



Monster: Ambiguous Depiction of the Female Killer

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Monster: Ambiguous Depiction of the Female Killer

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Monica Michlin est Maître de Conférences à Paris IV où elle enseigne en littérature et en civilisation américaine, ancienne élève de l'ENS ULM et agrégée d'anglais. Ses principaux champs d'étude sont les inégalités économiques et sociales dans la société américaine contemporaine, notamment celles touchant les minorités et les femmes. Sa recherche en littérature porte sur les représentations littéraires de la voix, notamment chez les écrivains de minorités ethniques, les femmes, et les auteur(e)s glbt. Elle rédige en ce moment une étude sur la fiction américaine des vingt dernières années mettant en scène la voix d'enfants ou d'adolescents victimes d'abus sexuels (Sapphire, Dorothy Allison, Jim Grimsley, et autres).

Cet article examine la représentation de la femme tueuse dans *Monster*, le film de Patty Jenkins d'après l'histoire d'Aileen Wuornos. Les angles d'analyse sont les suivants : l'humanisation, plutôt que la diabolisation, de la tueuse dans le cadre de l'histoire d'amour lesbienne; une représentation des meurtres qui nous distancie de plus en plus de Lee ; et finalement, l'écart transtextuel entre cette fiction et "l'histoire vraie" explicitement invoquée par la réalisatrice, et les problèmes que cet écart pose.

This article is an attempt to analyze the representation of the female killer in *Monster*, the Patty Jenkins film based on the life of Aileen Wuornos. The angles of study are the humanization, rather than the demonization, of the female killer within the lesbian love story; the depiction of the killings in ways that increasingly alienate us from "Lee", and last, the transtextual gap between fiction and reality, and the problems raised by the director's deliberate references to the "real story".

Aileen Wuornos, female killer, lesbian,
monster, prostitute, sexual violence

Aileen Wuronos, tueuse, lesbienne, monstre,
prostituée, violence sexuelle

In an interview included on the DVD version of *Monster*, Patty Jenkins explains that she was prompted to make the film when she saw Aileen Wuornos on TV, crying as the tape of her lover betraying her to the police was being played in court. What she saw was incompatible with the media propaganda, which labeled Wuornos a cold-blooded serial killer. In making her film, Jenkins insists: "I wanted to tell the truth, I wanted to find that space in between the man-hating lesbian serial killer and the feminist hero"¹. If *Monster* is an attempt to highlight the humanity of the female killer, by showing her capacity for love and by letting her tell her history of abuse, it is also a film which distances us increasingly from its main character, Lee, in the depiction of the shootings themselves². However much Jenkins contextualizes our initial reading of the title, viewer response is overdetermined from the start to ensure we see Lee's story as a tragic fate playing itself out. In an effort to demonstrate *Monster's* ambiguities, I will show how the killings are contextualized within an unhappy love story, which could be read as the nightmare version of *Thelma & Louise*; I will then analyze how the killing itself is filmed in ways that increasingly alienate us from Lee; and finally, I will examine the *mise en abyme* of truth and betrayal, revelation and travesty in Jenkins's use of the *real story* – taking into account the ambiguity of these terms – in her *fiction*.

Monster tells interlocked two stories: hardly has Lee, a suicidal highway prostitute, met Selby, and bonded with her, that she is forced to kill a man in self-defense. While this resembles the beginning of the

¹ *New York Times*, 30/12/03.

² The serial killer thriller has been one of the most successful genres of the past fifteen years. To name a few: *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Red Dragon*, *Hannibal*, *Basic Instinct*, *Kiss the Girls*... They generally adopt the point of view of the police investigating the crimes, but there are exceptions, generally felt to be "trashy" cult movies in which the male psychopath's perspective is imposed on us: *Henry: Portrait of A Serial Killer* (1986), or *American Psycho* (2000). These films resemble horror films and bear no resemblance at all to *Monster*. Jenkins quotes such influences as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *In Cold Blood* (1967), *Badlands* (1973), or *Taxi Driver* (1976) in the DVD interview with Bourgoïn.

romantic road movie *Thelma & Louise*, *Monster* is the negative of it almost term for term, since it precludes either identification with or attraction to the lead female characters, represents betrayal rather than loyalty, and uses the road as the stage for alienation and exploitation, rather than freedom or liberation. While one can see the love story as the tragic flaw that turns Lee into a repeat killer, the fact that Lee is a prostitute, who embarks upon a lesbian love story, and who starts to kill men, marks her an *unnatural* woman three times over in a male-dominated society³. Within this gaze, Lee embodies monstrous womanhood; for the rest of us, interpretation hinges on how Jenkins presents Lee.

Monster is necessarily viewed against a backdrop of pre-existing American films featuring female killers. In a “culture of male fantasies that eroticize [men’s] worst nightmares”⁴, deadliness can be revealed as being the “true” nature of women: this is the fantasy behind the *femme fatale*⁵. While the seductress may be heterosexual, she is often sexually ambiguous: the hyper-feminine, sexy “bisexual” killer appears prominently in thrillers from *Basic Instinct* to *Wild Things*⁶. Such women are all *femme* (as opposed to *butch*) as well as lethal: they seduce like women, but use aggression like men. This subtext to *Basic Instinct* or *Wild Things* – subverted in the thriller *Bound*, which turns into a real lesbian love story – heavily relies on viewer identification and/or fascination or desire. Lee is the opposite of this archetype: splotchy-skinned, overweight, swaggering, profane, confrontational; a *negative* image, in all the meanings of the term (devalued, and turned inside out) of femininity, she is no turn-on for the male gaze. As a physically degraded, homeless prostitute who has to bear male domination in its most exploitative form, she is necessarily a representation of “abject womanhood” to most women⁷;

³ See Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women*, p.142 and the whole chapter on Aileen Wuornos as “unnatural unnatural” woman.

⁴ Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women*, p.141

⁵ Hart, reminds us that Shoshana Felman brings to light the hypothesis Freud formulated but did not explore—that the “enigma of woman” might be woman as criminal, rather than hysteric (p.17). See Felman.

⁶ As Linda Williams puts it, these “bisexuals” are in fact “hetero-lesbians” whose so-called lesbianism is “foreplay” for a male gaze. (Pam Cook, *Women in Film*, p.113)

⁷ Women are generically defined as rapeable and prostitutable within a male-dominated society, (expletives such as “fuck you”, and more explicitly still, “bitch”,

and she is unattractive to lesbians themselves⁸. While it is realistic that she should be no beauty queen – in this, *Monster* is laudably a counter-*Pretty Woman* – the viewer's response seems predetermined to be distanced, and to swing only between sympathy and revulsion, pity and horror.

The film begins on an ambiguous dramatic irony: after the caption “based on a true story” (a deliberate reference to the Aileen Wuornos story), Lee comments, in a voice-over devoid of pathos or self-pity – but which one might feel to be devoid of *emotion* – “I always wanted to be in the movies”. In another irony of the after-the-fact narrative, a rectangular window the size of prison door peep-hole opens up mid-screen, allowing scenes of Lee as a pretty little girl and teenager to play themselves out silently, while the voice-over evokes her dreams of being found beautiful, and of another, better life awaiting her. The flashes are increasingly depressing (an older man's horrific red face, a young man paying her but pushing her roughly out of his car and driving off without her), and the voice-over abruptly stops with the reflexive phrase: “And one day, it just stopped”. After a split second of silence, the soundtrack reverberates with the onslaught of traffic and rain, and we sight a small figure hunched to the right of the screen, as the title *Monster*, in red, fills the screen above the highway. The next frame, a heart-wrenching close-up of Lee's rain-and-tear-soaked face, physically justifies, but emotionally undermines, the label “Monster”, while the gun that we see in her lap evokes suicide rather than murder, something the voice-over confirms within seconds: “By the time I met Selby Wall, shit, all I wanted was a beer” (2'45). We thus first meet Lee not as a killer, but as a potential suicide.

In the voice-over, Lee remembers her meeting with Selby as a life-saving epiphany: “and there she was” (7'40). Although she at first explicitly rejects Selby's friendly advances – “Get your hands off me, you dumb dyke! I'm not going to fuck you for a fucking beer! (5') –

are reminders of this), but are forced to deny this; all the more if they are heterosexual, of course.

⁸ This has nothing to do with not being *feminine*: Gina Gershon plays a seductive butch in *Bound*. It hinges on Lee being “ugly” in culturally masculine ways (drunkenness and profanity, for instance), *as well as* having a destitute woman's physique.

this is doubly explained by the comments “I’m not gay” (4’20), and in the voice-over stating why she is so determined to have one last beer: “I had given some asshole a blowjob, so if I didn’t spend it, I’d basically sucked him off for free” (8’): the sordidness of Lee’s life prompts her to equate Selby with yet another person who wants to use her sexually (and cheaply). Because Lee is in fact a “true romantic” (1’), as the voice-over (somewhat flatly) reiterates – “You’ve got to have faith in something. Me, all I had left, was love” (7’30) – from the moment Selby courts her platonically, and says, in a dream come true, “You’re so pretty” (9’40), she necessarily falls in love. She later explains that she never stopped believing what she was told at thirteen: “All you need in life is love and to believe in yourself and then there’s nothing you can’t do” (40’). Although this is said in a voice-over that directly conflicts with reality (scenes of rejection in job interviews), the entire film shows that Selby crystallizes Lee’s dreams, and that, subsequently, Lee will do *anything* not to lose her. The problem is that from the moment Lee is ready for a love affair with Selby, Selby suddenly (and surprisingly) declares: “I don’t have any money”. It is while hooking to pay for a motel room for the two of them that Lee is brutally raped the following evening and that she kills for the first time, in self-defense — but all she remembers later is that Selby was the only reason she *survived*: “I didn’t want to die, thinking that maybe, *maybe*, you could have loved me” (47’20)⁹. Our own view of Selby is of an immature childish-looking hanger-on, constantly whining for money, for parties, for fun. The irony of the love story is that Lee aspires to “get a job, go clean, straighten up” (37’), *because* she has met Selby: “I got you now” (37’)¹⁰. Although, in an echo of her teenage fantasy that she might be seen as “a diamond in the rough”, and taken to a “new life, and new world, where everything would be different” (1’45), Lee finds them a room at the *Little*

⁹ The modal verb is essential, for we are never sure what Selby feels or thinks. When initially reminded by her friend Thomas that her last boyfriend was abusive (12’40), Lee proffers that Selby is different...with a prescient modulation: “She’s real nice, you know... I think.” (12’40). The truth is, Selby wears her surname well; she is just another *wall* Lee has run into.

¹⁰ We are *forced* to hear the pun in Lee’s unrealized desire to “go straight” (43’): *straight* as opposed to *gay* emphasizes that as long as Lee wants to stay with Selby, she cannot change lives.

Diamond Motel (36'20), wider patterns of social violence make it impossible for her to escape her past.

The world despises Lee. To emphasize this disconnection between Lee's intentions and the world's response, the voice-over during Lee's interviews is optimistic, and the lucid monologue on how marginalized women like herself are treated is delayed – in deliberate irony – until the *Fun World* scene¹¹: the contrast between what we see and what we hear is all the more tragic. When Lee tries to speak “woman to woman” to the worker at the unemployment agency, the other backs away on hearing “I’m a hooker”, and speaks loudly in dismissal, illustrating the absence of *sisterhood*.¹² When a potential employer cruelly quips “when the beach party’s over, you don’t get to say ‘I’d like to have what everybody else has worked their entire lives for’” (41’), we understand her rage at his unfairness and complacency. The worst of it is that Selby herself parrots what Donna has told her, and cries out “you’re using me” (46’). In shock, Lee blurts out the truth about why she cannot go back to the streets, and reveals the rape and self-defense. Although Selby does not, contrary to Lee’s premonition, “run like the fucking wind” – *yet* – she does not really volunteer much more than an embrace and a weak offer to find work. When Lee answers she is going back to the streets – “I’ve been hooking since I was thirteen, man. Who am I kidding? I’m a hooker” (49’) – Selby neither hears the pain nor sees the offense in accepting this¹³.

¹¹ “People always look down their noses at hookers. Never give you a chance because they think you took the easy way out, when no one would imagine the willpower it took to do what we do, walking the streets night after night, taking the hits and still getting back up.” (1:06)

¹² Donna, Selby’s caretaker, a self-righteous good-looking middle-class woman, looks down on blacks, gays and “street people” – whom she accuses of choosing “the easy life” – alike. The onomastics – *Donna* as in *woman* – draw our attention to women’s discourse on women, and their denial that marginalization always proceeds from a history of abuse. Donna also unwittingly confirms Marx’s definition of marriage as a legal form of prostitution when she tells Selby “someday what you’ll want is a roof over your head even if you may have to sleep with a man to get it” (1:15)

¹³ Jenkins goes out of her way to make her the *unaware* pimp; but Selby never offers to prostitute *herself*, which clearly tells us that she knows that there is nothing “wild” (14’) about it.

Lee thus only goes back to hooking – and becomes a killer in the process – because she is so afraid to lose Selby, who, in her passive way, is extremely “pushy”, as Jenkins puts it (interview with Bourgoïn, 11’). When, overjoyed at the money Lee has literally showered on her after the second killing, Selby asks “was it OK?”, and when Lee answers “It was fine; I knew I was coming home to you” (55’), we alone catch the double meaning. Lee is caught in a vicious circle where, to keep Selby “happy” (53’40), she *must* kill¹⁴. When she softly declares: “I love you”, we thus hear this declaration as *absolute*, whereas Selby’s “I love you too” seems conventional; a thank you for the gifts Lee has brought or promises to bring¹⁵. As the dialogue draws attention to Selby’s arm finally being out of the cast, the subsequent images show this to be not for work, but for her own sexual gratification and/or to “thank” Lee; in a remarkable shot, we see that Lee has to push aside the money her lover has stacked on the bed for them to make love (the only such scene of the film). The soundtrack (“Crimson and Clover”) reflects Lee’s romanticism (“I don’t hardly know her/ But I think I could love her”), as do many of her gestures in the next few shots (carrying Selby over the threshold to their apartment like a newlywed).

Lee’s love shows when she confides that she was thrown out in the street at thirteen, and hooked to keep her brothers and sisters in clothes, only to be rejected and abandoned by them as well (“my brothers and sisters screwed me royal”, 1:07)¹⁶. The tragic irony is that this very situation is about to repeat itself, even more literally, with the egocentric lover for whom she “discipline(s) herself” (1:06) to hook and/or kill. While Lee bears everything for Selby (1:04), she soon learns that, like her ungrateful siblings, her lover feels ashamed of her (1:04), indirectly calls her a monster (“fucking scaring [people] off”, 1:04), and shuns her in public. The emblematic scene takes place when they go to *Fun World* (1:06): we witness Selby abandoning Lee

¹⁴ A number of puns connect dreams of another life and the violent means necessary to achieve them, for instance when Lee promises “we’ll have a shot at a *real* life, not this one, a *real* one” (1:14).

¹⁵ Often unrealistically, with some *macho* boastfulness: “What else do you want, a little purple Porsche, you want a little pony you can ride?” (58’)

¹⁶ In real life, Aileen’s brother Keith was incestuous (see Sue Russell, *Lethal Intent*, p. 80) which makes the expression horribly literal.

to chat with barroom acquaintances, and Lee denying what this means (“I loved her”, “I believed in her”). Since she has just told us in a voice-over that as a child, she had been traumatized by a ride in a Ferris Wheel called *The Monster*, when she accepts Selby’s invitation to go up in a similar wheel, in denial of the possible repetition of trauma, and when we see her managing to overcome her fear when Selby holds her hand, we are forced to see both the sincerity and the tragic delusion of this love. The *Monster* of the title is thus necessarily reinterpreted as referring not to *Lee*, but to the Ferris Wheel, and beyond, symbolically, to the wheels of life, fate, and treacherous love. For Selby seems to have stayed on for the money alone¹⁷: as soon as the police start to hunt them down her sole thought is for her own survival. Lee keeps her promise to buy her ticket out (both literally and symbolically), but as they wait for the bus, her “tough-gal” façade crumbles. As she sobs broken-heartedly, crying out “maybe if you just helped me” (1:27), Selby fails to respond, turning the scene of Lee’s abandon into that of her abandonment. Once Selby has gone, Lee crouches on a bridge, in a loop back to the first scene, as if contemplating suicide. Finally, she throws the gun into the water. More than the destruction of the murder weapon, this seems to imply that she has no intention of killing again; and that Selby and the murders were *inherently* connected¹⁸. To highlight the formal parallel between meeting and parting scenes, the next frame takes up the initial title-shot, of Lee sitting hunched above the highway, but this time the screen is (reflexively) blue.

In a tragic irony, Lee is caught through Selby’s fault, arrested while waiting for Selby to call her, and finally *deliberately* framed by Selby to the police during a telephone call (1:32-1:35). When she realizes that her lover is betraying her, she almost hangs up, but chooses

¹⁷ The scene in which Lee shows her the money she has saved and pleads urgently “See this? This is everything you’ve ever wanted. Just a little more, and a car, and we’re out of here” (1:13) is emblematic: Selby’s scruples about the murders vanish immediately.

¹⁸ For viewers who connect this not to Selby’s greed, but to the *psychopathology of the lesbian as killer* (or vice-versa), this theory has a psychoanalytical history that Hart (1994) analyzes at length. Recent films developing the male myth that (like identical twins) lesbians are necessarily psychotic because of their attachment to another woman, are Barbet Schroeder’s *Single White Female* (1992) as well as Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992).

instead to answer Selby's self-justifications – "I want to live, Lee, I just want a happy normal life, I don't know why you did this" – with a declaration of love, in complete self-sacrifice: "because I love you, and I never wanted to lose you. I love you with all my heart, my soul, my mind" (1:35)¹⁹. The film cuts to Selby coldly testifying in court – the nickname "Sel" thus belatedly identifies a *sellout* – while their goodbyes still ring in our ears. The final voice-over, as Lee is escorted in manacles down a blinding white corridor – an image of *dead woman walking* – gives a final twist to the romantic mottos she has lived by, and is about to die for – "love conquers all", "love will always find a way" – and as she turns around to face us, she delivers the punch-line: "Huh. They got to tell you *something*".

Lee's having (in part) killed for her girlfriend only to be turned in by her is one aspect that makes *Monster* the counter-*Thelma & Louise*, which "never closes" on the celebrated shot of Thelma and Louise flying together over the canyon rim. Not only is there no *Lee & Selby* in the sense that there is a *Thelma & Louise* (Selby proves to be no *girlfriend* at all), but Jenkins seems to have construed *Monster* as a *no-road movie*. Except for the rare scenes in which the pair ride happily into a beautiful sunrise on their first day together (32'45), or after their night of love (56'30), the landscape of gas-stations and highways where Lee prostitutes herself only opens onto a landscape of nightmare: the woods of the killings. While we hear Lee's belief that money and a car will get them *out of the woods* ("just a little more, and a car, and we're out of here", 1:14), there is never really anywhere to go *to*²⁰. In a reminder of Selby's surname (*wall*), the two women are hardly ever together *outdoors*; even their roller-skating takes place in an indoor rink²¹. When Selby whines that she wants "to travel, go different places", the only suggestion she herself comes up with is *Fun World*: the ironies attached to this name, and to the *Monster* within it

¹⁹ One notices that Lee does not mention the body, in a sublimation of love which can be read as defusing viewers' eventual homophobia, or, more likely, as proof that what she sought in Selby was a soul-mate.

²⁰ Although Lee briefly sports a cap that reads "Colorado", she will never *go west* towards freedom.

²¹ Similarly, all we see of Daytona Beach is the name in kitsch yellow on the iron overpass (20') under which Lee hooks, but never the beach itself.

are so numerous, that in itself it heralds how in her love for Selby, Lee is headed for a *dead end*.

While the film illustrates that *love is a killer*, it is absolutely clear that Lee turns to violence against men because she has been abused by them, physically and sexually, over and over again²². As soon as she starts to kill, her self-image starts to change, and she feels a growing sense of empowerment, which is captured in a number of scenes featuring her reflection in the mirror. These scenes take place at regular intervals between the killings – four in all – which are, as Jenkins stresses in the DVD interview, represented on a “sliding scale” (interview with Bourgoïn, 15’) reflecting Lee’s “descent into madness” (interview with Lacombe, 7’) as she crosses the line from absolutely a victim, to absolutely a killer. The first time Lee *has to* kill, in self-defense. When she says to the client who drives her deep into the darkened woods “hey man, don’t go *too* far”, we hear the sexual meaning, but cannot anticipate the sadistic violence to come. After expressing extreme ambivalence²³ towards *girls* – reminding us that the term implicitly equates all women and prostitutes – this client screams sexual insults and punches Lee unconscious when she refuses an extra sexual act. The montage guarantees our empathy (the screen blacks out when Lee does, 25’30), and precludes voyeurism. When Lee comes to, a scene of torture unfolds (the psychopath kicks her, sodomizes her, douses her in alcohol, all the time screaming sadistically “do you want to fucking die?”). When she manages to untie her hands, find her gun, and shoot him, screaming “fuck you, fuck you, you fucking piece of shit!” (27’30), we feel relieved. Lee’s equating killing with a reversal of *fucking* cannot be misconstrued as sexual sadistic *pleasure* (the kind of things that the trashy bestsellers around the Wuornos case suggested): there is nothing *orgasmic* about the scene – when she screams in the forest, the sound is that of

²² In Ross’s documentary, *Mugshot: A Woman Scorned*, the real Aileen Wuornos says “I was raped over and over and over and over all my life” (2’) and explicitly connects her having become a lesbian to this physical and sexual abuse by men (17’). She reiterates that she killed because she was raped once too many: “Enough is enough” (20’).

²³ In an intertextual play on *The Night of the Hunter*, he ominously groans “I love ‘em and I hate ‘em”, (repeated for effect) – which immediately brings to mind Robert Mitchum’s fists, tattooed LOVE and HATE in this 1955 role as sadistic woman-killing false preacher – just before he punches Lee out.

unbearable pain. What the “fuck you” means is a *political* reversal of male sexual violence²⁴.

After this horrific night, Lee thinks only of changing lives. But all her efforts to avoid sexual violence are doomed. She is recognized in the street by a policeman who insults her (“what’s a day off for a whore?”), and who forces her to give him a blowjob. In a deliberate counterpoint to this new rape, Lee catches sight of a newspaper headline concerning the rapist she has killed (“Police Have No Leads”) as the abusive policeman drives off in the background. The double victory of having killed one abuser and of having one-upped the second by escaping detection brings a smile to her face – one we can share. As the movie unfolds into a depiction of Lee’s single-handed war²⁵ against *the pigs*²⁶ – all the males she sees as sexual predators (the cop, of course, is doubly a *pig*) – there are a number of references to Lee’s “cleaning up” a corrupt world²⁷. When she angrily checks Selby: “No, you don’t know my life, Selby!” and then adds softly “And I know yours” (1:11), we are made to feel that we are the double addressees of this speech: our safe lives within the norm preclude a right to judge, since Lee’s life – and especially her past of sexual abuse – continues to be made known to us, piecemeal, as she kills.

²⁴ On this question of women’s reversal and appropriation of male violence, see Carol Clover’s analysis of “rape-revenge” films that showed a woman avenger methodically killing all the men who had raped her. (in Pam Cook, *Women and Film*, 76-86). Also see M-H. Bourcier’s analysis of the film title *Baise-Moi* (M-H. Bourcier, *Queer Zones*, 25-32).

²⁵ Jenkins confirms this reading: “(she was) more like a person going to war (than a serial killer)” (interview with Bourgoïn, 2’40).

²⁶ Joyce Carol Oates’s *Starr Bright Will Be With You Soon* (1999) similarly casts an ex-beauty who starts to kill men in a combination of self-defense, revenge, and psychotic dissociation, and who writes “pigs” on the wall in her victims’ blood. In a specular move of “split identity”, Oates wrote this novel under the name Rosamond Smith.

²⁷ In her first encounter with Selby, she claims to have a “pressure-cleaning business”, in what initially seems a pun on her suicidal state, or a compensatory image for the stain associated with prostitution. Later, as she kills men, the meaning retroactively seems political. There is a similar double meaning when she is housecleaning and angrily shouts at Selby: “I’m cleaning up this fucking pigsty” (1:03).

Indeed, the second killing depicts the vigilante in Lee as born of post-traumatic stress²⁸. When her client asks her to call him “Daddy”, Lee freezes and asks “Why, do you like to fuck your kids?” (50’). Deafening music fills the soundtrack as she turns around and shoots him, with the words “fucking child molester”. We already know that Lee was pregnant at thirteen (39’) and remember the older man’s terrifying face from shots of her first years, but confirmation that she was raped as a child will come later, during the next killing (1:17). This killing is deferred to show that Lee does not run *amok*: when her next client, an obese man on the verge of tears manages to stutter that he doesn’t “like it rough” and that he has “never done this before”, she manages to repress her violence (59’10). But Jenkins implies that this is a brief parenthesis in a now uncontrollable dynamic: the third killing takes up where the second left off, in a sort of uninterrupted spillover of memories of abuse now violently returning to the surface. Indeed, although in this third killing episode, the client looks shocked when Lee asks him if he goes with “strange girls” to rape them, in a reversal of her dead rapist’s expressed hatred of *girls* she now aggressively declares “fucking men. I fucking hate them.” (1:16). When he asks her why she is a hooker, then²⁹, she retorts: “I’m *not* a hooker. I don’t *fuck* men. I used to. Mostly against my will.” (1:17). She then reveals that she was raped at eight by a friend of her father’s; and in a doubly reflexive phrase (“the fucking kicker to the story”) that she was beaten by her father for *telling*, and had to endure the rapes for years. Although the client reacts decently, it is too late to placate Lee: she has just declared implicitly declared that she now *kills* men: implicitly, *all* clients are abusers because they take advantage of women who have had no choice but to prostitute

²⁸ In *Never Talk to Strangers*, psychotic dissociation connected to past sexual abuse is used as a fundamental narrative structure. Some films that show killing as suppressed memories of abuse resurface feature males: Sam Raimi’s *The Gift* (2000) for instance; or play on the killer’s identity (multiple personality in René Manzor’s *Dédales* (2003), for instance).

²⁹ This is an irrelevant question – as if women prostituted themselves out of love or liking – but Jenkins’s discourse is ambiguous, here. To make the client “completely innocent” as she says in the Bourgoin interview, she belatedly lets us see a photo of this man’s wife, in a wheelchair. The rationale is that this client “has” to pay a woman for sex, which shows the limits of her discourse on male domination.

themselves *because* of a history of abuse³⁰. Jenkins clearly refuses to vindicate Lee: as the latter is reminiscing about the triumph she felt when her childhood abuser was finally killed in an accident³¹ – “I fucking loved it: knowing you can’t get away with your shit forever” – her victim’s wallet falls open to reveal his police badge, so that her words suddenly, and tragically, apply to her.

Jenkins casts Lee as conflicted: on the one hand justifying herself as an avenger, when she tells Selby:

people kill each other every day, and for what? For politics, for religion, and they’re heroes. No, no, there’s a lot of things I can’t do anymore and killing’s not one of them (1:12).

On the other, grappling with guilt, when she blurts out to her friend Tom: “I just sometimes feel everybody thinks I’m just a bad shitty fucking person”. Tom, mistaking her meaning, tells her not to feel guilt, evoking his experience as a Vietnam War vet, and insisting that, like him, Lee had no control over her circumstances (1:20)³². When seconds later, he learns that she is a *wanted* serial killer, he tries to save her, but in a tragic irony, Lee believes he wants to use her sexually. When she cries out “no, not you, Tom”, we also understand that she does not wish to kill him.

Indeed, Lee is only a *man-hater* in a sexual context; hence the tragic aspect of the last murder. When picked up by a Good Samaritan who refuses to use her, Lee is shaken by his kindness and tries to get out of the car. But her gun falls out of her jacket; the man hesitates, but trustingly hands it back to her, thus sealing his fate (Lee fears he will report her). The buildup to his execution is unbearable because he remains compassionate to the end (“you’re just going through a hard time”, “you don’t have to do this”). When Lee sobs and says “I can’t”, we feel a flicker of hope, but after a split second, she cries out instead: “I can’t let you live”, and shoots him, crying out “Oh, God, I’m sorry”, in visible pain. In a final tragic twist, she comes home to Selby

³⁰ Only abolitionist feminists (including myself) think this; so-called *post-feminists*, relayed by a complicit male-dominated media, consider “sex work” to be just work.

³¹ The abuser’s name is “Victor Bourne”, as if to signify that men are born victors (over women).

³² Judith Herman also draws this parallel between war veterans, battered women, and abused children (*Trauma and Recovery*, p. 32).

to find out that the police sketches of them are out anyway – making this last murder horrifically gratuitous.

Jenkins punctuates the killings with mirror scenes that symbolize Lee's changing, and splitting, identity. On the night of her first date with Selby, Lee "pretties herself" in a gas station restroom. She approvingly addresses her reflection ("You look good") and, in playful dissociation, acknowledges the compliment ("Thanks", 13'40); while this seems humor, some may view it as a sign of Lee's already split self³³. When, having survived the rapist, Lee is desperate to find Selby and (in a dramatic understatement) explain that *it was not her fault* (30'), she returns to the restroom to wash the blood from her hair, and dab foundation on her face to hide the bruises (this is literally *makeup*, rather than making herself pretty). When Selby elopes with her, Lee is still wearing her rapist's overalls and cap; and as they start their first day together in the motel bedroom, Lee tilts her head back, and smiles at her cross-dressed reflection (33'50). While connoting her triumph over male violence, it also heralds her appropriation of this violence, and her capacity to keep her two lives separate – the "normal" one with Selby, and the secret, violent one.³⁴ After the second killing, this compartmentalization is made visual, and verbally explicit. We see Lee's face in the bathroom mirror, smiling contentedly as Selby tells her through the closed door how happy she is at promises of moving to an apartment. The voice-over then picks up:

In my life it's always been the harmless stuff that hurts the most, whereas the thing so horrible you can only imagine it [*here, we see Lee's naked body, covered in her victim's blood, reflected in the bathroom mirror*] is usually a lot easier than you'd think— you never really know until you're the one standing there (53'50).

This last phrase overlaps Lee's literally standing in the shower, as the blood washes off her: the narrative voice implicitly challenges us to

³³ When Lee tells Selby about the rape and killing, and cries in rage and sorrow at the thought that Selby is going to abandon her, she designates herself in the third person, in childlike regression (or psychosis): "Lee'll be fucking fine, Lee'll be fucking fine" (47'50).

³⁴ This is evidenced in the dialogue, when she tells a seemingly horrified Selby: "we're going to have a drink and forget about all this" (1:11). Only in a second move does she claim the right to be heard, and to "open Selby's eyes" to what the world really is.

see ourselves in that place. In one last mirror-scene (59'), Lee, in a masculine sleeveless jacket, deliberately aims her gun (sideways, not at herself) before a split mirror that deforms her face, in an iconic image of broken femininity and broken sanity. This image, which is the equivalent of a line like "I've got it under fucking control" (42'), signifies deluded empowerment; viewers are aware – as Lee, the tragic character, cannot be – of the ending of the *real* story which predetermines *this one*.

This is the last essential prism through which *Monster* is necessarily viewed, and it introduces a whole set of ambiguities in its representation of the female killer. How does this fiction *reflect* the "true story"³⁵? Is this film ultimately, and ironically, a *mise en abyme* of betrayal? Jenkins indeed goes against what Aileen said in her confession to the police, and repeated in every public document for the next eleven years – that all of the seven killings were in self-defense, against clients who attempted to rape her, or who did³⁶. She implies that Lee was paranoid after the first man nearly killed her, and that, although she may have believed she was in danger, she was in fact killing because she had "snapped"³⁷.

This goes against the feminist defense of Wuornos. In her 1994 essay, Hart argued that to invoke past abuse and post traumatic shock syndrome was to pathologize Aileen, the better to cover up the *actual* sexual violence of middle-class, middle-aged white men (p.153), who

³⁵ The words "true story" ring like an oxymoron. Such notions as "truth" in biography are necessarily problematic; but politically and ethically, they remain central. It is necessary to question whether *Monster frames* Aileen Wuornos in more than the cinematographic meaning of the term.

³⁶ Jenkins and Broomfield both explain that Wuornos, in the last year of her life, accused herself of cold-blooded murder in all seven cases because she wanted to die, as she told Broomfield off-camera; Nick Broomfield believes that she was insane after 12 years on Death Row ("Hard Talk Extra" interview, BBC World, 01/04/2005).

³⁷ Aileen was abandoned by her mother when she was three months old; her biological father committed suicide in a jail where he was serving a sentence for sodomizing a seven-year-old, the year Aileen was that age; she was adopted by her grandparents who were (at least) physically abusive: at times she said the baby she had to give up at age 14 was in fact her grandfather's. Her grandfather is the one who threw her out in the streets when her grandmother died. See Sue Russell, *Lethal Intent* (pp. 20, 63, 70, 80), and Mary Beth Ross, *Mugshot: A Woman Scorned* (9'20-17').

did not hesitate to brutalize prostitutes³⁸. Hart's thesis was that Wuornos had to die because she was a symbol of what would happen if *all women* started to defend themselves. The Defense Committee for Wuornos also upheld Lee's claims of self-defense, denouncing the bias against women who kill³⁹, the double standard in claims of self-defense⁴⁰, and the homophobia of judges and juries⁴¹. While Jenkins implies that she *knows* the truth because she read the seven thousand letters Aileen sent her childhood friend Dawn during the twelve years she was on Death Row (Aileen decided this, before her execution), she also says in the interview with Bourgoïn:

The truth is, (for) Aileen Wuornos, during this period of time, and we know this from a lot of the letters that we have, even after the fact, there was a lot of actual belief that what she was doing was O.K. (2'40)

But the director remains *adamant* that all the killing was *not* in self-defense⁴². Since she seems sincere about the moral imperative that hung over her film – “I would have to live with myself for the rest of my life with how I made this film”⁴³ – and since she is satisfied that there is “no moral flaw” in *Monster*, we have to take her on trust.

We can, however, question some of the liberties she has taken with the facts. She suggests that Lee's sexual identity allowed her to act out her violence:

From the moment [Aileen] found Tyria, she found a label for herself that allowed all of this hatred I think

³⁸ “In a patriarchy, prostitutes are both necessary and utterly dispensable. Usually they are the prey, not the predators (...) since Jack the Ripper, they are the most likely victims of a serial killer.” (*Fatal Women*, p. 142).

³⁹ “A study by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence found that men who kill their wives or girlfriends serve an average of 2-6 years, while women who kill their male partners serve an average of 15 years”.

⁴⁰ “Recently, a Los Angeles storeowner killed five men in four different armed robbery attempts. This man was never charged with any crime”.

⁴¹ According to the Committee, 80% of women on death row in Florida at that time were lesbians. For other sources on the anti-gay bias in the judiciary: “Was Justice Served?” *The Advocate*, Sept 27, 2001; “In Murder Cases, Being Gay Can Seal a Defendant's Fate”, *Village Voice*, March 13, 2001.

⁴² Jenkins emphatically makes the point in *The Guardian* (interview of 27/04/04) and again in the interviews on DVD that to uphold Aileen's claim of systematic self-defense is sympathy based on an untruth.

⁴³ Interview with Lacombe, (9').

she already had – “I’m a lesbian” – and she was able to hang her hat on that. (interview with Bourgoin, 6’30)⁴⁴.

Yet the film is simply *framed* in such a way that the love story coincides with the shootings. In real life, Aileen had already had a lesbian lover, for whom she bought a... pressure-cleaning business (which the other woman stole, abandoning her besides). The real-life “Selby”, Tyria Moore, was a hefty butch who quit her cleaning job to live off Lee. Their relationship lasted four years, and Lee only started to kill the last year, when Tyria threatened to leave her if she didn’t bring home more money.

The DVD fortunately includes Nick Broomfield’s documentary *The Selling of a Serial Killer*, which denounces all the ways in which Aileen was exploited, and which *Monster* does not show. In 1992, Broomfield proved Aileen right in her seemingly delirious accusations that the police had entered negotiations with fifteen Hollywood studios to sell her story before they even *arrested* her; that they had cut a deal to grant Tyria impunity as a state witness (and for her to get part of the movie package) in exchange for betraying her; he showed that Lee had not had a fair trial and had been sentenced to death for the first “victim” because it was only revealed *after* the trial that he *was* a sadist and had already served years in jail for sexual assault; she was not given a retrial; she was adopted by a born-again Christian who made money off her interviews, urged her to plea no-contest and thus made sure she would get a death sentence, and defended by a lawyer who, in one scene, sings “I’m the public defender” to the tune of “The Great Pretender”. Given this unbelievable accumulation of injustice and betrayal, it is disturbing that *Monster* does not even allude to it; the editing may have been necessary to avoid lawsuits, or too lengthy a film, but it excessively *reframes* the real story.

True, contrary to the trashy TV film *Overkill*, or to Sue Russell’s *Lethal Intent*, Jenkins did not do what Aileen protested in the 1992 Broomfield documentary: “revile my character and make me look like a monster and deranged, and like a Jeffrey Dahmer, which I’m not.” (53’). While Lee does not appear “super-bright” and “exuding great

⁴⁴ Her own film makes Lee an “accidental” lesbian (she was hungry for *any* love), as expressed in the dialogue when she first kisses Selby passionately. When Selby seems puzzled: “I thought you didn’t like girls”; Lee responds “I didn’t like anyone really—but I like *you*” (19’).

likeability”⁴⁵, she is always *human*, including in the most violent scenes, which do not focus on the victims’ bodies, but on her – non-psychopathic – emotions. The film *does* exploit a sensationalist title, (especially given the much-publicized transformation of Charlize Theron), but beyond a doubt, it constantly deconstructs it. Theron explains that the picture of Aileen which was used by the media to stereotype her as a *monster* had come from the perfectly innocent, (pathetically) feminine gesture of pushing her hair back while handcuffed, which gave her a white-eyed, manic look and the impression she was making a strangling gesture. The actress shows great empathy, emphasizing that Lee’s *life* was the monster, and that Lee was a victim⁴⁶. While it is obvious that she won an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and Best Actress Prize in Berlin for her metamorphosis, as much as for her *performance*, one could argue, conversely, that this can prompt viewers to think of Lee as “beautiful beneath the surface” – an effect one could not get with a “naturally ugly” unknown actress. As for the reflexive *double entendres* on Aileen’s identity as *monster*, when the film starts on “I always wanted to be in the movies ... It made me happy to think that all these people just didn’t know yet who I was going to be, but one day, they’d see” (1’10), or when she urgently tells Selby “you’ll never meet someone like me again” (32’), they do play on ambiguity, but are only exploitative if the viewers refuse to be drawn into the tragedy that unfolds, and that the voice-over is an ironic *chorus* to⁴⁷.

Ultimately, there *is* a certain ambiguity to Jenkins’s portrayal of the female killer. Although humanized, instead of demonized, within the lesbian love story, Lee often comes across as pathetic (drunken, raging, profane, deluded), sometimes as touching, rarely as heroic. Although gritty realism is a value, given the representations of women in Hollywood film, Lee’s physically “monstrous” appearance necessarily distances us throughout, no matter how clearly the title is

⁴⁵ Nick Broomfield’s impression of her in 1992, as he said on “Hard Talk Extra”, BBC World, 01/04/2005.

⁴⁶ In a bizarre twist, which illustrates the multiple *disguises* in the film, Theron’s mother killed Theron’s abusive father in self-defense when she was 16.

⁴⁷ Besides, Jenkins symbolically emphasizes the interchangeability of the roles of victim and killer, by casting Scott Wilson, who was the killer in the classic *In Cold Blood*, as the last, and totally innocent victim; an irony she recognizes when questioned by Bourgoin (14’).

revided from within. The distance that Jenkins wanted to increase as the film progresses is obvious: through framing, through the gap between the voice-over, (which is always poignant), and Lee's dialogues (that are sometimes grotesque, in the literal *as well as* the literary meaning of the term), and through her depiction of the shootings. While the voice-over allows us insight into Lee's life, explaining how a "real good person" (1:14) can become a repeat killer⁴⁸, we rarely see as Lee sees⁴⁹: the camera is mainly trained *on* her, and she remains a *monster* in the etymological sense of the word, on display. And last, since, as viewers, we do not have access to the letters the real Aileen wrote, and since she cannot speak for herself any more, we must trust the director that this film is no *mise en abyme* of the exploitation, abuse and betrayal Lee was made to endure her whole life through.

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⁴⁸ Though not a serial killer, according to technical definitions (no stalking, premeditation, etc).

⁴⁹ In a cut scene included on the DVD, we get a glimpse of what Lee's dream of "another life" was – a middle-class house, a full fridge, eating cake to her heart's content, and going back to sleep with Selby – sweet, and to middle-class viewers, accessible pictures of domestic happiness. Because the final cut does not include this sequence, we remain more distanced.

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<http://www.prisonactivist.org/pubs/crossroad/6.3/wuornos.html>

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