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A study of female aggression as represented in Patty Jenkins' fiction film Monster

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis begins with a synopsis of the film, which will enable an analysis of the significance of this plotline for Jenkins' ideological and creative exploration of women, agency and aggression.

Synopsis of *Monster:*

The film *Monster* (USA, 2003) is based on the life of Aileen Wuornos, the Florida prostitute who was one of the few documented female serial killers in the United States. The scriptwriter and director of the film, Patty Jenkins, surprisingly centered the film on a love story, instead of assuming the role of judge or advocate towards the actions of Wuornos. After a flash back sequence that recreates the childhood of Lee (Charlize Theron), the film opens as Lee meets Selby (Christina Ricci), a young and immature lesbian in a bar. Lee responds very rudely and defensively to the clumsy flirtation of Selby, as she does not think of herself as gay and her life as a prostitute has made her very hostile towards society. However, Lee opens up to Selby, as she perceives her as her last chance to find Love. Patty Jenkins cinematically evokes Lee's hopelessness and despair before meeting Selby in order to emphasize the importance of this same-sex relationship. For Lee, Selby is the innocent child that she has to protect and save, a symbol of the child she once was herself. Inspired, she goes out to work on the highway to earn money for their first date, and a client beats her unconscious, ties her up, rapes her with a tyre iron and pours petrol over her. Fearing for her life, Lee shoots him, and then takes his car and wallet. As her relationship with Selby develops, she enters into the role of provider and protector. After her brutal encounter, she is scared of the streets and makes an attempt to go straight. However,

in her attempt to look for a proper job she encounters social rejection and brutalization. Pressurized by her new girlfriend to provide money, Lee goes back to prostitution. However, her last traumatic experience with the rapist john makes her believe that all her clients might turn out to be abusive, which provokes in her a desire for revenge and killing. Unable to stop, she robs her victims to provide for her girlfriend and believes that she can identify which clients deserve to die. After the killing of an innocent man, she is turned over to the police by Selby. *Monster* is not about sensationalism, but rather portrays the intimate tragic story of a human being who became a serial killer, due to a combination of bad social and personal pathologies.

The Meaning of the Form:

The aim of this thesis is to explore the representation of women and aggression in Patty Jenkins' film *Monster*. I will argue that, while the female characters in *Monster* do not escape the conventional portrayal of women within the dominant Hollywood cinema, their portrayal does nonetheless create a 'non-normative' representation. By exploiting the classical narrative and a particular model of representation of women, Jenkins creates a cinematic text which attacks the patriarchal principles grounding the model. Therefore, the main argument of this thesis will be that Jenkins uses the Hollywood system of narration and representation of women in order to subvert and criticize it. Ultimately she is using the film as means to critique the patriarchal violence within American society itself.

In order to substantiate my argument, I will first look at the conventional representation of women in fiction-film genre[1], and will then investigate how the performance of aggression is constructed within the film. The film represents aggression as a social phenomenon that develops into a pathological behavior. By establishing the history of the general phenomenon of female aggression, I will examine its specific representation in my film case study *Monster*. Although the film introduces different female characters that each have their particular expression of aggression and representation, the primary focus of analysis will be Lee, the main character of the film.

Contemporary feminist film theorists, such as Mayne (1984), Creed (1993) and Mulvey (1989) claim the necessity for filmmakers to challenge the phallocentric order in terms of the representation of sexual difference and spectatorship, as well as the Freudian argument that woman terrifies because she is castrated. They postulate the need to deconstruct conventional cinematic codes in film in order to reclaim the self-representation of femininity. Jenkins, as both scriptwriter and director of *Monster*, is a representative of this particular trend and the film analyzes the inadequate position of women within society. As a filmmaker, she is challenging the cinematic tradition by portraying society as an extension of male exploitation and intransigence. According to the film, it is precisely this ideological situation within American society that causes the psychological collapse and the pathological behaviour of Lee. In her attempt to escape the role of a victim, she assumes many traditionally male attributes. This could be read as a desire to change her status and to cease being 'castrated' but rather to become 'phallic' and 'castrating'. I would argue that the film suggests that

[1] A tradition emerged within 'film noire' that constructed the narrative around an unreliable and aggressive woman who used her sexuality to entrap and betray the protagonist.

the predetermined role of the woman as 'castrated' by the patriarchal order is accountable for the development of the female aggressiveness and monstrosity of Lee[2]. This effect is achieved through the director's incorporation of cinematic details of Lee's constant exploitation into the narrative structure of the film. The structure of the plot evokes the idea that the cause of Lee's pathological aggressiveness is in fact society and her rape serves as a key occasion that provokes a desire for revenge. The filmmaker sporadically reveals evidence of Lee's abuse by men, from her childhood to her daily life within society. The creative decision to use this background material is evidence that Jenkins' purpose is to show how Lee is labeled by society in a way which prevents her from changing. The film suggests that the manifestation of aggression is her only means of escaping the vicious cycle of victimization. The representation of the character within the film is shockingly realistic and unusual within the genre as it aims not to be fetishizing or objectifying. At the same time, it offers a collective image of women struggling to find their own identities. This is achieved through the filmmaker's aim not to create a sympathetic portrait of the character, but rather a portrait of a woman who is exasperated at being a victim and decides to change her position.

I will use Mulvey`s (1989) concept of the patriarchal nature of popular cinema discussed in her article on visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In her analysis of cinematic apparatus, she concludes that it is dictated by the dominant patriarchal system that imposes a visual representation from a male's perspective. This leads to the creation of an unrealistic image of women, as they are constructed in film as passive, sexual objects without an identity, available for visual gratification. Judith

[2] This thesis will only analyse the fictive character, created by Patty Jenkins and will not deal in any detail with the real woman, even though the film was based on a true story. I do however mention the historical figure just to compare Jenkins' interpretation of it.

Mayne (1988) in “The Female Audience and the Feminist Critic” takes this subject further and concludes that not only have women been misrepresented in film, but they have been denied any self-representation. She argues that the representation in film is usually based on a male heterosexual construction of female subjectivity (ibid: 22-40). I will be tracing the development of feminist film theory from Barbara Creed (1993) to MaryAnn Doane (1984), to establish the specific conceptual, narrative and stylistic approaches that Patty Jenkins uses in order to create a ‘non-normative’ representation of women in her film *Monster*.

The notion of the ‘non-normative’ representation of women entails that I first describe dominant cinema in order to consider how Jenkins’ film is situated. For this purpose, I will use Annette Kuhn’s (1982) analysis in *Women’s pictures: Feminism and Cinema* on the subject. Kuhn examines dominant cinema as an economic and social institution and then discusses it in relation to its textual features. According to Kuhn, the textual model of the dominant cinema is organized around a certain kind of narrative structure and cinematic codes (Kuhn, 1982: 42). Although *Monster*, in terms of narrative structure, corresponds to the textual characteristics of the dominant cinema, it shifts the focus between the plot solution of Lee’s crimes (killings) and the solution of the woman-question. From a psychological point of view the film doesn’t provide closure at the end, but rather raises further questions. In terms of cinematic codes, *Monster* disrupts certain convention of the dominant cinema. The editing is no longer invisible, as at some moments there is lack of continuity and there are unusual switches in the plot in terms of time and space.

Although this thesis does not aim to focus on the institutional frameworks surrounding the production and distribution of *Monster*, it seems impossible not to

discuss this issue, as it is an integral part of the cinematic apparatus. In an interview for *The Guardian Unlimited* (Aitkenhead, 2004), Patty Jenkins discusses her struggle to get funding for the film. The main reason that the film went into production was that Charlize Theron was not only the star of the film, but also its co-producer. In using Patty Jenkins' interview, I will pay particular attention to the discussion about her creative decision not to compromise with the attribution of sympathy in the representation of the characters in the film. On the one hand she was against a sympathetic portrait of the serial killer, as her crimes could not be excused, and on the other hand she was aiming to get the audience to feel the way Lee felt. Therefore this thesis will investigate the viability of the main question which interested Patty Jenkins: "Can we have sympathy for the circumstances of someone's life?" (Aitkenhead, 2004). Even though this argument is contradictory[3], I will try to tackle it, as it was of great importance for the filmmaker.

The analysis of aggressive behaviour evident in the film consists in the investigation of the motives and the premise of such behaviour. For this purpose, I viewed different theories that determine its antecedents. While there is considerable theoretical input on aggression, Freud's doctrine concerning the aggressive behavior will act as a stepping-stone for the analysis of the female characters in *Monster*. Although Freud's ideas on aggression underwent considerable change through the years, this paper is interested in his hypothesis about the dualism between 'life instincts' and 'death instincts' in relation to aggression and how they derive one from another. As for the representation of the female aggression within the film, Karen Horney`s theory embodies the culturalist stress that this paper aims to assume. She traces the roots of

[3] Sympathetic, but not entirely sympathetic.

sadism in hopelessness and futility. This particular state could be described as the "feeling a child has of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world" (Horney, 1962: 89).

I will undertake a close reading of *Monster*, and examine the mechanisms that predetermine female aggression suggested by the film. By identifying the specific cinematic codes used by the film, such as mise-en-scene, camera movement and editing, I will look at how they enhance the narrative structure in order to evoke the shifts inside the character. These particular strategies that the filmmaker undertakes in order to create the escalation of aggression within the character will help me to investigate Lee's ability to reward herself and find motivation within her pattern of crimes. Through a discussion of its cinematic representation[4], I will investigate the complicity of the female characters within *Monster*. I will then trace the antecedents of Lee's antisocial and sadistic behaviour as posited within the film. The film also tries to explore the impossibility of a definite female 'identity' and realization within such a bureaucratic and patriarchal society. I will base my analysis on the filmmaker's position and will aim to discover the specific elements in the character's history in order to support my argument.

[4] I will raise debates around the possible purposes and effects of this controversial representation of women within the general cinematic discourse.