom she seeks information about tracing her daughter's records, she wants to leave again (a repetition of her original refusal to "nest"). But Marianne spends their "leaving money" on flowers, a porch swing, and the corner desk that Darly had wanted Joe to build for her (symbols of the "nest"). Furious, Darly plans to leave without Marianne (a second "transgression"), and offers herself to the man who propositioned her earlier, to get some "leaving money" (approaching "the brink of catastrophe"). And if the man had not mentioned seeing Joe with his daughter a few years ago, Darly would have kept moving on (continued "suffering," or even become irredeemable), in spite of Marianne's warning that, "Just because you're leaving doesn't mean you're not in the same goddam place." Believing the daughter he mentions to be her long lost daughter (she is actually a child from Joe's second marriage), Darly begs her client for scraps of information about her, giving him back larger and larger sums of her fee in exchange ("redeemed from the brink of catastrophe"). Discovering her mistake when the man says the daughter was only about five years old, Darly breaks down, sobbing, in maternal anguish ("refeminization"). And when the man asks her if she has a home to go to, it is then that she realizes, with the suddenness of a religious epiphany, that indeed she does
("reintegration"). A commitment to staying with the child-like Marianne and the Inuit boys (on the unfinished site of what was meant to be her home with Joe and their child) while she waits and hopes to hear from her biological daughter, thus becomes Darly's rite of passage toward being redeemed as a mother ("Paradise Regained"). At the end of the film, Darly and the other members of the surrogate family hold hands around the table, and she prays to the possible god, "Dear... whoever, please bless this home...family, whatever the hell it is..."

It is thus Darly's thwarted biological imperative of maternal love, rather than the film's buddy structure, that ultimately defines Leaving Normal as a (rather essentialist) female love story.

**THE (EMOTIONAL) JOURNEY**

Like the same-sex love story, the journey motif that informs the male buddy films of the 1960s and 1970s is also reworked in the three female buddy films. In the original buddy films, the journey either had no clear goal, or its professed goal proved illusory (Wood 228). In Thelma and Louise, there is a depicted journey with first one, then a new, ideological and geographical goal, neither of which is realized. But another type of journey emerges as a subtext of the film as the narrative progresses. Thelma and Louise set out for a weekend fishing trip, a traditional (male) ritual of same-sex bonding, freedom from domestic routine, and from the opposite sex. As the women concede that they don't even know how to fish, this journey can be understood as reflecting the women's desire to temporarily appropriate the signifiers of masculine freedom and power—the classic American roadster, the fishing stuff, and Darryl's gun—for a fun-filled weekend of make-believe feminine freedom. But these icons of male privilege do not accord Thelma and Louise the actual
freedom of action they represent, because, as we are painfully reminded at every turn of the narrative, they are nonetheless female, and therefore, vulnerable. This journey goes sour almost immediately, when they shoot the rapist and suddenly find themselves fugitives from the Law (of the Father). After a period of panic and aimless driving, the women change the geographical goal of their journey to Mexico, and the ideological goal of their journey to a permanent freedom, outside of the patriarchal rules of the society that confines them. But Mexico, a symbol of freedom rather than actually holding out a better, safer life for the women, cannot be reached from the point (geographical and emotional) the women find themselves at without crossing through Texas, where, we are led to assume, Louise was raped in the past. Louise explains to Thelma, "If you shoot a guy in the head with his pants down, Texas is not the place you want to get caught." In the end, their desperate journey to Mexico is blocked by a final obstacle, the Grand Canyon, which ironically also provides them with the ultimate escape (and perhaps the only real escape possible, according to the film's fatalism) from repressive patriarchal power.

But this negative trajectory of the doomed journey does not actually reflect the lively, empowering tone of the film, which is created, in part, by the women's emotional journey from dissatisfaction with their lives (Louise says, "you get what you settle for") and relationships with men, to discovering a new happiness and love in each other. And accompanying this emotional journey is an uplifting movement toward a realization of oppression by gender, that is, toward feminist awareness. Many critics have pointed out certain aspects of a select few films of the new women's cinema (usually Alice Doesn't Live Here
Anymore or An Unmarried Woman, rather than the three films about a friendship between two women, which I mentioned in Chapter 1) that indicate their heroine's personal growth toward a greater degree of self-awareness (Geraghty 140; Kolker 137; Kuhn 125; Mellen 541). Thelma and Louise, on the other hand, are constructed within a filmic discourse that charts their journey not just in terms of their growth as individuals, or as friends, but more importantly, as women. In discussing independent feminist films, Charlotte Brunsdon terms this type of journey an "odyssey of consciousness," insofar as it depicts a raising of consciousness within a moral universe that is defined in relation to "explicit political affiliations" (61):

Burning an Illusion and A Question of Silence, have the classic 'odyssey of consciousness' structure that has frequently been popular in 'tendency' fiction. In cinema, the classic examples are films like The Mother (V.I. Pudovkin, USSR, 1926), where the initially apolitical and symbolically nameless (i.e. typical) mother gradually takes on the politics of her revolutionary son through confrontation on his behalf with the repressive Tsarist police and State apparatus. At the end of the film the mother dies, heroically and defiantly holding the red flag in a demonstration. The journey from false to true consciousness is the motivating narrative drive of this type of fiction and the audience is intended to make this journey with the central protagonist. As Annette Kuhn has usefully pointed out, the heroine of this kind of odyssey can either be shown to be typical, and thus representative, as in (to use her examples) Salt of the Earth (H. Biberman, USA, 1953), or remain a unique individual, as in Norma Rae (Martin Ritt, USA, 1979). However, in both cases the tendency is towards the use of realist conventions to render the film form transparent and facilitate identification by the viewers. (Brunsdon 56-57)

Brunsdon suggests that A Question of Silence, for example, depicts a journey "from non-feminist heterosexuality to woman-identification" and "[a]t a schematic level...offers a utopian bonding of its female characters...against the uncomprehending state apparatus of a male world" (57), a description that
could equally apply to *Thelma and Louise*. What is perhaps in question is the level of explicitness of the film's discourses in presenting this "odyssey of consciousness" in relation to feminism, as the political affiliation which defines the fiction's moral universe. Thelma develops a new awareness of the injustice of the legal system's—and the patriarchal culture-at-large's—attitude toward rape, for example, and concludes, "The law is some tricky shit, isn't it." And the audience is invited to share this perspective by the collusion of many of the film's discourses—the negative characterization of individual men's attitude toward and treatment of women; the extreme insensitivity and excessive reaction of the police force in general; and the oblique evidence of Louise's emotionally crippling experience in Texas—in presenting "the uncomprehending state apparatus of a male world" (57), as Brunsdon puts it. Their attack on the sexist tanker truck driver also adds to the coherence of the film's feminist definition of the moral universe, for this is the only logical (although unstated) motivation for the women's actions, and the only way in which the viewer can be invited to enjoy the results as the driver's well-deserved punishment. The extremity of this feminist odyssey of consciousness is hinted at several times during the film, and with greater frequency as the end of their journey approaches. Thelma tells Louise that she feels wide awake, that everything looks different to her now, and that she finally feels like she has something to look forward to, but that: "Something's, like, crossed over in me, and I can't go back. I mean, I just couldn't live." The buddies are told by the police that they will have to decide whether they want to come in dead or alive, and ultimately faced with that choice, they choose death rather than allowing themselves to
be taken back into a society where they could no longer live, now that their consciousness has been raised.

Although not organized around a geographical journey in the way that *Thelma and Louise* is, *Fried Green Tomatoes* also depicts an odyssey of consciousness moving from "non-feminist heterosexuality to woman-identification" (Brunsdon 57). In the embedding narrative about the relationship between Evelyn and Mrs. Threadgoode, Evelyn moves from focusing all her attention and energies on her complacent husband toward a strong identification with the transgressive behaviour of Ruth and Idgie and a feeling of love for Mrs. Threadgoode that supercedes the emotional importance of her marriage. This emotional journey allows her to make drastic changes in her own behaviour in the world, but the question remains as to whether or not these changes are constructed by the film's textual strategies as belonging to a coherent moral universe defined by the politics of feminism. At the outset of the film, Evelyn is shown to be a yielding, Southern woman with a weight problem and little self-esteem. She takes the abuse heaped upon her by her husband's aunt in the nursing home, and reacts in helpless disbelief when a young man at the grocery store is extremely rude to her, for example. She is attending group classes with her friend, Missy, hoping that they will improve her marriage, although Missy suggests that an assertiveness training course for Southern women would be more useful. The film mocks these classes as embodying a ridiculous kind of female bonding, a "false consciousness" from which Evelyn must free herself. At one session, which is played for comedy, the group leader announces to Evelyn's stunned horror, that: "During these next few weeks we will be learning to reclaim our own power as women."
Hallelujah! And tonight we're going to begin to explore our own femaleness by examining the source of our strength and our separateness, our vaginas. So, if you all will slip out of your panties and straddle your mirrors...."

A change begins to take place in Evelyn's behaviour as her friendship with Mrs. Threadgoode develops and as she hears more about the romantic exploits of Ruth and Idgie. From the flashback depiction of Idgie's rescue of Ruth and her threat to kill Frank, Avnet dissolves to a tabloid newspaper with the headline, "Wife kills husband and sells his body parts to aliens," which Evelyn is musing over in the checkout line. She tells Missy, who is shopping with her, that she will not be going to the group session that night. Evelyn later visits Mrs. Threadgoode, and confides to her that she feels "useless" and "powerless," and that she just can't seem to stop eating. Mrs. Threadgoode attributes these emotional problems to menopause, and suggests that she get hormones, and that she try to find a job, perhaps selling cosmetics. And over the course of the rest of the film, these problems do seem to go away. She loses weight, deals with her husband more assertively, and gets a job selling Mary Kaye products. The next time someone is rude to her at the supermarket--two young girls quickly pull into the parking spot she has been waiting for, and then laugh at her protests, saying "Face it lady, we're younger and faster"--Evelyn does not react powerlessly, but instead uses her car to repeatedly ram the girls' car, laughing and shouting, "Towanda," in emulation of Idgie. In recounting her exploits to Mrs. Threadgoode, she delivers the following speech:

I never get mad, Miss Threadgoode, never. The way I was raised it was bad manners. Well, I got mad and it felt terrific! I felt I could beat the shit out of all those punks--excuse my language--beat 'em to a pulp, beat 'em 'til they beg for mercy. Towanda, the
avenger! And after I wipe out all the punks of this world, I'll take on the wife-beaters of this world, like Frank Bennett, and machine gun their genitals. Towanda will go on the rampage. I'll put tiny little bombs in Penthouse and Playboy so they'll explode when you open them. And I'll ban all fashion models who weigh less than 130 pounds. And I'll give half the military budget to people over sixty-five, and declare wrinkles sexually desirable. Towanda, righter of wrongs, queen beyond compare!

Mrs. Threadgoode responds to this speech by asking, "How many of those hormones are you taking, honey?"

In this way, Evelyn's odyssey of consciousness is not tied to a distinctly feminist moral universe created by the film's fiction, but rather involves a confused mixture of feelings of antagonism against "wrongs" as diverse as youth ("punks"), wife-beaters, social demands that women be thin, excessive military spending, and the cultural equation of sexual attractiveness with youth. While feminism might have something important to say about all these issues, no such discourse is articulated in this film. The very confusion of these ideas are also ascribed to biological femininity—the hormones—as are all of Evelyn's problems and failures. Rather than necessitating an understanding of her actions from a feminist standpoint, which might contextualize her feelings of powerlessness as stemming from women's culturally conditioned powerlessness under patriarchy, for example, many of the film's discourses instead encourage us to see Evelyn's odyssey of consciousness as that of a shy or sexually repressed individual's growth toward personal self-confidence; or as the mid-life-crisis/menopausal epiphany of a bored housewife in an unhappy marriage. If there is any suggestion of a feminist discourse—an explicit gender consciousness—in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, it is to be found structurally in Evelyn's identification with the transgressive behaviour of Idgie and Ruth, and the fact that this identification is empowering for her. Acting as
the diegetic audience of the story that Mrs. Threadgoode recounts, Evelyn stands in for the film spectator who is also enjoying the adventures of Ruth and Idgie, and suggests the possibility of drawing empowering meanings from their story that are perhaps relevant to the cinema spectators' lives. *Fried Green Tomatoes* thus uses the diegetically inscribed odyssey of consciousness of Evelyn as an internal commentary and testament, pointing to the powerful impact of fictions of sisterhood and woman-identification, despite its lack of an explicit feminist affiliation.

*Leaving Normal*, like *Thelma and Louise*, is organized around a symbolic journey, with no expressly stated goal, except that which is articulated in the title. "Normal" is the name of the town that Marianne leaves at the beginning of the film, when she decides to leave Kurt. And "normal" has an ideological meaning, as well as a geographical one, as Robin Wood explains in relation to the male buddy films: leaving "normal" is understood as "progressive" insofar as the buddies avoid submitting to patriarchally defined concepts, such as home, marriage and family. But *Leaving Normal* ultimately returns to the normality it claims to leave, and in an extremely idealized way. As I have already described the ideological conservativeness of Marianne and Darly's emotional journey toward redemption (romantic or maternal) in my discussion of the female love story, I shall now turn my attention to how the ostensible "goalessness" of the physical journey reinforces these traditional discourses surrounding femininity. The film creates an interesting alibi for all of its conservative elements by suggesting that fate, which the characters are powerless to resist, is steering their course through life. At the beginning of the film, Marianne and her sister, Emily, overhear their parents fighting, as they are
packed up into a van for yet another move. Marianne comforts Emily by assuring her that everything will work out somehow, as the van magically takes off flying into the starry night sky. This sort of mystic, fantasy-optimism is visually reinforced throughout the film. For example, when Marianne says she is afraid she is making another wrong choice by leaving Emily's house, Darly decides that they will no longer make any decisions themselves. As they take their vow to relinquish their destiny from their own control (since they deem themselves unqualified to make decisions of any importance), a rainbow appears in the sky beyond them, sealing the covenant, and promising divine intervention into their hopelessly misguided lives. They draw straws (actually, cigarettes) to decide between options that present themselves, and allow the spot where bird droppings hit the map, or the direction a frog leaps, to decide the route they will take. Thus, while the women's travels seem aimless, the viewer is cinematically reassured that there really is a higher purpose at work, which in spite of the problems that beset the buddies on the way, still manages to deliver them to their destiny in the Alaskan town. The women cross many borders, and leave behind many versions of normal, but even the (somewhat) "alternative" family and home they create in Alaska is seen as provisional, as a surrogate outlet for Darly's frustrated maternal instinct, and as a temporary stop for Marianne before fate decides she will settle down with Harry as her fourth husband, and like Sixty-six and her millionaire beau, live happily ever after. She does not choose to stay in Alaska, but, as she explains to Darly, "it chose me." Any type of emotional growth or increased self-awareness that the audience could see in the alternative family that the women find, or in the ways they make peace with their past, is severely undercut by the film's continual
assertion that the women maintain no agency over their lives, and have thus not undergone an odyssey of consciousness related to an explicit political affiliation (even a reactionary one). And even the very engaging friendship between the women is somewhat diminished by this fatalism, as their relationship is dependent on having been thrust together by chance. In this way, both the physical and symbolic journeys of Leaving Normal collude with the text's other conservative discourses on femininity and female friendship.

**ABSENCE OF HOME**

All three of the female buddy films in question in some way comment on the notion of home as a state of mind, or as an ideological construct of security. In Thelma and Louise, the heroines leave home as a temporary respite from its constraints, but are ultimately disallowed from returning, not only by their status as fugitives, but also by the "odyssey of consciousness" structure of their journey, in which "home" is exposed as patriarchal construct, and thus invalidated as a place they would want to return to. Similarly, the justice system as an ideological construct of security, is dismantled in relation to a specifically feminist consciousness. As in the male buddy films that Wood discusses, home, in Thelma and Louise, is ultimately America itself. They decide that in order to escape the oppressiveness of the ideology that "home" represents for women, they must flee the country to Mexico. In an ironic commentary on women's subjugation under the "security" of being confined to the home, Thelma and Louise presents the buddies desperate flight from the law as an opportunity for freedom, travel and self-expression. Thelma says of their fugitive existence, "At least now I'm having some fun." And as they are being chased by the swarms of police cars near the end of the film, Louise
asks, "So how d'you like the vacation so far?" In this way, the women's
decision not to return "home" is presented as informed by their recognition of
the way it has constrained them in the past.

In *Fried Green Tomatoes* the ideological concept of home is reworked
several times, in both levels of the narrative. First, Idgie rejects her childhood
home and its repressive values, deciding instead to continue her transgressive
lifestyle outside it. Later, she helps Ruth reject her husband's abusive home,
and the two women reconstruct a home for themselves, with a number of black
employees of the cafe becoming their extended family. This alternative home
stands in direct opposition to the narrowly delineated concepts of home that the
racist and sexist historical milieu demands. In the modern day story of Mrs.
Threadgoode's friendship with Evelyn, the "normal" concepts of home are also
reinvented. Mrs. Threadgoode moves from her home in Whistle Stop to stay
with her ailing friend in the nursing home, and when her friend dies, tries to
move back home, only to discover that her house has been destroyed. But the
concept of home, as representing love and security—and for Mrs. Threadgoode,
it also means having someone to take care of—endures as Evelyn now
considers her as family. Ed's idea of family, however, is limited to blood
relatives, and he vehemently objects to Evelyn bringing the old woman home.
Evelyn has torn down and rebuilt her "home" as part of her emotional journey:
physically, in first tearing down and then putting back the walls of her grown
son's room, which she prepares for Mrs. Threadgoode; and ideologically, as
she now feels she can defy her husband's wishes in regard to her friend, as
this friendship has become the emotional focus of her life and now defines her
concept of "home" in a decidedly anti-patriarchal way. In this way, the
redefinition of home in this film suggests a shift in Evelyn's social identity from dutiful wife, to "liberated" and loving female friend. It is nonetheless important to note that while the film presents this as a radical departure from Evelyn's past deference to her husband's wishes, a middle-aged woman becoming the caretaker of a very elderly woman does not represent a terribly unusual turn of events in real life, and is certainly not incompatible with patriarchal definitions of women's role in society.

_Leaving Normal_ also suggests an effort to redefine the concept of home. While America as home, as ideological security, is not undermined to the full extent that it is in _Thelma and Louise_, the buddies do find themselves fleeing their past lives of instability and pain, ultimately settling in Alaska, a kinder, marginal America. But the title of the film suggests a more decisive break with dominant ideology than that which is actually accomplished by the women's (at least temporary) abandonment of "normal." Married life, with a house, kids and patriarchal law, is replaced by two female friends living in the middle of nowhere in a trailer/rebuilt cabin with a couple of Inuit boys whose father is in jail. In this case then, a group of misfits and outcasts come together to create a provisional matrix of ideological security, in order to get by while waiting for the real thing. _Leaving Normal_ does not stand in opposition to the ideology of "home" in the same way the male buddy films do, but instead seeks to re-idealize the emotional stability of "home" by redefining it outside of its most oppressive, patriarchal dimensions.

**DEATH AS RESOLUTION**

Robin Wood suggests that the death of one or both of the buddies is necessary in order to resolve the narrative without leaving open the possibility
of consummating the same-sex love story that the male buddy films tell. In *Leaving Normal*, it is unnecessary for anyone to die, as the relationship between the women has not been constructed in a way that is threatening to patriarchal values, as mentioned above. And although Ruth dies within the story of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, her death does not occur to deny a potential consummation of the buddy pair's relationship, as she and Idgie have already been living together for years at the time when she dies. That their relationship was quite possibly more than platonic love is never disavowed. And Ruth's death, too, is contained within the framing structure of Mrs. Threadgoode's growing friendship with Evelyn, which gradually takes over the film's overall narrative focus. Only *Thelma and Louise* resolves its central narrative trajectory in the tragic death of the buddies, but unlike the male buddy films, this death is not necessarily demanded to disallow the possibility of the same-sex relationship being consummated sexually, but rather to complete the feminist odyssey of consciousness of their journey together. The death of Thelma and Louise elevates their status to that of martyred heroines, allowing them the final evasion of patriarchal authority, without them having to be shown actually dying: they drive over the cliff in slow motion, a Polaroid snapshot of them flutters out of the back seat, and the image of the car in mid-flight is frozen to a still and fades out to white, in a glorifying swell of music. And then the film presents us with clips of the buddies' adventures, from happy moments earlier in the film, denying the finality of their deaths.

I have proposed readings of *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Leaving Normal* which suggest a more conservative presentation of female buddies than that of *Thelma and Louise*, which may go some way toward explaining why the
heroines of this latter film are killed, whereas the female friends of the other
two films are allowed to continue their relationship. All three films represent
modified versions of the Wood model of buddy films' progressiveness, pointing
to the potential to appropriate these elements for a feminist agenda. My
comparative reading of the films paints their relative levels of "success" in this
venture along a continuum of ideological positions, in order to demonstrate
their diversity. But each film would be better understood as a mixture of both
progressive and conservative impulses, which are organized—not only by
textual strategies, but also by critical reading strategies—in a hierarchy of value
to create (or deconstruct) a coherent ideological "meaning." My own critical
perspective (as well as the framework of Wood's model) shapes which
elements I have privileged in fixing slippery notions such as textual
progressiveness.

Although all three female buddy films offer "positive" images of female
friendship (insofar as all of the friendships are seen as a "good" thing for the
women involved), I have tried to demonstrate the varying degrees to which this
translates (or more often, fails to translate) into a coherently progressive,
feminist position. In the following chapter, I shall turn my attention to how an
"anti-buddy" film (one that a liberal feminist critique might characterize as a
"negative" portrayal of female friendship) struggles with this same ideological
ambivalence, rather than simply constituting a reactionary "backlash."
CHAPTER 4

Backlash?: Fatal Female Friendship and Other Mor(t)ality Tales

In terms of generic affiliation, *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) primarily belongs to a cycle of contemporary thrillers that problematize the stability of heterosexual romance, family, and home. But it also recalls the new women's cinema, by focusing on the relationship between two women friends (who are also roommates), one of whom wants to leave the relationship to be married. This is the basic situation in Claudia Weiël's *Girlfriends*, for example. And *Single White Female* also suggests an even earlier antecedent in the "competition" woman's films mentioned in the first chapter. Its plot is particularly reminiscent of *The Dark Mirror*, in which an evil woman tries unsuccessfully to steal the identity and boyfriend of her identical twin sister/roommate, by driving her mad; *A Stolen Life*, in which the evil twin does marry her sister's boyfriend, but then disappears in a boating accident, allowing the good twin to impersonate her sister and thus become the wife of the man she loves; and *What's the Matter with Helen?* (Curtis Harrington, 1971), a campy vehicle for Debbie Reynolds and Shelley Winters in which the insane Helen ultimately kills her best friend/roommate because she is planning to leave their relationship to marry her millionaire boyfriend. This pathological relationship between twins, sisters or roommates, as rooted in the fear—traditionally constructed as a feminine fear—of being *single* (both in the sense of one's marital status and the state of being alone, and therefore vulnerable), becomes the central anxiety expressed in *Single White Female*. This sense of anxiety is centred around the film's high degree of ideological ambivalence
toward marriage, romance, career, and friendship between women, which is
never textually resolved into a coherent organization of its many competing
discourses on femininity.

A struggling, young professional woman, Allison Jones (Alli), has come
to New York in order to pursue her career in computer software design for the
fashion industry, and becomes engaged to Sam Rawson. At the beginning of
the film, we see the couple lying in bed, discussing how many children they
plan to have. When Sam tells Alli that 1.2 is the statistical norm, she replies
that in that case, she wants 2.2 children. These more than "ideal" plans for
their traditional nuclear family are immediately undermined, however, when we
learn that Sam is divorced, and therefore a less than perfect embodiment of the
concept, "'til death do us part." In planning the size of their wedding, Alli also
articulates her rather heavy reliance on Sam: since she knows so few people
in New York, Sam is virtually (with the exception of Graham, her homosexual
confidant upstairs) the only friend she has, and, she declares, the only friend
she needs. But as the couple sleep, Sam's ex-wife calls the apartment, and
over the amplification of the answering machine, reveals that Sam has been
unfaithful to Alli, having slept with his ex-wife that afternoon. Alli breaks off the
engagement and kicks Sam out of her apartment, but then immediately goes
upstairs to spend the night with Graham, explaining, "I can't be alone tonight."

But it becomes more and more apparent that Alli is desperately afraid of
being alone any time. Discussing her situation with Graham, Alli says she can't
bear doing "pathetic" things, like cooking for one. She muses that perhaps she
should give up her career and move back home, but Graham tells her
(prophetically enough, given the outcome of Alli's decision to get a roommate),
"There are worse things than being on your own, you know." Alli agrees with him—that no guy is worth giving up her career in New York—and decides that she can make it on her own, but with a roommate. Sensing the emotional capitulation to the fear of being alone that this decision represents, Graham suggests that she could simply call Sam. But Alli replies, "Not if I have a roommate." Alli needs a roommate not only to replace Sam in her life, but also to prevent her from taking him back through her own emotional weakness.

Hedra is similarly desperate to escape her "singleness," and answers Alli's ad in the newspaper for a roommate. Hedra wants a guarantee that things are permanently over between Sam and Alli, explaining her feelings in terms more appropriate to the beginning of a love affair than a new tenancy, "I don't want to move in, and catch you on the rebound, and then have things change." But we later learn that Hedra's need for companionship is pathologically rooted in her unresolved feelings about her twin sister's death. When Alli asks about her family, Hedra tells her that she is an only child but was supposed to be a twin, and that her sister was still-born: "I grew up feeling a part of me was missing." Hedra's twin actually drowned when they were eight years old. In the scene in which Alli tries Hedra's perfume and a pair of her earrings, Hedra surprises her in the act, appearing in the dressing table mirror over Alli's shoulder. Hedra gives Alli the earrings, and thus begins the process of persuading Alli to complete the part of her that is missing. Hedra admires Alli's appearance and style, and begins to emulate her, buying identical articles of clothing, and eventually even dyeing and cutting her hair to appear like Alli's mirror image, in an attempt to reproduce the relationship she had with her dead twin sister. She buys a puppy and names it Buddy, because
that was the name of her childhood dog. Initially angry about the dog, Alli capitulates once again, desperately needing a "buddy" to fill the gap of her loneliness. Lying on the bed, Alli, Buddy and Hedra pose for a Polaroid "family portrait," as Hedra calls it, which duplicates the old black and white photo of Hedra, her sister and the original Buddy, which she keeps in her shoebox of secret stuff. Also in the shoebox is a letter from Sam to Alli, which Hedra has stolen to prevent the couple's reconciliation. And as persistently as Alli checks her answering machine for messages from Sam, Hedra erases them.

Ultimately, however, the couple meet in person and reconcile, much to Hedra's dismay. In one instance, Schroeder cuts between scenes of Hedra's solitude at the apartment, and Alli and Sam making love at his hotel. Hedra kicks the puppy violently across the room, as she watches Jimmy Stewart on television telling a woman that he loves her, and asking, "Would you like it to go on for always?" The woman asks if anything goes on for always, to which Jimmy replies, "Well, one likes to think that some things do." From this ironic commentary on the disintegration and ending of Hedra's relationship with Alli, as with her sister before, Schroeder cuts back to the hotel room where Alli and Sam are making love, and then cuts to a close-up of the engagement ring Alli wears, a symbol of the permanence of her relationship with him, as well as her status as no longer "single." When Alli comes back to the apartment around dawn and tells Hedra about her engagement to Sam, Hedra compares herself to Alli in the mirror, saying, "I'm sure you'll be very, very happy, and I'll be alone."

Hedra's characterization, while reasonably sympathetic at this point, becomes increasingly negative as the film progresses, culminating in her killing
two people (Sam and Mitchell, Alli's rapist boss) and trying to kill two others (Graham and Alli). Hedra repeatedly warns Alli that Sam will cheat on her again, and desperate to convince her, sets out to prove it by flirting with Sam, and making passes at him. And not only does she thus represent a sexual threat to the couple in pursuing Sam, as in the traditional "competition" woman's film, but she is also shown to be a sexual threat to Alli. One night Alli hears strange squeaking sounds, and discovers Hedra moaning and thrusting, face down against the bed. Hedra frequently kisses Alli casually, and undresses in front of her several times through the course of the film, as Alli looks away, embarrassed. And when Alli follows Hedra to the underground club, there seems to be a live (offscreen) sadomasochistic spectacle of some kind going on. A woman approaches Alli, asks her if she wants to play, and then continues to menacingly follow her through the club, and a man in a cage reaches out and touches her face as she passes, thus linking Hedra's sexuality with a "perversity" that violates Alli's personal space and sense of safety. And when Alli sees Hedra's bloody clothing soaking in the sink (the result of her bludgeoning Graham with a crowbar), Hedra complains of her period starting and ruining her outfit, thus linking the monstrous spectacle of her murderous violence with her (female) sexuality.

Thwarted in her attempts to undermine Sam in Alli's eyes, and having been exposed as being deeply, mentally disturbed, Hedra decides to impersonate Alli to prove Sam's infidelity. She warns Alli that Sam will cheat on her again, "and when he does don't come running to me, 'cause I've had it with you. You're so fucking weak." Hedra is vindicated in her opinion of Sam, in that he allows her to perform fellatio on him even after he has realized the
deception. Although Hedra accidentally kills Sam by lashing out at him with her (actually Alli's) shoe, which spikes him through the eye, what Hedra later tells Alli about her motives is sincere: "Everything I've done, I've done for you. All the people you've hated, I've hated."

But Hedra's opinion of Alli's weakness becomes less and less true as the film progresses. Having violently repelled her boss's sexual assault—an assault which he justifies by referring to her (vulnerable) "single" status, as her last chance to play before she is an old married lady—Alli is surprised at her own capacity to fight: "But what I did... It was like something inside me taking over. It was scary." Within her career, too, she has protected herself from exploitation as an independent business woman, after an "unfriendly split" with her first partner/roommate, by building a "time-bomb" into her software, which destroys the data in the system if she is not paid in full by a certain date. When Alli discovers the full extent of Hedra's lies about her past and the calculated interference in her relationship with Sam, she initially goes and confides in Graham (Sam is out of town), but refuses his invitation to spend the night at his place and his suggestion to bring in the police: Alli tells him, "She's my problem, I'll handle it." And ultimately, Alli finds the strength to "handle" Hedra and save herself. Discovering that Hedra has killed Sam with her shoe, she pretends that her nausea is caused by a possible pregnancy, rather than revealing her emotional shock and horror. When Hedra takes Alli up to Graham's apartment at gunpoint, Alli tries to persuade Hedra to leave Graham out of it. Taped into a chair in his apartment, Alli turns up the volume of the television in hopes of attracting the attention of neighbours. And when Hedra discovers this attempt to escape and decides to cut Alli's throat, Alli cleverly
plays on Hedra's emotional weakness, kissing her tenderly on the lips and whispering, "Don't make me leave you, Ellen" (Hedra's real name). After a second escape attempt and the brief intervention of Mitchell, the rapist/boss, Hedra again resolves to kill Alli, this time as a forced 'suicide'. Hedra dictates the following suicide note for Alli: "I don't want to be alone anymore. I don't want to be anything anymore. I don't need a reason to kill myself. I need a reason not to. And there isn't one." Alli objects to the content of the note, saying, "No one I know will believe I wrote that. I was never that scared. Well, not like that." But Hedra answers, "Of course it's you. I never met anyone so scared of being alone. I saved you from that, but you don't care." Alli explains that she is no longer like Hedra's sister (who, according to Hedra, used her and then left her behind, alone), but like Hedra herself (the one who was left behind to go on living, surviving without her loved one). And in the final battle in the building's basement, just after Hedra throws open the wardrobe and slashes at her own image reflected by the mirror inside, Alli swings down from the ceiling beams and stabs Hedra, her own psychological likeness, in order that she may survive. In this way, Alli undergoes an "odyssey of consciousness," of sorts, moving from weakness (her desperate fear of being alone) to strength (independence). But this journey also demands that she kill her friend, who can be read as embodying the emotionally weak side of Alli, before she can achieve independence.

The final sequence of the film takes place in an empty apartment (the one which Sam and Alli had considered taking to get away from Hedra) which Alli is apparently moving into. As we watch her hands, in close-up, leaf through various photographs and clippings, replacing them in Hedra's shoebox—the
picture of the twins and their dog, the Polaroid of Hedra, Alli and Buddy,

another photograph of Hedy and Alli—we hear Alli’s voice-over narration:

    I cried the whole week of Sam’s funeral. Graham says that won’t
bring him back. He says I have to start letting go. He’s right.
Hedy’s parents said that for years they tried to explain to her that
her sister’s death wasn’t her fault. But she never forgave herself
for surviving. So everyday I try to forgive Hedy for Sam. Then I
try to do what she couldn’t—forgive myself. I know what can
happen to someone who doesn’t.

Graphically representing these psychological consequences, the camera then
pans from the closed shoebox to a photographic composite of Alli and Hedra's
faces, almost imperceptibly split down the centre. The "singleness" which Alli
was so desperate to leave behind at the outset of the film threatens to be
replaced with a pathological doubleness, mental illness apparently being the
price of her new-found state of emotional independence.

But this reactionary conclusion to the film’s discourses on women's fear
of being single and the undesirability of female strength and emotional
independence, does not represent the only ideological resolution of the film, as
*Single White Female* does not, on the other hand, successfully defend the
family or heterosexual couple—the alternative that is usually presented for
women to choose instead of independence— in terms of narrative closure. As
only the single, white (heterosexual) female and her gay, male neighbour
survive, there is no chance for any even pseudo-familial relationship to be
salvaged; yet an alternative sense of community is evoked in the emotional
support system Graham provides for Alli in her period of grief, without
demanding her emotional dependence. The growing personal strength and
independence we see in the development of Alli’s character can be read as
suggesting that Hedra did not rescue Alli from being alone, as she claims, but
from the constant fear of being alone which originally left her crippled and
dependent at the beginning of the film. By the end of the film, it would seem
that she can "make it on her own", that is, without needing a lover or roommate,
as suggested by her "letting go" of Sam, and moving into a new, smaller
apartment in New York, rather than even contemplating going home, as she
had done after her breakup with Sam. And the uplifting music over the end
credits, "State of Independence," sung by Chrissie Hynde, supports this
trajectory toward a new-found power of self-determination, in lyrics such as,"Yes, I do know how I survived./ Yes, I do know why I'm alive...."

In the final analysis, however, there are an overwhelming number of
contradictions within the text that suggest the film's extreme ambivalence in
relation to feminism. There are many threads within the narrative that would
indicate Single White Female's collusion with conservative discourses of
patriarchal culture: the alignment of lesbianism with criminal deviance; the
pitting of two women against each other as two sides of the same weak,
dependent, psychotic coin; and the fact that marriage to Sam is seen as a
negative choice because of his inability to measure up to the ideal of the
traditional husband/father, rather than because this ideal is in itself
problematic, for example. But other elements can be seen as working toward a
more progressive discourse: the "positive" depiction of Graham as the film's
"voice of reason," and as the only man who is presented as deserving to
survive; the critique of idealized fantasies of heterosexual romance; the
validation of women's careers, and the final affirmation of the career woman's
ability to survive all manner of assaults, outside the confines of marriage.
This openness of *Single White Female* to various opposing readings suggest that the film does not simply represent a "backlash"—the term itself implies the existence of a coherent political discourse against which it can "lash back"—against the positive depiction of women's friendship in the female buddy films, but rather points to the same sort of ideological ambiguity that I discussed in the previous chapter. This ambiguity stems from a lack of consolidation, or of a clear hierarchy, of the film's discourses on femininity and female friendship. This lack of ideological coherence, in other words, is a product of the lack of a textually preferred meaning: are we being instructed on the dangers of emotional weakness, as this could lead to an unhealthy (or even life-threatening) trust in and reliance on someone unworthy (Sam), or homicidal (Hedra)? Or perhaps we are being taught that too much feminine "independence" is a dangerous thing: in first moving to the big city for a career, Alli is taken advantage of by both a business partner and then a rapist boss; second, in throwing over her fiancé and living with another woman in his place, she destroys her romantic happiness and risks her own life; and third, the film suggests that by finding the strength to defend herself and survive, Alli causes her own (future) mental illness, the same pathological doubleness that Hedra represents. As I have indicated previously, however, the idea of "preferred meaning" is itself somewhat problematic, especially in relation to various forms of "political" criticism. The next chapter will take up this issue in more detail, with reference to female friendship films as popular texts.
In discussing the discourses on femininity carried within the popular cinema of the 1950s, Brandon French points to a contestational impulse running beneath the surface of films of this generally conservative time period, in a manner which could equally apply to the films I have discussed in the previous chapters:

These movies...are a mixture of progressive and reactionary elements. For transition is a time of conflict and contradiction, as well as growth and change. When stable patterns break down, both old and new alternatives compete for ascendancy. The transitional woman is often torn between her desire for a conventional, secure lifestyle and her longing for an unconventional, adventurous, largely uncharted course of action. Or she may exhibit two contradictory modes of behavior, stemming from confusion about her real nature and her traditional female role. (French xxiii-xxiv)

The question presents itself as to what time period within the twentieth century was not a period of transition of some kind for western women. Feminism, as a women's movement, is commonly understood as coterminous with two distinct waves of political activism: the Suffragette movement and the Women's Liberation movement of the 1960s. But French uncovers the conflict and contradiction of the 1950s by "reading against the grain" of the films she analyses, looking for ruptures and silences within the text's overall coherent privileging of certain meanings, through a sustained application of a critical discourse (1970s feminism) at odds with the ideological hegemony of the text and its social milieu. Before one can read against the grain of preferred meaning, however, one must be able to readily locate that meaning and clearly
establish how it is textually "preferred." This was a relatively easy task in the decades of the classical Hollywood cinema, as I indicated in chapter one, but since the advent of more open, or even "incoherent," textual strategies in popular cinema beginning in the late 1960s, it has become increasingly difficult to locate meaning authoritatively.¹

Molly Haskell points out the ideological ambivalence of the portrayal of women across films of the late 1970s and early 1980s:

There was a split; the seventies were turning into the Age of Ambivalence. Even if Hollywood hadn't ignored us [women], we would have been hard-put to find a consensus as to just what we wanted to see on the screen: did we want women to be shown, dismally and realistically, as victims; or progressively, as vanquishers of mighty odds? (Haskell 392).

But perhaps even more problematic for today's critical endeavour than a lack of cultural consensus about the ideal way in which women should be depicted, is the cultivated ambivalence within individual film texts, regarding which of their diverse discourses on femininity is being put forward as a privileged meaning. Robin Wood coins the term "incoherent text" in an essay on three films of this period (Taxi Driver [Martin Scorsese, 1976], Cruising [William Friedkin, 1980], and Looking For Mr. Goodbar [Richard Brooks, 1977]), concluding that these films fail to privilege a preferred reading and as a result, retain a high level of textual "incoherence" that could only have been resolved by an explicit adoption of a radical discourse within the film, such as feminism or gay liberation (46-69). This idea of incoherence is congruent with Kuhn's argument about the new women's cinema, which like the films of recent years that I have discussed, "want to let everybody have their ideological cake and eat it, too. In other words, you'll see deliberate ambiguities structured into
almost every film to come out about strong women" (Lesage in Kuhn, 129).
And this sort of structured ambiguity makes an attempt to read against the grain
of such texts (as a feminist intervention) seem quite inappropriate, as Judith
Mayne notes (35-36), since it is nearly impossible to decide (except arbitrarily)
what the "grain" of the text is.

This desire to establish a "grain" within the text itself often resolves itself
in a criticism that creates a hierarchy of political value in order to recuperate or
discard individual mainstream films. The opposing, yet nonetheless equally
possible, ideological "messages" that I have suggested in relation to *Single
White Female*, for example, and that Mellen (526) and Haskell (390) have
suggested in relation to *The Turning Point* (noted in the first chapter),
demonstrate the difficulty of establishing textually preferred meaning, and the
danger of applying relativistic political labels, such as "progressive" or
"reactionary" to film texts:

Similarly, the idea of a 'progressive' text can be rather
unsatisfactory, the first problem being that it often implies that a
film has got one, fixed meaning. [...] Another problem with the
idea of a 'progressive' text, or textual device, is the idea that
particular films or strategies are progressive (or reactionary) for
all time, for all audiences, in all contexts. In a way, this is the
same problem, because it assumes what the 'meaning' of a film
is, in the sense that it has behind it an idea of meaning as
something that is always already there and complete in the film..." (Brunsdon 122).

It is quite clear in the context of modern "ambivalence" that a singular,
uncontradictory meaning does not inhere within the text itself, but rather, is the
product of a reader's response; and, it becomes clear by analogy that meaning
was never really "always already there." Meaning is found shifting across a
complex interplay of a film's historical milieu, its address of an audience, the
various reading conventions that it may mobilize depending on the individual spectators' social construction, and so forth. Feminist critics have thus become increasingly aware that strategies of reading against the grain in order to counter "reactionary" meanings (already there) with "progressive" discourses (that the critic creates) are not only inadequate to the task of politically evaluating recent film texts, but also fall short in the more general task of locating textual meaning, which is always already mediated by the viewer/critic:

But if a feminist reading against the grain does not take into account the ways in which female audiences have been constructed in the course of film history, then we risk developing a kind of tunnel vision that never sees much beyond the livingrooms of contemporary feminist critics watching 1930s and 1940s movies on television. However obvious it may be, it is worth recalling that 'feminist' and 'female' are not the same thing, and if feminist critics can undermine the ideology of the classical cinema, this hardly means that women viewers throughout film history have resisted the ideology of film spectacle simply by virtue of being female. (Mayne Women 28)

Many feminist film theorists have thus turned their attention to what goes on outside their own practices of spectatorship. Thumim's Celluloid Sisters, for example, combines textual analysis of a group of the most popular films of the forties, fifties and sixties in Britain with a sociological account of actual viewers' response to the films, and the way they impacted on their lives. The women's reported identification with Barbara, and the fashion trends started by The Wicked Lady, which I mentioned in the first chapter, are read symptomatically, toward an understanding of how women of the period found meaning and pleasure in such film texts, and thus, how such texts contributed to the social construction and containment of feminine identity in that milieu. And it is this
type of symptomatic reading that speaks to the place of ambiguous texts such as female buddy films in our current social formation:

Arguments and counterarguments about what is potentially progressive or reactionary about individual films can go on indefinitely. I think that feminist criticism gets much more to the heart of the matter when we deal with and embrace the ambiguity for which such differing arguments are a symptom, rather than declare films to be really progressive or reactionary, tentatively feminist or sexist to the core" (Mayne *Women 36*).

When *Thelma and Louise* was released in 1991, it touched off a major critical debate about this very issue of "progressiveness" in mainstream cinema. But the film also struck a chord in popular media, spawning many *Thelma and Louise*-style narratives, such as an episode of *The Simpsons* television show in which Marge and her neighbour-lady take a "girls' night out" and end up being chased by the police, who drive past the women over a cliff, although they do not drop any distance, because the canyon is a full garbage dump. A more subtle example of this sort of homage is found in a Visa commercial, in which a group of wacky old ladies drive around the country paying for stuff with their Visa card, including their fines for speeding when they are pulled over by a state trooper. At the end of the ad, a close-up of the card reveals the owner's name to be Thelma. The movie was also used in a cartoon in *The New Yorker*, in which two men complain to a bartender, "We thought we were going out with Laverne and Shirley, but it turned out to be Thelma and Louise" (Dowell 28). Many critics have called the film "feminist" (Dargis 17; Taubin 19), but many more have characterized aspects of *Thelma and Louise* in exactly the opposite manner(Cross 33; Grundmann 36): "Rather than heroines for women, Thelma and Louise have made their most indelible mark as cautionary figures for men. (Less noted is the fact that they serve as a
warning to women, too.) [...] it does little more than fill a male formula with female forms" (Dowell 28).

The ubiquity and extremity of the cultural commentary on *Thelma and Louise* is best read symptomatically, indicating something greater than anything that is coherently expressed by the film itself. In this regard, Elayne Rapping points out, that while she does not consider it to be a feminist film "in any coherent sense of that term," *Thelma and Louise* nonetheless "owes its life to second wave feminism and its twenty-five year aftermath" (30). Rapping notes that the film fails to make "any clear political statements...[but that] its attention to details of genre convention and contemporary gender issues...have made a lot of people committed to the sexual and cultural status quo uneasy" (30). She concludes her discussion of what she sees as an unwarrantedly extreme critical reaction to the film (both as "progressive" and "reactionary"), stating:

> Still, the furor surrounding this movie pleases me. Especially because it *isn't* an explicitly feminist movie, produced by the politicos as an 'intervention.' Rather, it simply takes for granted certain things first expressed by feminists, which now, apparently, are part of an oppositional way of thinking shared by a majority of women and lots of men. That's a good thing, I think. (Rapping 32)

Not only *Thelma and Louise*, but female buddy films in general, I would argue, can be read as symptoms (although the term sounds overly clinical, and in a negative way) of the greater degree to which feminist discourses circulate within the culture in a naturalized way. These discourses are not necessarily privileged or preferred in the text, but are nonetheless available (for those who wish to appropriate them for this end) as an ideological rubric under which these female buddy films can be understood and enjoyed by an audience they address as female. The films' textual discourses, as I have shown in chapter
three, are often contradictory and ambiguous; but the "trickle-down" legacy of second wave feminism does offer the possibility of reading them in an at least "feminist-inspired" (Haskell 375) manner.

While this type of liberalization of an initially radical ideological agenda could be considered recuperative, the purist critique of such cultural incorporation and popular appropriation, which suggests that "oppositional practices should retain a kind of radical copyright[,]...makes it very difficult to imagine any kind of social change" (Brunsdon 121). James Lynn suggests a similar line of reasoning, specifically in relation to feminism:

Although the projection of patriarchy as the ideology of ideologies certainly implies that crucially important aspects of women's oppression have remained more or less unchanged since the dawn of the ages, it seems both mistaken and—more significantly perhaps for a movement that is nothing if not political—tactically immobilizing to overlook the historically changing character of the patriarchal meditation on the feminine. (Lynn 7)

In this light, it is important to remember that the portrayal of women's friendships in Hollywood film has in fact developed in accordance with the changing times, insofar as: there are larger numbers of friendships carrying narrative significance being created; such portrayals have crossed many generic boundaries, expanding the field of action where women's friendships figure; and also in that the depiction of the friendship often establishes it as an important and positive aspect of the characters' lives. But it is equally important to bear in mind that this does not amount to a coherent feminist world view being created by or reflected in such films.

In this way then, the female buddy films I have considered are no more inherently "progressive" or "conservative" than the films depicting female friendship in the new women's cinema, or in the classical woman's film, for that
matter. None of these groups of films can claim a coherent feminist world view, as all are marked by ideological ambiguity and unresolved contradictions. The extremely ambivalent discourses surrounding female friendship (and other aspects of women's roles) under patriarchy, that bubble at the surface of modern films, are more often than not merely superficial variations on the same contestational issues that feminist critics, reading against the grain, "discovered" stuffed between the cracks of classical Hollywood's woman's films. But what has changed, of course, is the "character of the patriarchal meditation on the feminine" (Lynn 7); and the emotional resonance that a film such as Thelma and Louise has created within the whole of popular culture, amidst scores of contradictory meanings circulating around it, can thus be read as a symptom of a growing feminist impact on social hegemony. It is the trickle-down effect of feminist consciousness over the past three decades of film production and consumption—informing the way female buddy films create their audience, and how that audience creates the films' meanings—which thus differentiates this most recent cycle of female friendship films from its historical predecessors. Feminism itself is now held out as one of the many options (such as motherhood, career, female friendships, and marriage) facing women in modern versions of and variations on the woman's film, and is thus represented with the same degree of ideological ambivalence as the traditional choices. Ideological conflict is played out more overtly in the women's film market of today—as evidenced in the (albeit tentative and contradictory nature of) explicitly feminist discourses allowed by the female buddy films—while the films individually retain a large degree of ambiguity vis a vis feminism, as a
means of invoking, but refusing to commit to, a potentially alienating socio-political movement.
Notes to Chapter 5

1. This may have as much to do with the gradual erosion within academe of the dominance of American New Criticism, in which the "text itself" (as though such a concept has any potency free of its historical context, means of production and its reader) was taken to be the exclusive site of meaning, as it does with a change toward the production of incoherent texts.
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