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

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the stereotypical image of woman's aggression that entails an emotional outburst provoked by extreme circumstances. However, Jenkins` desire to create an objective portrayal of Lee's actions, (even though from Lee's subjective point of view) leads to the complex insinuation that the character progressively undertakes a more instrumental predisposition towards her violent actions. Jenkins` assumption that the female offender in the film uses aggressiveness intentionally, aiming at certain rewards, serves as a direct challenge of the established gender presumptions concerning the representation of aggression. In her book *Out of Control*, Ann Cambell (1993) explores the difference in the way the sexes understand and express aggression. In her analysis, she depicts a connection between aggression and control, as for women she considers it be a "failure of self-control", whilst for men "it is the imposing of control over others" (Cambell, 1993: 1). Cambell defines the gender differentiation towards an aggressive behaviour as exclusively expressive for women, as opposed to instrumental for men:

> For women, the threat comes from within; for men it comes from others. For women, the aim is a cataclysmic release of accumulated tension; for men, the reward is power over another person, a power that can be used to boost self-esteem or to gain social and material benefits. (Cambell, 1993: 7)

The representation of female aggression in *Monster*, through the character of Lee, aims to elide this ideologically imposed gender distinction in order to destabilize the existing presumptions about gender identity. The structure of the film suggests a connection between Lee's instrumental approach regarding the violent killings and her position as a breadwinner and provider for Selby, which in its essence is a male role within a relationship. The construction of the character of Lee and her criminal behavior follows the masculine hypothesis of female criminality. However, Patty

Jenkins emphasizes the sociological implications that determined the degree of 'masculinity' in Lee. Therefore, while analyzing the representation of the violent behavior of Lee, it is more appropriate to refer to Adler's thesis, which suggests a relation between female criminality and woman's entry into the workforce. Adler suggests that the more gender-blind opportunities afforded to women, the more they would adopt masculine traits and attitudes:

> The trend in the last two decades has been towards female adoption of male attributes, traits, vocations, prerogatives etc., as a means of raising their status also…Girls are involved in more drinking, stealing, gang activity, and fighting-behavior in keeping with their adoption of male roles. (Adler, 1975: 95; 106)

By establishing an alternative model to the dynamics of a traditional relationship, Jenkins emphasizes the connection between the socio-economic situation of women and their gender identification. She interweaves in the script Lee's pressure to assure a financial security for Selby (fulfilling a masculine role of provider), while escaping any further male submission and victimization. In the scene after the second killing, Selby's enthusiasm and glorifying reaction to the sight of the money that Lee throws on the bed, exemplifies the materialistic conception of the world that this child-looking woman has. Jenkins meticulously develops the romantic relationship between Selby and Lee in order to portray the dynamic interactions within a relationship. The narrative presents their daily exchanges in such a way that it enables the viewer to associate the events in the screen with her/his own experience. By casting Christina Ricci in the part of Selby, Jenkins wants to emphasize the power and assertiveness that an innocent and naïve person (in this case a woman, but it can also be a man) can have on her/his provider. As Jenkins justifies her choice:

> As Charleze was my number one choice so was Christina. I knew that what I needed out of the girlfriend¹s role was to be someone who instantly was

> understandably young, naïve, innocent but also incredibly wilful. Both of these characters had these wild extremes which had to be put together. The reason that I finally ended up saying that we have to cast the two best actresses and hope that this dynamic works is that Charleze and I met with several other actresses and so many of the women who were able to read the naïve part their energy just disappeared next to Charleze and I would look at them and I would say that I would never believe that that woman could make this woman do anything. Christina can look like a child but you don't want to fuck with her (Murphy, 2004).

Through the relationship between Selby and Lee, Jenkins cinematically portrays how Love can be a condition, but not a guarantee, for a successful relationship in any capitalist, money-driven society. Jenkins intentionally includes the surname of Selby within the script: Wall. This surname serves as a metaphor of `final resort', 'end of possibilities' (especially for Lee), but also suggests some character traits as: stubbornness, inflexibility and roughness.

Hence, the representation of female aggression in *Monster* has the binary implication of reinforcing stereotypical portrayals of women's outrage, while challenging fundamental views on the roots and expressions of such violent performances. Jenkins constructs Lee as an embodied image of antagonism of gender inequities, social order and psychological norms. Through Lee, Jenkins challenges stigmatized representations of female aggression; by creating a character that seems so 'alive' that it is impossible to dismiss the controversial impact that it has on the viewer.

CONCLUSION

Monster is a story about one human's life. In this paper, I have critically analyzed how Jenkins uses Lee's story to convey her creative vision about love, happiness and disruption. In its essence, it is a film that reaches the soul of the viewers who are not afraid of the truth. As the narrative is based on a real-life person (Aileen Wuornos), it drives the viewer to perceive the fictional version of her story from different perspectives. The reading of this film thus amplifies the specific perceptions of the viewers. *Monster* is an ambiguous multiplication of personal growth and pain. In order to understand this film, the viewer should have grasped the essence and meaning of life.

> Well, there were all of these beliefs when studios saw the film to buy them to distribute it everybody said across the board we love the film but no one will go see a movie about an ugly woman who is unsympathetic...no one. Or everybody thought that it was going to be a very tiny success in the cities, which is the most educated environment. The most touching thing that has happened with this film is that the majority of our money has been made with audiences who are over 50 in the most rural communities. That brings tears to my eyes because it makes me realise that there is something about loss and compromise and life that they know that younger people don't. I feel if that is where the money comes from and that they haven¹t seen a movie that they haven¹t felt represented by before then that¹s a beautiful thing and it sends a great message to Hollywood. (Jenkins interviewed by Murphy, 2004)

Jenkins portrays Lee, as the ultimate personification of human's struggle to get closure with her/himself, and reach her/his emotional boundaries with no fear or prejudices. Lee is portrayed as a woman who embraces her weaknesses and fears in order to overcome her painful past. However, the path towards reaching her dreamed happiness is not smooth. In her resentment towards men, she became a mirror image of her greatest enemy.

Jenkins' film is a classical tale of the 'Other' that has no chance to be accepted by society. In this paper I analysed Patty Jenkins' film *Monster* (2003) in terms of its representation of female aggression. I have explored the ambiguous representation of women in the film, as they are simultaneously conforming to the classical image and subverting it.

In Chapter one, I looked at Johnston's (1999) views on the classical use of the sign 'woman'. She provides an interesting insight into how 'woman' as a sign is constructed as a code of convention within the classical narrative. I have used Johnston's analysis in order to examine how Jenkins subverts the conventional representation of women in *Monster*, in order to attack the patriarchal principles of the classical narrative and the society itself. Even though the characters conform to the 'normative' image of women, Jenkins uses them to create a 'non-normative' representation. For this purpose, in the first part of this chapter I examined the characteristics of the dominant cinema in terms of its textual conventions and structural components by using Bordwell's (1990) analysis of the classical narrative. After I juxtaposed the narrative structure of *Monster* to that of the classical narrative, I concluded that *Monster* functions in the realm of the classical narrative, but produces a different meaning by not hiding its means of production, often adhering to art-cinema devices regarding the use of mise-en-scene, editing, camera and lighting. Drawing on Mulvey's (1999) analysis on scopophilia, I have also examined how *Monster* doesn't negate it, but rather creates an altered curious gaze. I also looked at how the film subverts the conventional notions of passive/active, as well as narcissistic identification and voyeuristic pleasure essential for the classical cinema. Therefore in Chapter Two, I have taken this argument further in order to demonstrate

how Jenkins uses the heteronormative and patriarchal principles in order to restructure them and create a female representation that functions within a feminist context. In order to clarify the use of the term 'ideology', I have applied Althusser's (1971) analysis on the structure of society. I have used his concept of 'interpellation' to portray Jenkins' creative intentions to emphasize the social context of the character's experience within the narrative of the film. As a result, *Monster* is a cinematic text that critiques American society which, as a typical bourgeois and patriarchal society, rejects bad individuals, especially when they are women. As I have mentioned, *Monster* is ambiguous with regard to female representation. I exhibit its ambiguity by referring to Creed's (1993) analysis of the portrayal of aggressive women in film. Lee is represented as a compound image of the castrated, phallic and castrating woman, which makes her human. In the last chapter, I have expanded my analysis of Lee's representation regarding her manifestation of aggression. Therefore, I looked at the historical portrayal of female aggression within the Hollywood cinema and Neroni's (2005) outlook on the stereotypical image of aggressive women in films. I have come to the conclusion that Jenkins constructs Lee's character as a symbiotic image of female stereotypes in order to subvert them. By using the elements of the classical mode of narration and representation, Jenkins' critique on them becomes even stronger as she is able to satirize them. Following the position of the social-learning theory (Bandura, 1976), where patterns of behaviour are attributed to the social influences of the individual, I have been able to clarify Jenkins' view on the roots of Lee's aggressive behaviour. As a filmmaker, Jenkins does not undermine or forgive the monstrous aggressive actions of Lee, but she understands them, even without being able to forgive them.

To facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the study that I have endeavoured to provide, I have supplied my own interpretation of *Monster* with reference to the theories I mentioned throughout the entire paper.