

Crime and the Gothic: Sexualizing Serial Killers

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Male serial murderers are typically construed as having vampiric qualities and display the primordial evil that such murderers seek to inspire, assuming the status of a vengeful deity in relation to their victims. However, once a female serial killer (and particularly a lesbian one) becomes the object of such a narrative, it is less the vampire (which is aligned with the archetype of the male serial killer in popular film) than the Frankensteinian Monster who becomes the main analogue. Thus, this article is focused specifically on depictions of Aileen Wuornos (and in particular Charlize Theron's interpretation of Wuornos) as a Frankensteinian Monster.

Keywords: female; serial killers; portrayal; Gothic; Frankenstein

INTRODUCTION

In reflecting upon serial killing, it is apparent that criminological fact and literary fiction have become irretrievably intertwined. The focus on the twilight region of fact, fiction, and myth is important, because it gets at the ambivalent workings of the social construction of these contemporary monsters. Rather than assuming that film (and particularly fiction film) is a medium that tells us little about the reality of criminological phenomena, Gothic criminology, as envisaged here, recognizes the complementarity of academic literary and aesthetic popular accounts of deviant behavior. What prompts this article is thus an explosion of books and films that link violence, images of monstrosity, and Gothic modes of narration and visualization in American popular culture, academia, and even public policy. As Edmundson (1997) noted:

Gothic conventions have slipped over into ostensibly nonfictional realms. Gothic is alive not just in Stephen King's novels and Quentin Tarantino's films, but in the media renderings of the O.J. Simpson case, in our political discourse, in modes of therapy, on TV news, on talk shows like *Oprah*, in our discussions of AIDS and of the environment. American culture at large has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, with Gothic characters and plots. (p. xii)

Understanding the term Gothic is crucial. It is generally understood as a literary or aesthetic term that was coined during the 18th and 19th centuries, and can mean primitive (which runs the gamut from being barbaric to uncivilized)—the earlier 18th century characterization. But Gothic can also connote a nostalgic search for the true or lost foundations of modern European culture, suppressed by neoclassicism and the Enlightenment, with their obsessive search for order and

rules—the later reevaluation (though a precise date is impossible to come by; Bayer-Berenbaum, 1982).

Vampires possess this mythic primitivism that is both a positive and a negative and, as this article points out, so do male serial killers. Male serial murderers are typically construed as having vampiric qualities and display the primordial evil that such murderers seek to inspire, assuming the status of a vengeful deity in relation to their victims. If Katz (1990), one of the leading experts on serial killers (and fictionalized as Clarice Starling's mentor, Jack Crawford, in *The Silence of the Lambs*; Bozeman & Demme, 1991) was correct, serial killer films should bring to audiences a "sensual awareness of evil in the forms of dread, defilement, transgression, vengeance, sacrilege and sacrifice" (Katz, 1990, p. 292). Such psycho-emotional elements should be discernible in the films that paint converging portraits of serial killers and vampires, which I examine using a Gothic aesthetic. This is significant because traditionally, as Pirie (1977) points out, though there is a natural link between serial killers and vampires, the two are usually set apart because of a conventional desire to separate a realistic account from an account of fantasy. Thus, he argued, "the true life psychopath is very rarely a source for vampire movies. There is a world of difference between the psychological horror of mass murder and the dreamy romantic atmosphere of the undead" (Katz, 1990, p. 292). Yet contemporary characterizations of male serial killers converge with those of vampires, making the Gothic aesthetic not an obscure 18th century oddity, but a rhetorical feature of everyday life. However, as this paper ultimately shows, once a female serial killer (and particularly a lesbian one) becomes the object of such a narrative, it is less the vampire (which is aligned with the archetype of the male serial killer in popular film) than the Frankensteinian Monster who becomes the main analogue.

The topic of this article is focused generally on depictions of Aileen Wuornos, and in particular on Charlize Theron's interpretation of Wuornos, as a Frankensteinian Monster. Of course, larger criminological implications that flow from this case study can be pointed to. Female criminals, particularly those who commit violent crimes, are depicted as not women, bastardizations of women, or counterfeit women. There is a long history in criminology that aligns the transmogrification of women with criminality, with Lombroso being one of the most infamous (Adler & Simon, 1979). When men kill, these actions are naturalized as males simply doing things that are natural to men (e.g., violence, domination) who have stepped slightly outside the rules of acceptable behavior, such as a football player who makes a late hit. In other words, men who violate social norms/laws are seen merely as untamed or uncontrolled men. Male serial killers may be detested as aberrant, but the audience often ambivalently views the male serial killers' skills of tracking, trapping, and physically overcoming their prey as skills that normal or real men are supposed to have as men (no matter how far these actions are criminalized). Within the popular imaginary, as I point out in a later section, male serial killers are seen as brilliant (as in the case of the mythic Hannibal Lecter). Male serial killers possess traits that are desirable even if these skills are used for evil. In contrast, incarcerated violent women are seen as strange, alien creatures and, often, beings beyond redemption.

An examination of Wuornos' criminal record reveals that she was very different from male serial killers. Henry Lee Lucas may have killed hundreds, Wuornos killed only six. Though definitions generally vary, most experts would agree that it takes at least four victims to be considered a serial killer (Bahn, Hazelwood, Morrison, & Ressler, 1995), so Wuornos just barely

qualifies. Male serial killer Ted Bundy is often described as someone who had charm, cunning, and even brilliance in his killing, while Wuornos lumbered along like someone on a very slow killing spree. Wuornos was sloppy with her killing and, even if her motive was not financial, she appeared in the movie *Monster* (Jenkins, 2003) to be a cheap hood who killed as part of a robbery. Wuornos, even if given the title of being “America’s first female serial killer,” in comparison with heterosexual male serial killers, was not generally perceived as a skilled serial killer but, rather, as being a woman who did not know how to be a real woman (as defined by the patriarchy).¹ This observation is very much in line with the gendered (and raced and classed) dimensions of being a female criminal. Chesney-Lind and Shelden’s (1998) work, for example, demonstrated how, even within gang culture, female gang members, relative to their male counterparts, are placed in a lower prestige ranking. Furthermore, they are often seen as sexual auxiliaries to their male counterparts, which is reinforced through the female gangs’ adoption of names that mirror the male gangs they pair with, often for economic and physical protection (e.g., the Vice Queens in relation to the Vice Kings). Ironically, as Chesney Lind and Shelden also pointed out, there are very few empirical studies that confirm the “stereotype of the hyper-violent, amoral girls found in media accounts of girls in gangs” (p. 72). Indeed, the face of today’s demonized woman is a “violent African American or Hispanic teenager” (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004, p. 53). In Aileen Wuornos’ case, it is possible that her whiteness was cancelled out by both her class and sexuality. However, her whiteness may also have contributed to her being given the double edged title of being America’s first female serial killer—a title ambivalently tinged with some prestige, but also with some derogation.

Thus, the criminological ramifications that extend from this analysis stem from not only a critique of gender and sex (feminine behavior as natural to female bodies and the criminalization of deviations from this norm) but also from the pathologization of lesbian female bodies. Lesbianism, in Wuornos’ case, became tautologous with man-hating behavior. Her serial killing of men, therefore, became understandable precisely because lesbianism is man hating behavior. As Schmid (2005) astutely pointed out:

In an article written for *Glamour* magazine, Susan Edmiston quotes Robert Ressler as saying, “There may be an intrinsic hatred of males here, as well as an identification with male violence which helped push her across the line into what has been considered a ‘male’ crime . . . In stark contrast to the complex motives attributed to male serial murderers, and the evocation of those male murderers as essentially unsolvable mysteries, Wuornos’s motives are presented with absolute clarity: she is a lesbian; *therefore* she hates men and *therefore* she killed them.” (p. 238)

CULTURAL COMMENTARIES ON THE CONTEMPORARY FASCINATION WITH SERIAL KILLERS IN REAL AND REEL LIFE

Other theorists have focused on the cultural significance of the serial killer craze. Caputi (1987) saw both the rise in serial killing and the cultural fascination with the phenomenon in fiction and film as indicative of male sexual dominance. Defining sexual murder as sexually political murder or functional phallic terrorism, Caputi argued that serial killer films include the following typical elements:

1. The films refer to Jack the Ripper and the established tradition of sex crime.
2. The killer corresponds with, or Gothic-ally doubles with, the police or media.
3. The mother is blamed for her son's criminality, as a result of psychological or physical abuse.
4. The killer claims to love his victims, helping them by killing them.
5. The female victims are ultimately responsible for their own demise (either the killer mentions this or the plot construction naturalizes this).
6. The killer is waging a holy war against women, punishing them for their sexuality, aggression against men, feminism, and the like. (p. 64)

Newitz (1999) similarly focused on the gender identity anxieties of (hetero)sexual murder as “the serial killer kills off the ‘feminine vulnerability’ in himself when he kills women, and thus proves himself a man” (p. 65). In contrast, Jenkins (1994) criticized Caputi (1987) for ignoring female serial killers (who more often work in health-related professions) and limiting her analysis to feminist perspectives. He viewed the rise of conservative Protestantism in the 1980s and 1990s as a major factor in the shift from images of serial killers as psychologically damaged human beings to monsters (Jenkins, 1994).

While Jenkins (1994) also discussed the decline of interest in the psychological background of serial killers, Grixti (1989) saw the rise of depictions of real life monsters as indicative of the uncertainty in which we currently live and its resulting fears (e.g., “Feelings of fear...derive from the conviction of loss of control and the sense of helplessness,” p. 153). When real life policies for controlling crime are perceived as weak, and a general atmosphere of social malaise prevails, magical solutions for controlling the monstrous are sought, often imaginatively worked out through narratives in film and popular culture. As each era has its own fears, certain crime-related genres tend to dominate during these periods. Thus, gangster films emerged in the 1930s, *film noir* in the 1940s, science fiction in the 1950s, horror films in the 1970s, and serial killer films in the 1990s, each of which dealt with their era's most troubling tensions (Rubin, 1999).

Along a parallel track, Seltzer (1998) discussed the rise in interest in serial killing as an example of America's wound culture—the “public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (p. 1). As those who pass traffic accidents cannot seem to help but look at the carnage, the exploits of serial killers are depicted in documentaries, docudramas, and fictional films, and large audiences avail themselves of these images.² Similarly, Tithcott (1997) described the different ways in which we, as a society, construct the serial killer in our own image. We were both “thrilled and horrified by what we see, that we exist in a kind of horror movie which we write and perform for ourselves daily” (Tithcott, 1997, p. 9). All of these point to the gendered and Gothic dimensions of portraits of serial killers in popular culture as well as criminological theory.

Unnoted in previous literature until Simpson (2000) is a striking similarity between the mythic characterization of a vampire and the description of a serial killer: both kill out of an overpowering compulsion, and in similarly periodic and patterned ways. It is this thought-provoking convergence between criminological theory and popular cultural representations that

formed a significant section of this analysis. As Simpson pointed out, “While serial murder indeed remains a favorite staple of tabloid journalism and cheap fiction, it has also compelled a variety of serious contemporary American writers and film directors to grapple with its philosophical implications” (p. ix). This article thus builds upon Simpson’s position that the serial killer genre results from a combination of earlier genre depictions of multiple murderers, and inherited Gothic storytelling conventions and threatening folkloric figures that have evolved into a contemporary mythology of violence. Contemporized and repackaged for popular consumption, the Gothic villains, the monsters, the vampires, and the werewolves of the past have morphed into the fictional serial killer, who clearly reflects American cultural anxieties at the start of the 21st century.

In other words, what enables the Gothicization of crime and, in this particular case, serial killers, is a narrative mode that moves across fact (*verité*) and fiction (horror, melodrama). This movement across the narrative visual modes of the authentic documentary and the fictional is particularly evident in purported true stories of serial killers such as Henry Lee Lucas (*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*; McNaughton, 1986) and Ed Gein (*In the Light of the Moon*; Boot & Parello, 2000). In each of these accounts, attempts to sketch the portraits of the real men and to explain their supernatural compulsions to kill become reduced to Gothic tropes. These real men, Gothicized into reel archetypes become either a monstrous cipher (in Gothic literature a zero or an unreadable or inscrutable code—that is, a monster beyond human understanding or rationale; e.g., Henry Lee Lucas) or an offspring of *Psycho*’s (Hitchcock, 1960) Norman Bates, the conventional victim-monster (e.g., Ed Gein; Picart, 2003).

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Immortality* (Berwin & Leong, 1998), and *Hannibal* (De Laurentiis & Scott, 2001), the figures of the vampire and the serial killer blur into each other. For example, the face of the monstrous in *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* is initially visualized through Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), a brilliant but institutionalized psychiatrist known as “Hannibal the Cannibal.” Admittedly, there are technical differentiations between cannibals and vampires, but *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* conflate these two, such that Hannibal’s vampiric and hypnotic gaze (which is characteristic of vampires, not cannibals) becomes inextricable from his blood-soaked, man-eating teeth (which are ambiguously placed in between cannibalism [an atavistic real life horror] and vampirism [a supernatural horror]). More pertinently, in terms of the history of film (as opposed to literature), there is certainly precedent for the conflation of cannibalism with vampirism in zombie films like George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), which spawned a host of derivatives such as *Horror Express* (Gordon & Martin, 1972), *Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things* (Clark, 1972), *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue* (also released as *Don’t Open the Window*; Amati & Grau, 1974), *Fear No Evil* (Laloggia 1981), *One Dark Night* (Schroeder & McLoughlin, 1982), and *Dawn of the Dead* (Argento & Romero, 1978). According to Waller (1986), Romero’s presentation of the living dead in *Night of the Living Dead* was derived from Richard Matheson’s (1997) novel, *I am Legend*, which strips vampires of: (a) their ability to transform into mists or bats, (b) their legendary wealth, and (c) their need to be invited into a home in order to invade it. *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* continue this conflation of vampirism and cannibalism, but restore to the serial killer-cannibal the vampire’s aristocraticism, combined with a supernatural intelligence and the ever-present threat of his barely contained physical power (which rationally explain Hannibal’s ability to terrorize and feed on others’

terror; Picart, 2003). What is new about this article is that it emphasizes how the serial-killer-as-vampire analogy is very clearly gendered and, thus, insufficient for understanding serial killer mythology as generated in both popular and criminological literature. The vampire-male connection needs to be expanded by introducing the Frankensteinian Monster model as a female counterpart. *The Silence of the Lambs* is an interesting film to cite in this context because Buffalo Bill, the other (in more ways than one) male serial killer, also fits the Frankensteinian Monster model in one aspect: he craves acceptance and wants to remake himself into an image of what he wants to be (and wants society to see him as). Such a deviation from the vampire-male serial killer mold is both possible and believable, precisely because of the gender deviations written into Buffalo Bill's characterization. Buffalo Bill's pathological and aberrant masculinity, which prefers imagined femininity to normal masculinity, thus ends up as the villainous counterpart to Hannibal's elevated Dark Angel status. Yet what happens when the body of the serial killer is now female, and her orientation is lesbian rather than feminine? To answer that question, we turn to a detailed examination of *Monster*.

GENDER, CLASS, AND SEXUALITY IN RELATION TO SERIAL KILLING: THE CASE OF AILEEN WUORNOS

No discussion of the representations of serial killers in media is complete without a discussion of Jenkins' (2003) highly acclaimed docudrama, or biopic, *Monster*, alongside Broomfield's (2003) second documentary on America's first female serial killer, Aileen Carol Wuornos: *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*. Both films were released during the same year and a media account reveals that Broomfield shared information and outtakes from his film with Jenkins and Theron, reasoning that "a good Hollywood movie about Aileen would be preferable to a bad one" (The Internet Movie Database, 2004a, p. 1). Since the focus of this article is on fictional films, *Monster* remains the central fulcrum of the piece, with the documentary drawn in mainly for comparative purposes and for demonstrating the difficulty in sifting fact from fiction. Ultimately, the focus of the article is how the films on Wuornos call attention to the inadequacy of the vampire/serial killer analogy and suggest a corollary one: the female (lesbian) serial killer as a Frankensteinian Monster.

Unlike the male serial killer films surveyed in an earlier article (i.e., Picart & Greek, 2003), Aileen's portrait in *Monster* is neither vampiric (like Hannibal Lecter) nor that of a cipher (like Henry Lee Lucas). The Gothic monster who returns our gaze in this film is the Frankensteinian Monster. The principal features of the Frankensteinian Monster relevant to this argument are: (a) the Frankensteinian Monster is characterized as a lumbering, clumsy, and ugly body (compared with the glamorous, erotic, and often sophisticated body of the [male] vampire); and (b) the Frankensteinian Monster, like its body, is a social misfit and a lonely child in need of love, rather than a brilliant and dangerous rebel who flouts society's rules, which fits the typical characterization of vampires. This portraiture of the female serial killer as a Frankensteinian Monster is evidenced in: (a) the heavy media emphasis (a construction by the media outside of the film's production history) on the transmogrification of Theron's physical perfections into a grotesquely real simulation of the actual Wuornos (with a stress on Wuornos' ugliness as a form of physical deformity symptomatic of social alienation and emotional abuse), and (b) the framing of Wuornos' serial killing within the context of an overwhelming loneliness and an obsessive desire for love and companionship. Both of these traits are very much attributes of Mary

Shelley's (1818) Frankensteinian Monster (an internal construction that could be characterized as an intentioned narrative shaped by Jenkins, the director of the film). One could argue these two realms are not necessarily too disparate by saying that Jenkins shaped or elicited the media response to some extent precisely through the choices she made regarding the portrayal of Wuornos. But intent is not the point of this article. The important thing is the interesting convergence between precisely the narrative content of *Monster*, which teems with allusions to the misunderstood social outcast (i.e., Frankensteinian Monster), to the rhetorical tropes critics of the film repeatedly fell back on, particularly in relation to the transmogrification of Theron's glamorous body into lumbering and ugly (still Frankensteinian). In other words, despite the difference in the sources of the texts (external and internal), they resulted in a coherent narrative.

Perhaps one thing that compounds the Wuornos case is the attention given in particular to the uglification of Theron, the ravishingly beautiful blonde star. Media accounts regarding Theron's transformation from ultra-feminine, gorgeous starlet to menacing, homeless streetwalker scopophilically hyper-analyze the details of this uglifying makeover. Repeatedly, references are made to the splotchy make-up, protruding false teeth, dark contact lenses, and extra 20-30 pounds that produced the illusion of the real Aileen Wuornos so convincingly. Holden (2003) of *The New York Times* remarked, "With crooked yellow teeth that jut out from a mouth that spews profanity in a surly staccato, a freckled weather-beaten face and a prizefighter's swagger, Charlize Theron pulls off the year's most astounding screen makeover" (p. 1). Perhaps the wittiest gloss of this Oscar-angling transformation, with a comparison to its cinematic precedents, was coined by Sinagra (2004):

If you're willing to glug a few hundred cans of Ensure, wear prosthetic teeth, conjure terminal impairment/homosexuality, and dredge up an Oxycontin-slurred drawl that would scare the banjo off the inbred *Deliverance* boy, importance can be yours. And thus, with...[a] performance that swings from muscularly sympathetic to pre-*Extreme Makeover* crass, the bulked-up, butch-struttin', perma-frownin' Theron is poised to ride the tribulations of state-executed Florida prostitute and john-sniffing serial killer Aileen Wuornos straight to Slingbladin' Hilary Swankdom. (p. 1)

Edelstein (2003) used the protruding teeth to make a vampire analogy, but the analogy is in jest, and it is clear, based on tone, that a Filipino vampire is more comical and exotic than fearsome:

Although some of her features are bare, her skin has been lightly speckled (to simulate the ravages of the Florida sun on Wuornos' white Michigan complexion), her eyebrows plucked, her cheeks affixed with jowls, and her mouth with choppers that recall a Filipino vampire movie. (p. 1)

Even more consistently noted than the simulation of Wuornos' physical imperfections through make up magic was Theron's adoption of a lumbering and clumsy gait, a spastic head twitch, a corporeally hulking yet uncontrolled body, and a general nervousness that could explode into violence at the slightest provocation. All of these were traits of the Frankensteinian Monster, particularly in its cinematic iterations (Picart, 2001). Witness, for example, Boris Karloff's poignant interpretation of the lumbering and speech deficient creature, capable of

playing innocently like a child or suddenly erupting in violence (largely in self-defense), in Laemmle and Whale's (1931) *Frankenstein*. Or Christopher Lee's menacing interpretation of the Monster as a silent, grotesquely mangled, and unthinking killing machine, characterized by a clumsy gait and spastic body twitches, in Hind and Fisher's (1957) *The Curse of Frankenstein*. Ebert (2004) observed:

Aileen's body language is frightening and fascinating. She doesn't know how to occupy her body. Watch Theron as she goes through a repertory of little arm straightenings and body adjustments and head tosses and hair touchings, as she nervously tries to shake out her nervousness and look at ease. Observe her smoking technique; she handles her cigarettes with the self-conscious bravado of a 13-year-old trying to impress a kid. (p. 1)

Along a parallel track, Meyer (2003) perceptively remarked, "The actress slides a palpable fear beneath a weary frown and lumbering gait," as she uncovers the vulnerability and childlikeness that lurks underneath the raucous boisterousness and bravado of Wuornos' shell (p. 1).

In Branagh's (1994) cinematic rendition of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the mirror-imaging qualities of creator and created are magnified by their common search for an eternal love. Victor Frankenstein (Branagh), in this version, creates the female monster motivated by the desire to enable a love that overcomes death, as his creature (Robert De Niro) is determined to have a mate with whom he can share all the passions of his heart at all costs. In *Monster*, which appears to be based on letters Wuornos shared with Jenkins before her execution, Wuornos is similarly obsessed with hanging on to her lesbian lover Selby Wall at all costs, even killing (Snipes, 2004).

This, rather than simply the desperate need for money, constitutes the rational or sane part of why Wuornos turns from being a prostitute to being a serial killer. Yet it is also equally clear that there is a thick miasma of mixed motivations and powerful passions that incite her to kill: self-defense and revenge for having been violently raped, penetrated by a stick, sadistically tortured, and almost murdered in the first instance; then a deep seated hostility against men rooted in her childhood experiences of sexual abuse, moralized as a form of vigilante-ism later on. In one sense, this version of Wuornos' life does not fit the compunction model easily because Wuornos is not moved to kill in a patterned, compulsive manner. With one exception, the viewer sees the effort it takes for Wuornos to get herself into the mindset of being a justified avenger. She verbally prepares herself by casting her potential victim in the role of a child molester or someone who enjoys sadistic, rough sex. If he does not protest, and even relishes the role-playing involved, she pulls the trigger several times without remorse. When one of the men who picks her up turns out to be a shy, socially awkward virgin with a speech impediment, Wuornos cannot go on with her prepared script, and with downturned, set lips, perfunctorily gives him a quick hand job. When he thanks her, she grabs his wallet, extracts her due fee, and says, "You're welcome" sullenly.

Finally, guilt, pain, and shame mingle in her cry for forgiveness as she reluctantly pulls the trigger on her last victim, a man who had genuinely wanted to help her, but who presented a danger as he could now identify her to the police. All these details still show the remnants of a

sane and rational mind, even if one perpetually racked and tortured. As Holden (2003) noted, “What makes these encounters all the sadder is Wuornos’ obvious horror, and guilt at the pattern she has been repeating” (p. 2). It is this characterization that brings *Monster*’s portraiture of Wuornos at odds with Broomfield’s (2003) documentary rendition of her last days in *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*. For Taubin (2004), *Monster*’s most hideous misrepresentation was this:

The movie’s unforgivable flaw is that it portrays Wuornos not as the totally insane person that, on the basis of the Broomfield documentaries, she clearly was, but as a woman who merely had a problem with anger management, a woman who was a fool for love. If anything, *Monster* supports the sanctimonious assertion of Florida governor Jeb Bush (then up for re-election) that the three psychiatrists he ordered to examine Wuornos on the eve of her execution (they spent all of 15 minutes with her) found her to have been of sufficiently sound mind to be dispatched by lethal injection. (p. 1)

Indeed, the portrait that emerges from Broomfield’s (2003) documentary is different in terms of its depiction of Wuornos’ sanity. As Winter (2004) eloquently described Wuornos’ conduct, “Wuornos spills streams of damaged consciousness and contradictory half-inventions, while her puffy, ravaged face freezes into nervous cheer or contorts in molten rage” (p. 1). The condemned woman appeared to have a tenuous hold on reality: she proclaimed that after her death she was going to heaven and returning to earth with Jesus in a spaceship like the one in *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996).

Since Wuornos was an uneducated homeless prostitute, Hannibal Lecter’s mythic erudition, high-class refinement, and vampiric charisma could not be part of her portraiture. Also, though she occupied a similar economic sphere and suffered from a similar background of abuse as Henry Lee Lucas and Ed Gein, she is not given the Gothic trope of the cipher. In fact, the movie strains to make Wuornos as emotionally transparent as possible in order to create empathy for her character. Nevertheless, references to Wuornos’ heartbreakingly tragic history of abuse and alienation are kept to a minimum. Based on the two documentaries by Broomfield, we find out about the mother who deserted Aileen, the grandfather who consistently beat her up and threw her out of the home (thus forcing her to live in woods after she got pregnant and had an abortion as a young teen), and her subsequent relationships that ended in betrayal (making her a predictably paranoid person). Her life leading up to meeting Selby—a life marred by rape, incest, violence, and abandonment, and on the brink of suicide—is barely hinted at in Jenkins’ script. Instead, the focus remains on the period from 1989-1990, when the hitchhiking prostitute killed six male clients—crimes for which she was executed by the state of Florida in 2002. During this 2-year period, Aileen happened to meet and fall in love with the aptly (re)named Selby (fictitiously renamed for legal reasons; Broomfield, 1992). The cinematic depiction of Wuornos’ relationship with Selby is important to note in detail, because the changes from fact to fiction underline the melodramatic character of the narrative. *Monster* is conceived of as a love story, not principally as a horror story. A telegenic love object must therefore possess certain acceptable feminine traits, and Selby in particular must be a believably appealing character to make the audience understand why Wuornos would kill to keep her.

The real name of Selby Wall (Wuornos' former lesbian paramour portrayed in the film by Christina Ricci) is Tyria Moore, who functioned as the prosecution's chief witness against Wuornos. Those who stayed atop the media coverage immediately took issue with the film's characterization of Moore, who in real life was a tough, masculine-looking redhead (Persall, 2004). In contrast, Ricci's small stature, large, doe-like eyes, smooth features, soft-spokenness, childish rebellion, and physical infirmity (she has one arm in a cast when the two meet) make the character easier to like, and it is thus easy to see her through Wuornos' besotted, overprotective gaze. Selby is trying to tiptoe out of the closet, attempting to escape a domineering family. She clings to Wuornos as a potential savior, provider, and soul mate. Wuornos, so long accustomed to rejection, eagerly assumes the role of the husband and breadwinner, her desire to keep Selby's devotion at all costs drives her to justify killing and robbing her tricks to support them both. Ricci infuses her interpretation of Selby's weak character with a cloying neediness, materialism, and fickleness that delicately balance Theron's brash bravado and armor of cocksureness. Finally, Selby's feigned ignorance of her lover's nocturnal fundraising activities "establishes an air of complicity that suggests Wuornos is not the only monster in this little domestic unit" (Germain, 2003, p. 2). Ricci's acting and scripted role in this movie have been panned by several critics. Meyer (2003) decried:

Selby's fuzzy motivation [that] boxes the actress into a performance that's often unreadable. The character didn't have to be much to attract a lost soul like Wuornos, but for viewers convinced by Theron's magnificent show of ardor that this girl means the world to her, she should have been more than this. (p. 1)

There seems to be a direct proportion between the degree of transparency and empathy encouraged in the portrayal of Wuornos, and the degree of opacity and distance from the aptly named Selby Wall, who occupies the position of the cipher and traitorous beloved in this story. Nevertheless, it is clear that Ricci deliberately portrayed Wall's character in that manner because that was the way she interpreted the script. In an interview, the young actress claimed that a significant source of attraction for Ricci was the idea of "playing someone who was such a weak person, someone so motivated by fear that they really couldn't do anything... That to me was interesting, because I generally don't play very weak people" (Buckalew, 2003, p. 3).

Despite the use of nerve-jangling music and sharp, controlled cinematography (both of which serve to intensify the flesh-crawling reality of these horrifying events) *Monster* is shot not as a horror film, as are the prior serial killer films we have written about in this article, but principally as a romance and melodrama. Both the film's formal properties and promotional packaging seem to enact a complex rhetorical dance between the realms of fact and fiction. Though the film's trailers moved across color and frozen black and white images (thus contributing both to its grittiness and seeming authenticity), the final film stays fully in color. Thus, the film's form from the start is ambiguous, straddling the realms of documentary reality (its gritty look in some sections) and feature fantasy (particularly in its depiction of the love story, or of Wuornos' dreams of becoming a star and of being beautiful).

Hints of Wuornos' childhood begin with a colorful snapshot of a beautiful blonde child playing dress-up in front of a mirror as a voiceover narrates the young girl's dreams of being discovered as a movie star by a prince who would rescue her from the overwhelming poverty

that surrounded her. The screen widens, still in color, though no longer shot in soft focus and heightened color, to reveal a teenager who lifts her shirt to reveal her breasts to a small crowd of fascinated boys who, after ogling her body, rush off as if in fear of becoming infected with a dreaded disease. Then, during a nocturnal scene, she is shown being picked up by a man in a car, where a transaction occurs before she is thrown out of the car and abandoned, underlining the heavy irony of her dreams in contrast with the realities that weigh her down. Particularly during the violent scenes, the movie generally adopts the cinema verité look characteristic of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, and the camera work is almost seamlessly invisible. During the disturbing scene in which Wuornos is raped and penetrated by a stick used by her assailant, the camera focuses mainly on her face as she grimaces and begins to struggle in pain, anger, and protest. In a quick set of shot-reverse shots, we then look down upon her as she manages to grab her gun, only to assume her point of view as she guns down her attacker, before moving into a medium shot as she repeatedly mangles her attacker's corpse (with the barest hint that her panty is still pulled down). As if in deference, the camera then moves into a long shot as Wuornos staggers about, howling like a primeval beast.

The juxtaposition of the rape scene with the lesbian lovemaking scene is important, because it highlights the conflicting properties of the Frankensteinian Monster, which is capable of wreaking violent havoc as much as of being vulnerable and childlike. During the much-publicized lesbian lovemaking scene, despite extreme close-ups on lips touching in ardent kisses or hands traveling over bodies that remain clothed for the most part, the camera resists the scopophilic gaze so characteristic of lovemaking scenes, particularly of the lesbian variety shot for heterosexual patriarchal consumption. Persall (2004) complained that:

When the women are shown making love, Tommy James and the Shondells' *Crimson & Clover* makes it seem more like prom night than a porn film. Writer/director Jenkins never misses a chance to remind us these kids are in love, as if that's justification for what Wuornos does. (pp. 1-2)

Nevertheless, what is also equally clear in this scene is that a role reversal occurs: it is now Selby who initiates the act of seduction and lovemaking. It is her small figure, dressed in jeans and a masculine shirt that lies atop Aileen's body, which is draped merely by a towel. Later, when their lovemaking is done and they embrace, Selby's head is above Aileen's, as if she were the one cradling the larger woman. The majority of the scene is shot in low-key lighting infused with deep blue, as if in romantic nostalgia.

Thus, despite the meticulous detail put into simulating reality, such as shooting in the very locations Wuornos used to frequent (which are reputed to be haunted by her ghost), the film ultimately cannot make a claim to being either a realistic or objective depiction (The Internet Movie Database, 2004c). It was clearly shot from Wuornos' point of view several years after the events had transpired, and it was the emotions that seared in the memories that animated the portrayal. In fact, the film aroused considerable controversy as the relatives of the men victimized by Wuornos took offense at the generally unflattering portrayal of the men she killed. The film also aroused the ire of John Tanner, the Florida state attorney who prosecuted Wuornos, who claimed he was never consulted by the filmmakers. Tanner dismissed the film's depiction of what occurred as a total lie. In defense of the film, Brad Wyman (one of its producers) attempted

to pacify the film's detractors by claiming that, "It's not a documentary... It is a dramatic portrayal searching for a greater truth than a factual truth" (The Internet Movie Database, 2004b, p. 1). Rabin (2004) summarized the formal and thematic contents of the film in this manner:

Patty Jenkins combines the gritty, claustrophobic neo-realism of *Dahmer* with the unlikely gutter romanticism of *Boys Don't Cry*, creating a haunting portrait of how a person can feel so desperate and hopeless that murdering for a few crumpled bills and maybe a beat-up car can begin to seem like a reasonable option. (p. 1)

(One could make the argument at this point that it is the dark side of the "American Dream"—that is, the "cultural emphasis on achievement, which promotes productivity and innovation, also generates pressures to succeed at any cost" [Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001, p. 13]—that produces monsters like Wuornos, but that is not the focus of this article.)

What is crucial to this article is that there are Gothic elements to the portrayal of Wuornos. For example, the polluted urban highways and dark woods in which Wuornos and her customers furtively do their commerce display the mimetic correspondence between the Gothic setting and its characters. In an interesting parallel, Wuornos' depiction as both childlike and animal-like in her stunted moral development resembles Van Helsing's description of Dracula as operating as if motivated by a "child-brain in much . . . and it is of the child to do what he have done" (Stoker, 1997, p. 336). This childlikeness is crucial to what makes both vampires and the Frankensteinian Monster Gothic, because childlikeness is actually construed as a form of primitivism, and as freedom from conventional morality. This is not to collapse one into the other, but to show the key affinities they possess in common, which make them repositories of Gothic imagery.

Nevertheless, the principal Gothic monster who emerges from this narrative is the Frankensteinian Monster—a lumbering, lonely misfit desperately in search of love; a neglected child in a body too large for it to control; and a creature who ends up a fallen Eve despite the purity of her aspirations. In the end, it is hardly surprising that Wuornos meets the fate of female monsters or the feminine-as-monstrous characters who inhabit the classic horror versions of the evolving Frankensteinian cinemyth. It is either they commit suicide (such as Helena Bonham Carter's composite Elizabeth-Justine in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* or Susan Denberg's Christina Kleve in *Frankenstein Created Woman* [Keys & Fisher, 1967]) or someone else (usually a white, masculine aristocratic figure, or an establishment upholding this hierarchy) kills them off (e.g., Elsa Lanchester's monstrous bride in *Bride of Frankenstein* [Laemmle Jr. & Whale, 1935]). Broomfield's (2003) second documentary on Wuornos reveals an eerie parallelism between the two narratives. Before her execution, not realizing the camera was still rolling, Wuornos admitted that she changed her story of self-defense to one of robbery and murder in order to hasten the execution which, after 12 long years on death row—a period she claimed was not immune from further abuse and exploitation—she welcomed.

CONCLUSION: OF MONSTERS AND *DOPPELGÄNGERN*

This article began by gesturing toward the overlap of vampiric themes in male serial murder films. In contrast, it is the implicit portrait of the Frankensteinian Monster that surfaces

in the depiction of the lesbian female serial killer Aileen Wuornos. This article also broadly outlines a significant change in the depiction of the vampire in more recent literary Gothic popular novels. For example, in Saberhagen's (1975) *The Dracula Tape*, Rice's (1976) *Interview with the Vampire* and Scott's (1984) *I, Vampire*, vampires acquire the authorial voice. In crafting their own narratives, they become more sympathetic, more superhumanly human, and much less radically the other. As noted by Punter and Byron (2004), "They are more likely to offer a site of identification rather than a metaphor for what must be abjected, and with the movement from the metaphorical to the metonymical, the vampire increasingly serves to facilitate social commentary on the human world" (p. 271). This grows even more pronounced in the most recent characterizations of Wuornos as a Frankensteinian Monster—a neglected social misfit in search of love—both in fictionalized and documentary treatments of her story.

Arguably, the move toward establishing the monstrous other as a site of identification becomes particularly disturbing in the case of the serial killer, one of the most compelling monsters that dominate the last part of the 20th century. While sympathy is not precisely the word to describe the response encouraged by serial killer narratives, as we point out in our analysis of fictional serial killer films, there is often nevertheless a certain ambivalence in the representations of modern monsters. In docudramas such as *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Ed Gein*, the serial killer as an abused abuser emerges, while in horror films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Immortality*, vampiric aristocraticism and Byronic sex appeal become key features of the mythic serial killer. Often viewed as merely symptomatic of an increasingly violent and alienated society, the serial killer might seem to call for the most emphatic reassertion of social norms and the strongest reaffirmation of conservative values, which happened in the creation of the new FBI Behavioral Science Unit, as Surette (2005) pointed out (see also Punter & Byron, 2004). This is, however, rarely the case in fictional and popular narratives (Surette, 2005).

Rather than being established as the demonic other that must be exorcised from mainstream society, the serial killer is explicitly identified as that society's logical and inevitable product. Thus, society, rather than the individual, emerges as a primary site of horror. In such narratives, there is rarely any assurance that the threat can be contained. Rather than being staked, the serial killer, society's monstrous progeny, is simply left to carry on. Even in the most reassuring serial killer narratives, often those in which a criminal profiler is offered encouraging evidence that the monstrous can be identified and contained, the majority of texts remain at the very least ambivalent about the repudiation of the monstrous. The stability and autonomy of the self and the other, as well as the clear separability of good and evil, are frequently undercut through a particularly emphatic use of the traditional Gothic *Doppelgänger*. The killer may ultimately be caught and punished, but this is often brought about by the profiler's over-identification with the killer, as in Clarice Starling's pursuit of Buffalo Bill under the mentorship of Hannibal Lecter. Popular narratives such as these are actually more complex and force us to confront the realization that the potential for corruption and violence lies within us all, and the horror comes above all from an appalling sense of recognizing ourselves in our others (Punter & Byron, 2004). Ultimately, one could argue that the Frankensteinian Monster archetype is perhaps more frightening than the vampire archetype precisely because it elicits sympathy (and, in so doing, questions the self/other dichotomy) more than the male vampire model. And perhaps

precisely because it is more frightening, it is harnessed within a predominantly feminized film genre: the melodramatic.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to one of my reviewers for these astute observations.
2. One could point to the current popularity of *CSI* as well as the constant pilgrimages to 9-11's Ground Zero as further evidence of the prevalence of this wound culture. I wish to thank one of my reviewers for this astute addition.

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