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

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CHAPTER I:

"*Monster* versus mainstream: classical narrative structure and the representation of women".

The representation of women in cinema is strongly linked to the position they assume within a social and cultural context. Therefore, feminist film theorists (Mayne, 1984; Creed, 1993; Mulvey, 1989) have directed their attacks against the ideological presumptions that underpin patriarchal ideology about women. The dominant mode of narration within fiction film is characterized as classical or mainstream cinema. Dominant cinema has been regarded as providing the model for modes of production and modes of representation within the film industries (Kuhn, 1982: 21). Consequently, the main focus of feminist criticism is directed at this particular branch of cinema.

Hollywood filmmaking, as the exemplary type of dominant cinema, is responsible for the establishment of the defined image and specific roles that women play in films (Johnston, 1999). The stereotypical representation of women in film is largely due to the fact that women are represented from a male perspective (Johnston, 1999). As I will show later, the classical narrative structure produces a specific meaning (Kuhn, 1982: 36). This meaning is produced by the patriarchal ideology that emphasizes the inferior status of women in relation to men. The following analysis of women's mis/representation and their position within the dominant cinema will enable me to demonstrate how Patty Jenkins uses the characters in *Monster* to create a representation that does not escape the 'normative' image of women within the dominant cinema, but rather creates a 'non-normative' representation. By using stereotypical characteristics in the construction of some of the characters, Patty

Jenkins subverts their conventional representation in order to attack the patriarchal principles of the classical narrative and the society itself.

In her article “Feminist Film Theory”, Anneke Smelik claims Claire Johnston (1999) to be one of the “first feminist critics to offer a sustained critique of stereotypes from a semiotic point of view” (Smelik, 1999: 353). Johnston suggests that classical cinema constructs an ideological image of woman “within the dominant sexist ideology” (Johnston, 1999: 33). Ideology is defined as a representational system that is viewed as ‘universal’, but is in fact a product of a specific perception created by our patriarchal society (Thornham, 1999:12). By using Roland Barthes’ notion of “myth, as a signifier of an ideology”, Johnston explores how the “image of woman” functions as a signifier in the classical cinema (Johnston, 1999: 32). For Barthes, “a sign can be emptied of its original denotative meaning and a new connotative meaning can be superimposed on it” (Johnston, 1999: 32). As Smelik (1999) points out, Johnston uses this analysis to create an important theoretical shift. Johnston views cinema not as reflection of reality, but rather as a construction of a new reality (Johnston: 1999:33). I am particularly interested in Johnston’s analysis of how the ‘woman’ as a sign is constructed as a code of conventions. This provides a model for analysis of the construction of the characters in *Monster*, where Patty Jenkins deconstructs the classical use of the sign ‘woman’. Within the dominant cinema “woman as woman” is absent from the text of the film, as she “is presented as what she represents for men” (Johnston, 1999: 33). In other words, woman’s value as a signifier is resolved through the conventions of narrative possibility. Therefore, Johnston attributes the repression

of the women in cinema to the 'law of verisimilitude'[5] that the classical cinema relies on, within the construction of its narrative (Johnston, 1999: 33).

Because the dominant cinema pretends to represent a reality through the negation of its means of production, I will analyse how this approach differs from the production of *Monster*. This is an important shift between the classical cinema conventions and the construction of the cinematic reality created by Patty Jenkins. Although *Monster* functions within the paradigms of the Hollywood mainstream cinema in terms of stars, distribution and narrative structure, it meticulously implicates elements from the art-cinema mode of narration and its reciprocated stylistic devices into its classical narrative structure. The fusion of these contradictory modes translates into the creation of a complicated and ambiguous film. I will first examine the characteristics of the dominant cinema in terms of its textual conventions and structural components, in order to juxtapose the textual models of the dominant cinema to the narrative structure of the film *Monster*. By analyzing the narrative structure, or as Johnston formulated it, the 'denotation' of the film, I will be able to establish the 'connotative' meaning of the filmic text (Johnston, 1999: 32). The analysis of the representation of the female characters is essentially a 'connotation' that derives from the basic material of the film (plot/story). Therefore, I shall first study how the narrative structure of *Monster* is constructed, in order to draw conclusions regarding the way this narrative straddles the boundary between 'non-normative' and 'normative' representation of women[6].

[5] By 'law of verisimilaritude' Johnston implies "that which determines the impression of realism" (Johnston, 1999: 33).
[6] Although the main character of the film is finally contained and punished, she manages to assert that in submitting herself she serves her own utopian libidinal drives and fantasy.

In his book *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell (1990) analyzes the fundamental principles of the classical narration. His exploration of the principles assumed by this particular mode will enable me to investigate to what extent the narrative structure of *Monster* operates within the parameters of the classical cinema narration and which structural components it uses to deviate from this model.

When discussing 'narrative structure', this paper will refer to the term adopted by the Formalist tradition (Bordwell, 1990: 17). According to Bordwell:

> The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goal. (Bordwell, 1990: 157)

This definition suggests that the classical narrative uses particular configurations for representing the story of the film and for manipulating the possibilities in which the story is told. The essential characteristics of the classical narrative[7] are psychologically defined and goal-orientated characters, whose actions follow cause-effect logic. As a classical Hollywood film, *Monster* is character-centered. Although the protagonist drives the narrative and is goal-orientated, she is not psychologically defined. In his analysis of the art cinema narration, Bordwell (1999) articulates the essential differences between the classical and non-classical mode of narration. Bordwell identifies how in relation to the character, the art cinema is classical in terms of its "psychological causation; characters and their effects on one another remain central."(Bordwell, 1999: 718) The main differentiation comes from the fact that characters within the art cinema narrative lack clear objectives, but rather

[7] Hollywood studio filmmaking of the years 1917 to 1960.

question their desires and goals. Therefore, Lee's uncertainty and constant indecisiveness in terms of her desires could be classified as a typical trait of the art cinema heroine. However, in her quest to find a purpose, a 'light in the tunnel', she grasps the opportunity to build a relationship with Selby. The attainment of such a relationship could be considered as a goal. In the beginning of the film her initial goal is set up: to find Love and to keep it. Although the development of the narrative presents a differing set of goals, they are derived as a continuation of her initial goal. Therefore, her goal to find a job and live a respectable life could be viewed as an articulation of Lee's delusional perception that she can change her life and start a 'normal' existence, which will be filled with love and social acceptance. As this goal fails, her new objective becomes to provide money for Selby and to protect her. Although the continuous shift of her goals is determined by casual and unexpected circumstances, it evolves from the classical cause-effect logic of the events. The transferring of objectives is due to one of the film's aims, which is to portray a sketch of women living in the street, a certain class of society. We could say that some of the motivations arise from within the conception of the character, while others arise through the imperative of certain ideological purposes being expressed through the film. However, even though there are some elements arising from within character and some from outside the character, difference is in a way concealed. Therefore, the contradiction of the construction of the character arises as the changing goals and the fragmented subjectivity are trapped by the immediate goal of Lee, which is to find Love. Thus, the film presents the evolution of a continuous person, by breaking this evolution into fragments. The character's ambiguity is only the first instance that represents the contradictory aspects of the narrative structure of *Monster*.

At the level of the plot, the structural analysis of *Monster* shows how the film acts as a synthesis between the classical Hollywood text and more radical modes of production and narration. Using the terms of the classical formula[8], the construction of the plot in *Monster* follows 'causality' (cause and effect). The events occurring in each scene or sequence are produced as an effect of a previous cause[9]. For example, the brutal rape of Lee premises her desire for revenge and the following chain of murders that she commits. However, the film fails on numerous occasions to use classical 'linearity'[10], because instead of continuity editing, it employs a rather drastic editing style, which I will discuss later. The main narrative strategy of *Monster* is to use classical structure in order to challenge that structure. Jenkins makes uses of the classical montage technique to construct a 'prologue' at the beginning of the film and an 'epilogue' at the end. The use of the classical bookend sequences has a twofold meaning. On the one hand the sequences are filled with the kinds of images that are most predictable within *Monster*'s genre: early snapshots of childhood abuse and sexual objectification are set against the later tearful attack of the humiliated criminal who is dominated by the rebellious anger of those about to die. On the other hand, these same images are cinematically presented using unusual stylistic devices for the genre, such as unsettling pace, the splicing of the murder scenes just as they are reaching awful climaxes of action, and loading the film with a threatening anxiety that transcends cliché. By condensing family background and juridical resolution to the very extreme ends of her picture, Jenkins uses the classical cliché that Hollywood prefers, in order to disorientate the spectator. The latter is initiated in the familiar framework of the classical text, but soon discovers that s/he is being misled by false expectations. This

[8] "The plot consists of an undisturbed stage, the disturbance, the struggle, and the elimination of the disturbance." (Bordwell, 1985: 157)
[9] This happens not just at the level of the plot, but also in terms of psychological profile.
[10] One line of action must be left suspended, which will act as a hook for the next scene.

principle is relevant also to the famous ‘equilibrium’, which is disrupted at the beginning of the classical mode of narration and is replaced by a new set of ‘equilibrium’ at the end (Kuhn, 1982: 29). The classical narrative uses the plot as a ‘retardation device’ that delays the narrative closure of the film (Todorov, 1977). *Monster* could be interpreted as classical in terms of plot structure only because of the popularized view that the commercial American cinema is meant to follow a specific set of rules that are organised within a mimetic realism. Jenkins starts her film moments before Lee meets Selby Wall and for all intents and purposes ends it with Selby's manipulative extraction of Lee's confession and her public accusation against Lee in the courtroom. Lee’s career as a killer is not only coincident with her newfound affair with Selby; they are presented as almost inextricable from one another. Selby becomes for her lover an absolute of Hope and Good, whose preservation and gratification demand Lee's vicious aim. Therefore, if the initial equilibrium of the narrative could be considered the romanticized beginning of the affair between Selby and Lee, the disturbance comes with the first rape scene. The film uses the rape as a plot device that represents the causality of the following revenge killings. At the end of the film, the equilibrium is restored in so-called classical resolution, where the killer is punished for the crimes. However, the film uses the classical schemata only as a starting point. At the same time, the classical story is told in a different way. In her article “Monstrosity by Degrees”, June Pulliam notices that *Monster* “differs from the typical serial killer narrative in that the film is told through the murderer’s eyes rather than unfolding before the audience as a crime scene in need of solving by a clever law enforcement agency” (Pulliam, 2003). Other serial killer films such as *Silence of the Lamb*s (1991) or *Se7en* (1995), represent the killers and their crimes as too “contrived to exist outside of the realm of

fiction" (Pulliam, 2003). These stylized killer narratives function with the presumption that the monstrosity is unreal and inhuman. *Monster* evokes the more frightening idea that the killing monster is human and the outrage comes from the frightening reality that the film asserts.

The specific construction of the cinematic reality in *Monster* is once again ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, Patty Jenkins manipulates the plot from Lee's subjective point of view. Thus, the narrative at moments provides us with a restricted range of knowledge, as the spectator is uncertain of the information given by the character. The self-conscious narrative is particularly relevant to the continuous voice-over that breaks the action. It coincides with the art-cinema mode of narration, where "characters retard the movement of the syuzhet by telling stories - autobiographical events (especially from childhood), fantasies and dreams." (Bordwell, 1990: 208). Hence, the film uses the notions of time and space not motivated by 'false' realism as in the classical narrative, but rather as a tool to demonstrate the character's inner motivations and thoughts. It subverts the conventional use of the cinematic codes within the classical cinema. On the other hand, there are moments where the narration is omnipresent and highly communicative. The introduction of the additional plot-line, involving Selby and her development as a character contributes to the omnipresence of the narrative. Within these scenes, Lee's subjective reality is shown from a different perspective and the spectator's knowledge is superior to that of the main protagonist. The constant shift between subjective and omnipresent narration is complimented by the additional use of cinematic codes. However, the cinematic codes and style that *Monster* uses, don't

support the famous ‘effortless’ reading and ‘verisimilitude’ of the classical text (Kuhn, 1982: 36).

As I have discussed earlier, classical cinema never shows its means of production and is therefore characterized by covering its ideological construction. It uses a set of conventional cinematic codes to enhance a specific ideological meaning that aims to convey. In conventional cinema, a specific use of mise-en-scene, photographic image and continuity editing techniques serve to confirm the male protagonist’s journey within the cinematic reality. Therefore, the denial of these tools enables the spectator to identify with the protagonist. This concept is meticulously analysed by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1999). According to Mulvey, the classical cinema stimulates the desire to look (scopophilia[11]) by incorporating constructions of voyeurism and narcissism into the narrative structure of the film and its photographic image (Mulvey, 1999). Hence, the ‘spectacle’ is an inseparable element of the conventions used by the dominant cinema. Consequently, the analysis of the conventional use of scopophilia within the dominant cinema will enable me to demonstrate how Patty Jenkins plays into the usual ways to produce pleasure by looking at another and acquire pleasure from looking at an ideal self. Mulvey argues that: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/woman.” (Mulvey, 1999: 836). The narrative structure of the classical cinema establishes the male character as the active agent, who is not only the ‘bearer of the look’, but also around whom the dramatic action unfolds. The male protagonist is conventionally constructed as the ‘ideal ego’, “the main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify” (Mulvey, 1999: 838). In opposition to the powerful active male, the female character

[11] A fundamental drive according to Freud.

assumes a passive and powerless position. ‘Woman’ is represented as an ‘image’, coded with the erotic connotative meaning ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey, 1999: 837). Her voyeuristic function in the classical narrative is dependant on the controlling gaze of the male protagonist. Mulvey indicates that the classical cinema makes use of particular, conventional visual techniques that along with the narrative structure, constructs an exclusive male gaze. Hence, the three levels of cinematic gaze (camera, character, spectator) are means to objectify the female character and position her as a voyeuristic object for the male protagonist and therefore for the spectator.

In the construction of the narrative of *Monster*, Patty Jenkins turns upside down the conventional binary of activity and passivity. The protagonist is no longer the powerful ‘male’, but a ‘female’ who is driving the unfolding of the action. In *Monster*, the gaze is constructed on multiple levels. At moments Lee controls the gaze. Therefore, the spectator fails to consider her as an erotic object, but is supposed to identify with her. However, a full identification is impossible, as Lee is not built as the ‘ideal ego’ from the Lacanian ‘mirror stage’. Although she is powerful, physically as well as psychologically, she is far from the perfect and complete character that the spectator could identify with. This is particularly valid for the moments where Lee expresses unmotivated aggression and repulsive behaviour. The ‘narcissistic’ identification, an essential mechanism of the classical cinema is plausible only in the scenes where Lee is portrayed as victim (the rape scene, the quest to find a job). Hence, this is only the first instance where the cinematic construction of *Monster* abolishes the canonical use of scopophilia of the classical cinema, as a mean to satisfy completely male desires in its conventional use. It also threatens the conventional ‘safe’ position of the spectator. Not only is his narcissistic impulse threatened, as it is simultaneously provoked and destroyed, but also his voyeuristic drive is challenged.

Because, the female is no longer constructed as the classical erotic object, the notion of spectacle in *Monster* is subverted. As in the classical narrative, the female character is an erotic object for the characters within the story, yet the spectator is challenged to see her completely from this position. Not only does the spectator fail to identify with her as s/he is supposed to do (she is the active protagonist), but also the spectator is in an inadequate position to objectify her as a sexual image because Lee is unattractive, masculine and aggressive.

Monster does not negate scopophilia as an essential drive in the construction of the narrative. Rather, the film is creating a different kind of curious gaze. The knowledge of the spectator that he is observing a demonic, ugly woman who is in fact played by a glamorous Hollywood beauty plays upon her or his voyeuristic gaze. Nevertheless, the film subverts the conventional notions of passive/active, as well as narcissistic identification and voyeuristic pleasure essential for the classical cinema. The representation of the 'woman' is no longer the objectified sexual traditional image[12]. As I have argued, *Monster* uses the classical narration in terms of the character's psychological causality and cause-effect construction of the plot. However, it fails to negate its means of production as a technical mechanism in cinematically conveying its meaning. *Monster* doesn't hide its means of production (stylistic editing, informal mise-en-scene, unconventional camera framing).

The question of spectacle is complex in relation to this film. A theorist like Claire Johnston could argue that because of her masculine features, Lee could be considered as another example of the negation of the woman and the 'female voice', as the

[12] Because the majority of the critiques on the classical cinema have been written a few decades ago, there is a certain alteration of the spectator's contemporary perception regarding cinematic 'pleasure' and 'identification'. One could suggest that the forensic TV shows and reality TV inform and structure the 21st century viewer's visual pleasure rather than the conventional Hollywood narrative.

protagonist is holding the male gaze (Johnston, 1999: 33). Although this is a plausible interpretation, in the next chapter I will discus the issue of representation more extensively. When analysing the female protagonist in *Monster* in order to demonstrate her alternative or subversive representation, I have to take into consideration some of her key characteristics: masculine, aggressive, a prostitute, a serial killer and sexual orientation. Therefore, I will take further the analysis of the notion 'de-specularizing', by analysing the notion of 'spectacle' from different perspectives, particularly from the perspective of feminist film criticism.

In the first part of this chapter, I focused my discussion around the narrative structure of the film. I have used Kuhn's (1982) argument that "classical Hollywood cinema produces narrative as it produces meaning" (Kuhn, 1982: 36). My present focus point will be to analyze how genre, star and auteur structures in *Monster*, generate additional meaning. However, as Patrick Phillips (1999) outlines: "In choosing to focus on gender, star and auteur studies, it is impossible to isolate them from a study of institution, form and audience" (Phillips, 1999: 164). Therefore, I will assume different approaches in analyzing *Monster*, in order to explore how the film functions in the realm of Hollywood, while it produces an ambiguous reading that could be interpreted as feminist.

Monster, with a budget of only $5 million, is clearly a product of the 'New' Hollywood, including its independent producers and two major Hollywood stars that are essential for the 'winning' of a financial, marketing and distributing 'package' (Phillips, 1999: 162). As it was the director's debut for Patty Jenkins, the 'well-known director' was missing as an essential element. However, the 'package' benefited from another crucial element, it is 'based on a true life story' (Phillips, 1999: 162), which

subject, Aileen Wuornos, had already been exploited in several other filming projects. The story of the so-called 'first female serial killer' was central to the television version *Overkill* (1992) and the two documentaries *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992), and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003) by Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill.

> While the documentaries explore the failures of social and legal systems in order to sort out Wuornos' convoluted story (her childhood abuse, her mental illness, her exploitation by tabloids, courts, and individuals), the biopics predictably focus on personal tragedies and crises. To its credit, Jenkins' film, which only occasionally resorts to melodrama, doesn't show Aileen to be a "monster" without context. Instead, it presents her descent into violence and madness as a process as frightening to her as to you. (Fuchs, 2004)

The critics, analysis and reviews on *Monster* have been predominantly orientating their attention on the issue of authenticity, asking whether the story truthfully follows the actual events and characters:

> Ironically, *Monster* takes a true but unbelievable tale and shapes it into a semi-fictional but believable film. As this, it works pretty well. But my concern is that the general public will mistake the *Monster* version for Wuornos's story, which would be a disservice to both. *Monster* is a good movie that's based on a true story. Aileen Wuornos *was* the true story. Both are worth contemplating, but they shouldn't be confused with one another (MacLeod, 2004)

Although this thesis is not focusing on the 'truthfulness' of *Monster* in relation to the real story, it is necessary to point out the concern that most critics have towards this issue. The major criticism that the film instils, however, is in relation to the artistic pretensions in the creation of an alternative (avant-guard) cinematic text and the final package that follows the guidelines of a successful Hollywood product. As a critic pointed out: "The film demands the audience figures of a Hollywood film, while asking for the respect of a decent low-budget indie film". (Bull, 2003). A key factor for the success of *Monster* is the 'unrecognizable' physical transformation of Charlize

Theron. Her personification[13] has been debated, as it incorporates elements of, but at the same time uses the so-called 'fashionable' trend that the Academy has glorified in the past years. The latest Best Actress awards provide evidence that the Academy type is a glamorous beauty who is playing an unrecognizable character with all kinds of surface accessories. Examples of that trend[14] are: the cross-dressed Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), the poverty-row Hally Berry in *Master's Ball* (2001) and Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* (2002).

> It is a move that reeks of the kind of anti - vanity Hollywood loves - make yourself hideous and pathetic in a "serious" film and you can swan down the red carpet in couture on your way to your date with a statuette (Gardner, 2004).

The film is a definite product of Hollywood, but its ambiguous playfulness with different genres and styles makes it interesting for analysis that might be contradictory at moments. The film team uses this approach as a subversion of a profound political conflict.

Genre:

The traditional Hollywood genre film "exists as a sort of tacit 'contract' between filmmakers and audience" (Schatz, 1999: 642). The genre film is a system of conventions that deals with actual problems, the resolution of which is predictable. Genre films give a certain kind of security by providing 'imaginary solutions' to complicated real-life issues. (Phillips, 1999: 166) Hence, the different genres have a specific 'iconography' and 'visual signifiers' that the audience is familiar with and which it uses to identify the particular genre. The filmmaker organizes the specific

[13] The identity of the off-screen beauty and its relation to the on-screen character.
[14] The transformation of Charlize Theron is different, as her character is portrayed as repugnant. The other actresses that I will mention are still attractive and desirable.

‘signs’ of a genre into a specific paradigm that s/he uses to assemble into a final construction that inevitably follows ‘rules’. (Phillips, 1999: 167). However, because of the continuous social and economic evolution, the genre spectrum has been transformed progressively and a new “postmodern Hollywood” has been created (Phillips, 1999: 175/176). Therefore, as Susan Hayward observes: “a clear generic definition cannot immediately be imposed on a film even if a genre can be defined by a set of codes and conventions” (Hayward, 1996: 161).

As a contemporary film, *Monster* is a production of the ‘New Hollywood’, where films since the 60`s are a mixture of classical Hollywood cinema, art-cinema devices and genre pictures. (Bordwell, 1990: 232). As a complex, unconventional film, the narrative structure of *Monster* successfully merges different modes of narration into a coherent mode of representation that I would call Postmodern Cinema. In his analysis of the ‘postmodern Hollywood’, Patrick Phillips (1999) examines the tendency of the contemporary filmmaking to create a ‘hybrid’, ‘knowing’ films that play with different genres, as opposed to the traditional genre film that supports ‘authentic’ values (Phillips, 1999: 177). In “American Cinema/ American Culture”, John Belton (1994) expresses the view that the new wave of postmodern Hollywood filmmakers are struggling to produce new meanings, as “in transmitting the reality of their social and cultural context, they produce only its incoherence” (Belton 1994: 305-10 in Phillips, 1999: 176). This aspect is relevant for the construction of the cinematic reality in *Monster* that uses fragmentation and diverse settings, costumes and performance styles in order to portray the constantly changing reality of the lower-class (marginalized) social group that Lee is part of. In the construction of *Monster*, Jenkins makes use of ‘bricolage’ (Phillips, 1999: 176), by mixing elements of

different genres, and 'intertextuality' (ibid), by obviously referring to already existing cinematic texts. In terms of genre determination, *Monster* could be classified as a mixture of 'woman's film', 'lesbian serial killer', 'melodrama', 'romance' and 'social satire'. Consequently, its 'hybrid generic identity' is characterized by "its appropriation of signifiers from an even broader range of genres" (ibid).

The openness of *Monster* with elements with different genres becomes evident in the construction of the narrative structure that does not follow a repetitive formula or a system of conventions, specific for these particular genres. On the contrary, it uses the stereotypes that are typical of the 'woman's film' or the 'lesbian serial-killer' just to subvert them. To characterize *Monster* as a 'woman's film' would only be possible if we take into consideration that this is the major genre where a woman is the protagonist and it addresses female issues. Nevertheless, this particular genre represents women in their traditional position under patriarchy, namely as passive figures (Williams, 1974: 703). *Monster* uses some aspects of the construction of pathos in the woman's film, but these moments are so contradicted by the rest of the film that they are employed sporadically, rather then consistently. *Monster* is obviously structured from a female perspective, with a central female character that is self-sacrificing in the name of Love. The stereotypical pathos of the mother who endures sacrifice and loss is present in the film (Williams, 1974: 705). However, the stereotype is subverted in such a way that at moments it is unrecognizable. Lee's character doesn't coincide with the typical mother figure. If she relates to such an association, it comes across only through her desire to take care of Selby. However, Jenkins exploits the notion of pathos with a specific aim: to create a level of sympathy with the character of Lee. Furthermore, she uses some of the stereotypical

representation of the female ‘victim’ from the horror film to reinforce the empathy of the spectator. An explicit example of the traditional image of the “tortured and terrorized woman” (Williams, 1974: 705) is the representation of the suffering Lee in the first rape scene. As I have pointed out, this scene is constructed as a plot device that disrupts the equilibrium of the narrative. Therefore, the intentional portrayal of Lee as the classical female ‘victim’, serves only to demonstrate how this position can be subverted. This concept is continued in the appropriation of elements from the ‘serial-killer’ subgenre. The film represents Lee’s monstrosity as a hybrid between the typical female from the slasher film, “always represented as psychotic” (Creed, 1993: 126) and “the castrating woman - usually a sympathetic figure” (ibid). The narrative switches between the two representations in order to reinforce the ambiguous interpretation of the character’s violent actions that are simultaneously justified and repulsive.

The film surprisingly incorporates social satire into its tragic narrative. In the sequence where Lee looks for ‘a real job’, the spectator is amused by the repeated theme where a marginalized person is trying to fit into the social order. However, the representation of this stereotype again is not conventional. Lee is not the sexy mother in a mini skirt (Julia Roberts in *Erin Brokovich*). If we presume the ‘intertextuality’ of *Monster*, we could assume that the sequence rather ‘talks’ in an ironic manner back to that film. By dressing Lee in ‘old fashion’ clothes (which in itself provokes laughter), Jenkins emphasizes the sexist social reality. An attractive woman, even without education can manage to get a job, but the rough physical uneasiness of Lee could never be a ‘passport’ for social integration.

The film plays with different genres and themes, incorporated within the narrative structure of the film in order to produce a 'narrative meaning'. The latter could be defined as the character's struggle to integrate in society. When taking into consideration that the genre film provides "an array of ideological strategies for negotiating social conflicts" (Schatz: 1999: 650), it is necessary to examine the ideological framework in which the classical Hollywood films function. This will enable me to demonstrate how *Monster* functions in the realms of the ideology produced by the generic narratives, in order to portray the contradictions and unresolved tension generated by such a position. Hence, I will refer to Wood's (1999) article "Ideology, Genre, Auteur" to examine how Jenkins exposes the American capitalist ideology in order to subvert the values and assumptions that it inherits. Wood (1999) elaborates a 'list of components' that defines the 'American capitalist ideology' that is "embodied and reinforced by the classical Hollywood cinema" (Wood, 1999: 669). There is a striking correlation between Wood's traditional ideological components and the way in which the film handles them. Capitalism in its essence is "the right of ownership, private enterprise, personal initiative; the settling of the land." (Wood, 1999: 669). *Monster* portrays Lee's journey in striving for these American ideals. In its essence, the character aspires for Love and an established relationship with Selby. This is the first instance where the film subverts the ideological romantic ideal that is conventionally presumed to be heterosexual. Nevertheless, the film shows Lee's romantic aspirations to be dependant on the materialistic realization of acquiring practical commodities to ensure such objectives. As the character is deprived of any legal means of obtaining the basic commodities, such as a car, home and money, she acquires them forcefully disregarding any Law or moral principles. The film, therefore, portrays how the capitalist ideology is

accountable for the degradation of a human being that is prepared to do anything (killing, stealing) just to ensure the American dream. The film destroys the American myth that the "the more oppressed you are, the happier you are" (Wood, 1999: 670), as well as the mythological image of "America as the land where everyone is or can be happy" (ibid). The film plays with the notion of happiness throughout the narrative. Lee is represented as a naïve dreamer that believes in the 'American dream' despite her disturbed existence. Jenkins` introduction of the ironic juxtaposition between dreams and reality is a creative tool to criticize the unrealistic expectations that the dominant ideology creates. The film suggests that these expectations are partly responsible for Lee's monstrous mutation.

As genre films are easy to read and comprehend, because of their familiarity, the desire to label *Monster* a genre film is understandable. It provides a familiar historical background for the spectator, who is used to established cinematic codes, conventions and formulae. As Schatz (1999) points out in "Film genre and Genre film", genre films are characterized by a 'generic conflict'[15] that has a cultural and social basis and which ideologically threatens the established order (Schatz, 1999: 647). The resolution of this conflict involves the elimination of the threat and re-establishment of the social order and values (Schatz, 1999: 647). The 'generic conflict' in *Monster* could be described as Lee vs. Social Order. However, the protagonist of *Monster* is not psychologically static. Schatz (1999) describes the generic character as the "physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world view, of a predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture" (Schatz, 1999: 647). The psychological evolution of Lee is transparent within the evolvement of the narrative. As I have

[15] Depending of the particular genre this conflict could be: individual/community, man/woman/, order/authority.

shown, she is represented as the ‘castrated’, homophobic woman striving for men’s adoration in the beginning of the film, just to become the ‘castrating’ lesbian that resents men as the narrative develops.

The categorization of *Monster* as a genre film, functioning in the parameters of the Hollywood system, has benefited the film in terms of funding, distribution and public awareness. Jenkins describes how the film profited by the Hollywood conventions:

> This movie so strangely has benefited from the very same things that are the most irritating. Everything that is bad about how it sounds also helped me at some point. Like, it only got funded because of 'lesbian serial killer'. You know? And the reason everyone wanted to see it was because Charlize got fat. So it's been this weird thing where the very things that are the most maddening have been the things that got the movie seen. "Me being a 'female film-maker' and it being a 'woman's story' is a completely irritating way for me to look at it. But it was a useful thing to defer to. I could say, 'Hey, don't try to tell me how to do this; I'm a woman, right? And Charlize is a woman. So we know what we're doing, this is how we're going to tell the story.' (Aitkenhead, 2004)

As the film is an ambiguous mix of the ‘New Hollywood’ playfulness with different genres, art-cinema devices and feminist postulates, its interpretation and analysis demand controversial readings and provoke debates around its intentions.

Auteur and Star:

The auteur theory[16] has been a controversial issue within film studies, because of its allegation that the director is the leading productive force in the creation of a film. As filmmaking is a “collaborative production process which involves many creative people”[17] (Phillips, 1999: 196), it is very difficult to determine which creative output has the major impact on the final product. The auteur theory suggests that the elements generated by the creative team “exist only as ‘potential’ until mobilised and

[16] Francois Truffault conceptualized the auteur theory in 1954 in his essay “On a Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” in Cahiers du cinema (Braudy, Cohen (eds.), 1999: 510)
[17] Scriptwriters, actors, music composers, set designers, etc

made coherent within a meaning structure with a unitary identity" (Phillips, 1999: 197). The figure that unifies these elements is presumed to be the director of the film.

In analysing the creation of *Monster* from an auteur theory perspective, the correlation between creative limitations and freedom comes to the foreground. According to Patty Jenkins, her main creative battle was around the ascription of sympathy:

> The film makes no attempt to obscure Wuornos's guilt after the first killing; as the shootings progress, in fact, they grow increasingly senseless. As a creative decision, this was unpopular with many people involved in the film, who wanted to make Wuornos "more sympathetic". "They wanted to not show the last murder [Wuornos shot a passerby who only stopped to give her a lift]. They wanted to tone down anything questionable about her behaviour. More sympathetic meant less guilty - the very simplistic way that Hollywood likes to do these things." (Aitkenhead, 2004)

"If the auteur theory means to indicate where the center of a film's greatest interest lies" (Braudy, Cohen (eds.), 1999: 513), Jenkins` interest as a filmmaker was to create a cinematic portrayal of a character that is as much of a sinner and killer as she is a victim. "The question is: can we have sympathy for the circumstances of someone's life? That's what I was interested in". (Jenkins in Aitkenhead, 2004). Jenkins realizes her creative intentions of portraying a complex character who simultaneously repulses and provokes empathy by ascribing her own 'signature' as a filmmaker[18]. She aims to create a unique film by imposing a specific style on the film. The style follows the Hollywood conventions while implementing more avant-garde techniques. As a first

[18] What I think that what it might be about is that people assumed that I would deny and that I would make it this very sympathetic portrayal where you would say that it was all in self defence and she had no choice. What was important to me was to exercise tremendous sympathy for the sinner and never forgive the sins. So it was important for me to never back away from the fact that she killed people who never deserved to die and she killed them in cold blood. At the beginning of the movie she encounters a killer and by the end of the movie she's the killer. Those were my rules and I think that I wanted to see if there was a way for people to find humanity and sympathy for a person without denying that she did something unforgivable (Jenkins in Murphy)

time director, she is meant to produce an impressive final product that will assure her a place within the American film guild. However, as films depend on box office success, Jenkins inevitably had to make some compromises in order to obtain the approval of distributors. As the film was independently produced, Jenkins had the opportunity to stand up to her artistic beliefs as much as possible.

> I fought a battle with myself for two years to make sure that I believed in what I was doing and that we were never shifting anything that I morally believed was true to make money. And so as a result of that I actually feel amazing because it has brought back a lot of my faith that the audience is more sophisticated than we think they are and that the passion that we put into this film is hopefully coming back off the screen. (Murphy)

The freedom in the creation of *Monster* was amplified by the fact that the lead actress, Charlize Theron, was also a co-producer of the production. Not only was she the ‘face’ of the film, but she participated in the creative process as an auteur of the final product. Theron`s performance of Lee provoked controversial reactions. Some critics supported her “unrecognizable physical transformation” (Gardner), others accused her of becoming “a caricature as opposed to an actress simply using her own acting abilities” (Bull). The film in itself has simultaneously benefited and suffered from Theron`s interpretation of the character. As the majority of the audiences have been aware of the actual physical appearance and persona of the actress, their perception and understanding of the film have been influenced by the ‘image’ of the real-life sexy and feminine woman that only performs this monstrous creature on the screen. Jenkins justifies her choice to cast Theron from an institutional point of view:

> People have asked why she didn't cast a plainer actor. Hollywood prefers to "ugly up" its beauties (Kidman, Cameron Diaz in Being John Malkovich) than to cast to type - a preference some critics consider distasteful. "People would say, 'Why didn't you cast an actress who looked like Aileen? 'Well, I looked for someone who's a professional actor, who's amazing, who looks like Aileen,

> and the funny thing is, they're not out there. Hollywood is driven by beautiful faces. Always has been. As a result, the professional actors who are working on a regular basis are attractive. In order to get a movie financed, you need a working actor, and that is not going to be a woman who looks like Aileen." (Aitkenhead, 2004)

Casting an actress like Theron has a great impact on the reading of the film. It sets an additional level of meaning to the film. On the one hand, Jenkins wants to emphasize the psychological and emotional aspects regarding performances, messages and the meaning of the film. As she justifies herself:

> More than anything rather than looking for someone who just looked just like Aileen I was looking for someone who I thought would be brave enough to be vulnerable you know and still find a way to love the person that she was to play - to both sell the most vulnerable moment and to truly be intimidating. (Murphy)

Jenkins decision on the acting style regarding the part of Lee, suggests her desire to implement Strasberg`s 'Method' of performing. (Phillips, 1999: 188). The 'Method' is set around the "phenomenon of the star-as-actor", which involves "the star personifier appeared to become the actor impersonator" (ibid). This approach becomes even more evident, because of the film's publicity media strategy to reveal the fact that Charlize's mother killed her father in defence when the actress was young. However, in the traditional use of the acting 'Method' the spectators engage effortlessly in the "suspending disbelief", as "the relationship between the star (signifier) and the role (signified) appears 'natural' because the characteristics of the star persona are suited to those required by the role" (Phillips, 1999: 189). In the case of Charlize Theron performing Lee (a character complicated by the fact that it was a real person), the spectators are so distracted by the mismatching and unrealistic combination between performer and role that their attention is primarily focused on this unusual presence. Therefore, the scopophilia created by the film is set around the

binary Madonna/whore or Charlize/Lee. Even though this might not have been the intention of Jenkins, the spectators are so petrified by the monstrosity of Lee (the character) that their only reassurance can come from the fact that they know that this could not be a real woman. As the spectators watch the film, they consciously juxtapose the woman on screen with the beautiful 'real' persona of the actress.

Therefore, while playing the rules of the classical 'Hollywood' film, *Monster* presents additional controversial meanings that mirror the complicity of contemporary perceptions and worldview about gender, relationships, power and aggression. Consequently, I would consider the possibility that in *Monster*, Jenkins does not exclusively construct a non-normative representation of women and aggression, but rather is playing to, and into, the classical, heteronormative and patriarchal conceptions of women and aggression. Within the next chapters, I will explore the various different angles and interpretations that the film *Monster* offers.