

**Michelle D. Wise**

Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN

## “You’ll never meet someone like me again”: Patty Jenkins’s *Monster* as Rogue Cinema

# ABSTRACT

---

Film is a powerful medium that can influence audience’s perceptions, values and ideals. As filmmaking evolved into a serious art form, it became a powerful tool for telling stories that require us to re-examine our ideology. While it remains popular to adapt a literary novel or text for the screen, filmmakers have more freedom to pick and choose the stories they want to tell. This freedom allows filmmakers to explore narratives that might otherwise go unheard, which include stories that feature marginal figures, such as serial killers, as sympathetic protagonists, which is what director Patty Jenkins achieves in her 2003 film *Monster*. Charlize Theron’s transformation into and performance as Aileen Wuornos, and Jenkins’s presentation of the subject matter, make this film an example of rogue cinema. In addition, Aileen Wuornos is portrayed as a clear example of the rogue character. This character trope frequently defies social standards, suffers from past trauma, is psychologically complex, and is often exiled. As a prostitute and social outcast, Aileen Wuornos exists on the fringes of society and rejects the hegemonic power structure and later heteronormativity of society, which makes her a rogue figure. While there are several aspects to consider when analyzing Jenkins’s film, my intention is to argue that this film is an example of rogue cinema because of its content. In order to accomplish this task, I examine Theron’s bodily transformation and her performance as Wuornos. Furthermore, I look at how Jenkins handles the depiction of romantic love and gendered violence and argue that her treatment of this content renders this film rogue.

**Keywords:** lesbian, homosexuality, gender, violence, Hollywood.

---

Film is a powerful medium that can influence audience's perceptions, values and ideals. As filmmaking evolved into a serious art form, it became a powerful tool for telling stories that require us to re-examine our ideology. While it remains popular to adapt a literary novel or text for the screen, filmmakers have more freedom to pick and choose the stories they want to tell. This freedom allows filmmakers to explore narratives that might otherwise go unheard, which include stories that feature marginal figures, such as serial killers, as sympathetic protagonists, which is what director Patty Jenkins achieves in her 2003 film *Monster*. Charlize Theron's transformation into and performance as Aileen Wuornos, and Jenkins's presentation of the subject matter, make this film an example of rogue cinema. In addition, Aileen Wuornos is portrayed as a clear example of the rogue character. This character trope frequently defies social standards, suffers from past trauma, is psychologically complex, and is often exiled. As a prostitute and social outcast, Aileen Wuornos exists on the fringes of society and rejects the hegemonic power structure and later heteronormativity of society, which makes her a rogue figure. While there are several aspects to consider when analyzing Jenkins's film, my intention is to argue that this film is an example of rogue cinema because of its content. In order to accomplish this task, I examine Theron's bodily transformation and her performance as Wuornos. Furthermore, I look at how Jenkins handles the depiction of romantic love and gendered violence and argue that her treatment of this content renders this film rogue.

While characters in literary texts and films can go rogue, so can filmmakers with their films. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, rogue can mean "[w]ithout control or discipline; behaving abnormally or dangerously; erratic, unpredictable" ("Rogue"). Some directors make precarious choices with their projects and create films that compel us to identify with characters who disrupt our definitions of good/evil and beautiful/ugly. Generally, mainstream films follow a familiar and formulaic structure, contain conventional plot devices, and feature characters who are easily labeled as either good/bad or beautiful/ugly. In rogue cinema, directors challenge our perception of these binaries, make risky decisions, and present us with stories that are often unpredictable. Also, in rogue cinema, characters oppose categorization and push us to gaze beyond these constructions while simultaneously forcing us to question and redefine them. By its very nature, rogue cinema defies labeling, but it is something we usually recognize when we see it. Jenkins's film *Monster* is rogue not only because of the subject matter but because it also required an actress to be stripped of her beauty and forced her to rely on her craft in order to accurately portray Aileen Wuornos.

Americans have a macabre fascination with criminal behavior, and movies about serial killers have captivated filmgoers for decades; however, many of those films still adhered to conventional plot devices with the line between good/bad clearly drawn. When Patty Jenkins's 2003 movie *Monster* was released, audiences flocked to theaters for a different reason. Jenkins's bio-pic focuses on the life story of infamous female serial killer Aileen Wuornos, who was "one of the few women killers to gain widespread fame and notoriety," and "was inaccurately dubbed "America's first female serial killer"" ("America's First"). Theron's performance as Aileen Wuornos disrupts common notions about beauty, romantic love and gendered violence. Furthermore, Jenkins's movie is rogue because it blurs two conventional constructions: beautiful/ugly and good/bad. By doing so, the film takes us into a nebulous area where these binaries are deconstructed. In addition, it humanizes a serial killer by showing her struggle for love and social acceptance. A compelling aspect of rogue cinema is that films in this category are often more complex and thought-provoking, and often reveal a truth that we immediately recognize but do not fully understand. In the case of this film, Wuornos is portrayed as a victim who longs to escape her circumstance as an abused prostitute and gain social acceptance. As Bryan J. McCann argues, "*Monster* invites audiences to sympathize with a woman for whom conventional wisdom says they should feel no sympathy, and to regard her violence as something other than anathema to the norms of civil (i.e. patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist) society" (5–6). Furthermore, the film "asked its viewers to consider the kind of world that produces an Aileen Wuornos" (McCann 2). Also, Jenkins's film is successful because it depicts a "criminal case that raised potent questions about gendered violence" (McCann 3). While the film follows and adheres to a traditional storytelling structure, it can be argued that it is an example of rogue cinema because of the subject matter it tackles and the issues it raises.

### FEMALE BEAUTY AND PHYSICAL TRANSFORMATION

The relationship between Hollywood and feminine beauty is complicated and problematic. Hollywood producers and directors have defined and standardized ideals of femininity and female beauty. For decades, actresses altered their appearances to uphold a criterion of beauty that only exists in the fantasy world of Hollywood. Women have been objectified and criticized if they fail to meet and uphold these physical ideals. It is no secret that aspiring actresses are not only judged for their looks but are often advised to alter their physical appearances to make

themselves employable. Gorgeous actresses, such as Marilyn Monroe, soon realized that their roles in films were only meant to entertain the male gaze. Monroe, who often played the striking, dumb blonde trope, yearned to be taken seriously as a talented actress. When audiences see only one type of actress, the beautiful, attractive one, then that is how they define and measure beauty ideals.

Margaret E. Gonsoulin claims that

it is well understood that media images are not only representations of the ideals of gender, physical standards, and sexuality but are also one of the many active agents shaping these ideals . . . these ideals are intended to define the proper heterosexual, white, middle-class femininity. (1159)

Feminist scholars have argued that the female body is a site of political struggle, and that the female body is defined by and controlled by media influence. As Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury state in the introduction to their book *Written on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*,

the [female] body has, however, been at the center of feminist theory precisely because it offers no such “natural” foundation for our pervasive cultural assumptions about femininity. Indeed, there is a tension between women’s lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences. Historically, women have been determined by their bodies; their individual awakenings and actions, their pleasure and their pain compete with representations of the female body in larger social framework. (1)

As with other forms of art, when the female body is depicted in film, it becomes objectified and stereotyped. Laura Mulvey argues, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (837). The female body has commonly been displayed for the pleasure of heterosexual male viewers. As Jennifer F. Chmielewski and Megan R. Yost argue, “[n]early all women face pressure to present an idealized image of female beauty (Wolfe, 1991), and women are judged as successful in various life domains based on their ability to live up to these appearance and thinness ideals” (224). The female form, especially when it is projected onto the big screen, is trivialized, vilified and deconstructed, and feminist scholars ask questions such as what is a woman’s body, who defines it, and what “cultural meanings” are inscribed on these bodies. In

Hollywood film, actresses, such as Charlize Theron, become the cultural model for the ideal female form.

Charlize Theron, a South African and American film actress, is internationally known for her natural beauty. She has won numerous awards, including an Oscar for her performance as female serial killer Aileen Wuornos. Before she was cast, though, Theron had starred in several Hollywood films, none of which truly showcasing her artistic talent. It took a female director to see beyond Theron's natural beauty and her status as a bombshell actress to offer her a role with real gravitas.

When *Monster* was released, film critics and reviewers emphasized Charlize Theron's physical alteration into Aileen Wuornos and remarked on her uncanny resemblance to the serial killer. As Patricia Thomson states, Theron had to be transformed into an "overweight downtrodden prostitute" and calls the makeover "startling" (101). Everything about Theron's appearance was altered. According to Tanya Horeck, "the shocking disappearance of this beauty and its transformation into abject 'ugliness' are the subject of great media fascination" (148). Helen Barlow states that "CHARLIZE [sic] Theron's Oscar-winning role in *Monster*, as real-life executed serial killer Aileen Wuornos, is one of the most transforming since Robert de Niro played Jake la Motta in *Raging Bull*" (23). Theron "gained nine kilograms, has bad teeth, bad hair, bad skin, a white-trash accent and is involved in a lesbian relationship with Christina Ricci" (Barlow 23). As Bryan J. McCann argues, "*Monster* became a text primarily about a beautiful actress's voyage into the macabre, rather than a broken Florida prostitute who murdered seven men while trying to build a better life for herself and her female lover" (2). The overwhelming attention that film critics paid to Theron's physical transformation suggests that American culture's obsession with female bodies and feminine appearance overshadowed Theron's talent, as well as the underlying message of the film.

Theron underwent a bodily transformation that, Tanya Horeck argues, "has been described as 'one of the most startling transformations in cinematic history'" and is a "beauty-to-beast transformation" (147–48). Horeck states that the movie is "worth watching for the physical transformation alone—the preposterously beautiful Theron assumes an uncanny likeness of Wuornos" (142). Theron's makeover required that filmgoers disregard her beauty and focus on her as Aileen the overweight, unattractive streetwise prostitute. Bryan J. McCann claims that Theron's performance has the power to "disrupt patriarchal readings of the female body" (15). Theron's transformation was fetishized to the point that it upsets, challenges, and questions ideals of beauty. When Theron became Aileen, she established herself as

a serious, award-winning actress, which suggests that going ugly, for a Hollywood starlet, means going rogue because it is an unpredictable career decision. Theron's makeover into Aileen took center stage; however, once Theron became Aileen, the attention shifted from her physical transformation to her ability as a talented actress. Theron's metamorphosis into Aileen required that filmgoers forget about Theron the beautiful, attractive actress and focus their attention on Aileen the overweight, unattractive street prostitute who longs for love and acceptance, so the film's message is not lost.

Early in the film, Aileen is in a dirty gas station bathroom where she spends time grooming herself. At one point, she examines her reflection in the mirror and remarks, "you look good." At this point in the film, Aileen's attention on her appearance reminds the audience that she does not conform to Hollywood defined beauty standards. As Kristen Holm states, "[t]he intent of the film is to show Wuornos as a person in all her contradictions: flawed, loving, unrepentant, hopeful . . . the movie does show Wuornos as human, making decisions that eventually undermine her humanity and lead her to a dark, monstrous place" (83). The film's tight shots draw attention to Aileen's apparent unattractiveness and her unique mannerisms. Theron's portrayal of Aileen is so intense that "there's the uncanny sensation that Theron has forgotten the camera and the script and is directly channeling her ideas about Aileen Wuornos. She has made herself the instrument of this character" (Ebert). Throughout the film, there are several times when there are close-ups of Aileen's face, which highlight her unattractive appearance. These scenes "contribute to her monstrosity and demonstrate the degree of her anguish; they also present her face as a 'text' to be read" (Horeck 144). Furthermore, they remind film audiences that Theron the beautiful actress has vanished, and Aileen the streetwise prostitute and serial killer has emerged. Victoria L. Smith states that "Jenkins's relentless close-ups of Wuornos's face . . . suggest disjuncture between what we see and what is" (135). In addition, they also personalize audiences' connection to Aileen and make their filmgoing experience more intimate. Aileen is no longer a distant, dangerous character, but a person who experiences hardships and longings that many viewers can relate to and understand.

Clearly, Jenkins did not intend to feature Theron's natural beauty in this film. Instead, she created a rogue film that refuses to follow a traditional Hollywood film narrative where the beautiful actress is used as a prop and only present to entertain the male gaze. Both Jenkins and Theron take a risky and unpredictable path with this film and their careers by debunking the myth that beautiful actresses are not skilled in their craft.

## HOMOSEXUAL LOVE

While Theron's bodily transformation garnered much critical attention, the film also disrupted notions of romantic love and gendered violence. Throughout filmic history, romantic love was frequently reserved for beautiful, heterosexual couples. *Monster* emphasizes the love between Aileen and Selby (Christina Ricci), which devolves into a destructive relationship and ultimately ends in betrayal. The portrayal of this relationship is problematic and complex because, while it highlights the love Aileen has for Selby, it also suggests that lesbianism leads to violent, monstrous behavior. According to Kirsten Holm, this film,

72

joins a long line of films depicting lesbians and lesbian affairs as inherently unhealthy and dangerous. The relationship between the two women was overtly blamed for the "choice" that Wuornos made to continue to work as a prostitute, and subtly blamed for her descent into a darker side of herself. (84)

Horeck states that the film,

ultimately suggests that Lee [Aileen] is executed because of her great love for Selby whose demands were what pushed her to commit the string of murders in the first place. The excessive demands of queer love, as presented in *Monster* lead to death and destruction. (158)

Even though the film appears to present their relationship as a catalyst for Aileen's destructive behavior, it also effectively showcases the social obstacles and difficulty that lesbians often encounter when coming out and forming relationships.

In one early scene in the film, Selby and Aileen discuss the reason why Selby left Ohio. Selby reveals that it was because a girl in her church accused her of trying to kiss her, so her parents

basically disown[ed] me and I decided to come down here to try and figure some things out then this happened [she points to the cast on her arm] before I could get a job . . . my dad had to pay my medical bills so I made a deal with him that I would go back, which you know is probably for the best because maybe it'll work, maybe he'll be able to save my soul and all that.

This scene reveals that they are rogue figures because they reject the status quo and embrace their difference.

In another scene, Selby and Aileen are at a local skating rink and the announcer calls out that it is couples-only skating, so Selby attempts



to leave, but Aileen stops her. In this sense, Selby is aware that they cannot publicly be a couple because they are not heterosexual; however, Aileen insists that they can skate because they both love the song, so she takes the lead and guides Selby around the rink. Aileen kisses Selby, and afterwards Selby anxiously glances around to see if anyone notices. After they leave the skating rink, they are in an alley and begin passionately kissing as a group of teenagers stare on in disbelief. Selby is fully aware that lesbianism is unacceptable in a predominately heterosexual society. Aileen, on the other hand, is accustomed to her status as an outsider and does not exhibit the same fears that Selby has about their budding relationship. Selby's fears and anxiety stem from her relationship with her family and their inability to accept her sexuality. In one sense, Aileen has already embraced her status as a social outsider and realizes that she is a monster in the eyes of the heteronormative society. As Victoria L. Smith claims, "Wuornos is quintessentially outside and an outsider" (135). Selby, on the other hand, realizes the risks associated with accepting her difference. However, in the end, Selby does risk difference and embraces her outsider status, which is made evident by her decision to become romantically involved with Aileen.

Selby and Aileen's initial meeting occurs in a gay bar, with Aileen insisting that she is "not gay." As the night progresses, they continue talking and Selby invites Aileen back to the house where she is staying. Further in the film, we discover that Selby lives with an extended family. While this domestic space offers Selby a physical dwelling and protection from dangers, it is not her home. Aileen, on the other hand, is homeless and keeps her personal belongings in a storage unit. Jenkins's film reveals that there is no safe domestic space for lesbians and it also shows an underrepresented but real part of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) culture. Not every LGBT couple is an affluent white gay male pair with homes like those featured in *Southern Living* or conventionally attractive femme lesbians with children and a white picket fence. As film critic Lizzie Seal notes, Jenkins's film "is notable among Hollywood films for its representation of Aileen's precarious existence on the margins of society" (291). Bryan J. McCann argues that when Aileen enters into a lesbian relationship with Selby it is "an act of refusal that breaks with the heteronormativity and masculine violence that had come to define her life" (6). Aileen and Selby rely on each other for an escape from their respective realities. As both displaced loners and outsiders, Aileen and Selby are rogue figures who refuse to subscribe to their prescribed gender roles and accept heteronormativity as their only option.



## GENDERED VIOLENCE

Shortly after Aileen and Selby meet, Aileen is working the streets because she needs to earn money for her impending date with Selby. Aileen picks up her last “John” (Lee Tergesen) for the day, who turns out to be the man who violently rapes, sodomizes, and tortures her, which results in her psychotic break. In this pivotal scene, the car becomes a space where the “John” exerts his dominance and control and Aileen is rendered powerless. When Aileen refuses to do more than they had initially agreed on, he offers her more money and then punches her, knocking her unconscious.

The film cuts to Selby standing on a street corner waiting for Aileen and then reverts back to the car scene between Aileen and her “John.” Aileen awakens to discover that she is tied up and her head is bloody. When he demands to know if Aileen is awake and she fails to respond, he sodomizes her with a metal pipe yelling, “I knew that would wake you up!” and continues to thrust the pipe. Then he kicks her and orders her to “scream. Let me fucking hear it.” Next, he says that he is going to clean her up because “[they] have some fucking to do” and he pours a bottle of solution, presumably rubbing alcohol, on Aileen’s backside, which leaves her writhing in pain. As a result, she frees her hands, reaches in her purse, pulls out a gun, and shoots him about six times at point blank range. This entire scene is built around a gendered power structure with the male quickly assuming the masculine role of physically and psychologically dominating the female. However, Aileen refuses to submit to his demands, which suggests that she refuses to be victimized any longer. As Bryan J. McCann argues, the film has the potential to challenge “hegemonic notions about gender and violence. In casting Aileen Wuornos in a sympathetic light . . . the film offered viewers an opportunity to trouble prevailing discourses of female violence as an anathema to more properly masculine enactments of violence” (2–3). Furthermore, the violent attack that Aileen suffers results in her psychotic break with reality, and it is at this instant that her monstrous behavior surfaces. She abandons his body in the woods, cleans up his car, and steals his clothes. Her actions imply that she has regained the power that was stolen from her. When Aileen kills this “John,” it is at this moment that she challenges us to consider her as a victim and not a cold-blooded killer. One aspect of rogue cinema is that these films require us to see beyond the binary structures, as well as question them. It is at this point in *Monster* where the lines between good and bad, and right and wrong are blurred, which makes it an example of rogue cinema.

Aileen, still running on adrenaline from the killing, drives to Selby’s house to explain why she did not meet her earlier. In contrast to Aileen’s homelessness and nomadic life, Selby, who is living with an aunt, occupies

a controlled domestic space. This space is policed by Donna (Annie Corley), who at some points in the film functions as Selby's surrogate mother. When Donna discovers that Selby brought Aileen into her home, she chastises her like a mother does a child: "You cannot bring people like that here . . . we have no business with people like that." Donna reinforces the class structure and exercises her role as the voice of the patriarchy. Aileen's presence and occupation as a prostitute disrupts Donna's definition of heteronormative behavior for women. According to Pearson, "[i]n the United States, prostitution has always been viewed as detrimental to the white heterosexual family unit, the female body of the prostitute a reservoir of contagion and infection" (263). Furthermore, Donna views it as her duty as the maternal figure of the household to keep the domestic space protected from outsiders. For Donna, Aileen is a "monster" because she does not fit the "spatial and gender norms configured around white familial intimacy" (Pearson 258). Donna recognizes the danger that Aileen poses to her and her white, middle-class family life. Donna and her family govern the domestic space that Selby resides in, and as a result, Selby is afforded little freedom, so when Selby meets Aileen, she realizes that this is her opportunity to escape the watchful, prying eyes of Donna and her family.

Finally, Aileen and Selby rent a room at a local hotel. Aileen tells Selby that she has earned enough money for them to get a place and "party" for an entire week. The women spend a week together and it becomes apparent that Aileen assumes the dominate, masculine role as provider and takes pride in being able to supply beer and food for Selby. Selby, who is child-like, becomes dependent on her. By adopting a masculinized role as the head of the household, Aileen structures her relationship with Selby based on a heteronormative model because it is familiar to her. Gonsoulin maintains that "lesbians are women raised in the very same heterosexist and patriarchal society as other women," so they are not immune to the social norms that are projected onto heterosexual women (1160). Selby, who has been indoctrinated with the expectation that women remain subservient to and dependent on men, adopts the role as the dependent female. However, Selby's dependency and demands to be supported are motivated by her own selfish desires.

Even though she is a rogue figure, Aileen's desire for normalcy is apparent throughout the film. While they are still living in the hotel, Aileen announces that she plans to quit prostitution. Aileen says: "I've got everything going for me, so I'm gonna do it up royal. This time I'm doing it up royal." Selby responds: "Alright, but what are you going to do about work?" Aileen enthusiastically replies: "I'll get a job. I'll go clean. . . . House, car, the whole fucking shebang." When Selby inquires about the kind of job Aileen is going to get, Aileen replies: "I'll be a veterinarian," and Selby tells her that job requires a degree. Aileen's comment reveals that she is

psychologically aware of what is socially acceptable behavior and roles for women and what is not. Aileen dreams of a better life and escaping her reality. For Aileen, her budding relationship with Selby is something that she believes will give her a second chance and the opportunity to start over. Unfortunately, she cannot achieve this reality because of her lack of education and her need to immediately provide for Selby.

Later in the film, Aileen rents a house because she seeks to offer Selby a stable home. Her desire for a home implies that she longs for normalcy in her life and hopes that the relationship she has with Selby will enable her to achieve that goal. Aileen's "relationship with Selby becomes an act of refusal that breaks with the heteronormativity and masculine violence that had come to define her life" (McCann 6). On the day they move into their rented house, Aileen carries Selby over the threshold, which indicates that she is the male figure who expects to support her lover. In this sense, their domestic space has become gendered and mirrors heterosexual constructions of masculine and feminine behavior, which is the only frame of reference they have for romantic relationships. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that their relationship is unstable, doomed, and one-sided. Aileen is emotionally invested in her relationship with Selby, but it becomes obvious that Selby is selfish, ungrateful and restless. These are two women who exist on the fringes of society and are heading for a collision.

As their relationship spirals out of control, Selby eventually turns Aileen in to the authorities for the murders. Selby's actions reveal that she can no longer maintain her relationship with Aileen and decides to protect herself from incarceration. In a heart-wrenching scene that echoes many romantic melodramas, Aileen and Selby are on the phone and after a few minutes into the conversation, Aileen realizes that the phone line is tapped, and that Selby has betrayed her, which leaves Aileen with a sense of hopelessness and the awareness that she has been deserted by the one person she loved and trusted. Generally, rogue figures are often loners, and even though Aileen attempts to fit in and build a life for herself and Selby, she remains an outsider. It is at this point in the film where Aileen comprehends that she is alone and can only depend on herself.

The final scenes of the film are set in a courthouse with Aileen in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. In this space, she is once again powerless and governed by the hegemonic system. In the end, Aileen is portrayed as a woman who is "beyond redemption" and whose only desire is to be loved and accepted (Picart 1). Her murder of white, middle class men suggests that she "is accused of preying upon familial and communal logics, which it is assumed she is not entitled to claim" (Pearson 265). Aileen's refusal to subscribe to heteronormative gender behavior renders her rogue. Her

behavior stems from her desire to exert her own power and risk difference. However, Aileen's self-sacrifice indicates that she truly loved Selby, and her desire to save Selby humanizes her.

When Jenkins's film was released in 2003, American culture was experiencing an increase in political activism from both the feminist community and the queer community. Jenkins's film is challenging for feminists because it depicts Aileen's first murder as self-defense; however, it also suggests that Aileen gains power from that first murder and that she murdered more men as an attempt to gain more power in a society that denied it to women of her status. As Lizzie Seal points out, "this dreadful event acts as something of a catalyst for Aileen, who realizes that she can gain money (from theft) and power (from frightening her victims) through killing" (291). For the queer community, Jenkins's representation of Aileen is equally difficult because it depicts her as a rogue lesbian who kills members of the patriarchy to gain power. It also suggests that Selby knew that Aileen was murdering men, but she did nothing to discourage it. Instead of questioning and pressing Aileen for the truth, Selby seemed to be content with Aileen having enough money to support her.

77

## CONCLUSION

Throughout her life, Aileen was a victim of violence. From a young age she was raped and victimized. From the opening scene which depicts a suicidal Aileen sitting under an overpass with a gun and narrating her life, to her final murder, Jenkins's film shows that Wuornos was not inherently violent but that her life and circumstances made her so. The real power of this film lies in its ability to make us question our assumptions about male power and female violence. Generally, films which portray violent women do so in one of two ways, either as "victims of male aggression and/or the women themselves as reactive aggressors as in the 'rape-revenge' film" (Heathcote 203). While it is easy to argue that Jenkins's film presents Aileen as both a "victim of male aggression" and that the film is a "rape-revenge film," the violence that is depicted in the film is much more complex and resists simplistic categorization. When Aileen kills the "John" who rapes and tortures her, she unleashes a series of guttural screams, which suggest that "this moment is also a reaction to the gendered violence imposed on the younger Aileen . . . in turning gendered violence back on itself, Aileen, for the first time, resembles a monster—albeit a seemingly sympathetic one" (McCann 7). It is at this moment that Aileen unleashes her rage and subverts our assumptions about male and female violence, and compels us to consider that she was not born violent but made violent. Furthermore, we

also must question our social constructions of masculinity and femininity, and violence. Socially, men have been allowed, and even at times expected, to exhibit violent behavior. In contrast, women were expected to control any violent tendencies that they might experience. Aileen's reaction to being raped and tortured suggests that she refuses to suppress her rage any longer. When she unleashes her rage and becomes violent, she subverts our ideas about male and female violence, which makes her story and this film an example of rogue cinema.

Jenkins's film is perplexing on several levels, and it is important to acknowledge that it is more than a story about a female serial killer and her female lover. It is a film that challenges conventional heteronormative beliefs about female beauty, same-sex love and gendered violence. Although the movie primarily focuses on Aileen's unconditional love for Selby and the time they spent together, it presents her as a victim of male-inflicted violence that began in her youth and that set the trajectory of her life. Jenkins's film does not ignore the fact that Aileen committed several homicides; however, it does suggest that the murders are a result of the violence that she endured at the hands of men throughout the course of her life. Aileen's childhood was anything but happy. As a child, she was abused by the adult men in her life. While the abuse that she suffered during her youth certainly influenced her life, she continued to dream of a life free from violence. However, this film requires a careful unravelling of the layers to reveal its center, which is for us to see Aileen not as a villainous monster, but rather as a victim longing for love and acceptance. As David Rooney claims, "Jenkins' intention is not to coax sympathy or construct a feminist martyr. Without downplaying the horror of Wuornos' crimes or the abrasiveness of the woman, the writer-director humanizes Wuornos by focusing less on the killings than on the surrounding circumstances." By presenting Aileen as vulnerable instead of as a heartless serial killer, Jenkins allows viewers to identify with Aileen. Even though Jenkins does not dwell too much on Aileen's past, she offers us a glimpse into her childhood and it is just enough to expose how the abuse Aileen suffered as a child affected her life. The realization that Aileen desires a sense of normalcy, which includes a stable relationship with Selby, a safe domestic space, and a job that enables her to be accepted as a productive member of society, forces audiences to question their judgment of her as "America's first female serial killer" (Seal 291).

Aileen Wuornos is a social outcast because as an overweight, aging, unattractive female, she exists outside of the norm; however, Jenkins's film encourages viewers to perceive her as a woman who will sacrifice anything for love, including her life, even if her relationship is an unorthodox one. Theron's performance "finds not only the toughened harshness and anger but also the damaged vulnerability, sadness and need in Wuornos, making

her work here thoroughly convincing and empathetic" (Rooney). Theron's ability to portray Aileen as sympathetic and identifiable is what makes this "one of the greatest performances in the history of the cinema" (Ebert). Theron's nuanced performance humanizes Aileen, the monster. When Aileen utters the words "you'll never meet anyone like me," it echoes the transformative power of rogue cinema. Like Aileen, the film is rogue because it defies traditional Hollywood ideals of female beauty, romantic film narratives and female violence. Jenkins compels audiences to disregard the spectacle of Theron's physical transformation and concentrate on Aileen the rogue figure and her unconventional love story.

#### WORKS CITED

- "America's First Female Serial Killer' Strikes." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks 13 Nov. 2009. Film.
- Barlow, Helen. "Finding the Love in a Murderer." *Age* 19 Mar. 2004: 23. Web. 17 Jan. 2018.
- Chmielewski, Jennifer F., and Megan R. Yost. "Psychosocial Influences on Bisexual Women's Body Image: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 37. 2 (2013): 224–41. Print.
- Conboy, Katie, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. Introduction. *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. 1–12. Print.
- Doherty, Thomas. "Aileen Wuornos Superstar." *Cineaste* 29.3 (2004): 3–5. Web. 7 Oct. 2017.
- Ebert, Roger. "*Monster*." *Rogerebert.com*. RogerEbert.com 1 Jan. 2004. Web. 7 Oct. 2017.
- Gonsoulin, Margaret E. "Liberated and Inclusive? An Analysis of Self-Representation in Popular Lesbian Magazine." *Journal of Homosexuality* 57.9 (Oct. 2010): 1158–73. Print.
- Heathcote, Owen. "Reinventing Gendered Violence? The Autobiographical Writings of Jeanne Hyvrard, Helene Cixous and Marguerite Duras." *Modern & Contemporary France* 8.2 (May 2000): 203–14. Print.
- Holm, Kristen. "The Making of a Monster." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 16.1 (2004): 83–85. Web. 3 Mar. 2018.
- Horeck, Tanya. "From Documentary to Drama: Capturing Aileen Wuornos." *Screen* 48.2 (2007): 141–59. Web. 21 Jan. 2018.
- McCann, Bryan J. "Entering the Darkness: Rhetorics of Transformation and Gendered Violence in Patty Jenkins's *Monster*." *Women's Studies in Communication* 37.1 (2014): 1–21. Print.

- Monster*. Dir. Patty Jenkins. Perf. Charlize Theron, Christina Ricci. Media 8 Entertainment, 2003. Film.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833–44. Print.
- Pearson, Kyra. "The Trouble with Aileen Wuornos, Feminism's 'First Serial Killer.'" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4.3 (2007): 256–75. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.
- Picart, Caroline Joan (Kay) S. "Crime and the Gothic: Sexualizing Serial Killers." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 13.1 (2006): 1–18. Web. 12 Jan. 2018.
- "Rogue." *Oed.com*. Oxford English Dictionary. Web. 23 Jul. 2019.
- Rooney, David. "*Monster*." *Variety.com*. Variety 17 Nov. 2003. Web. 23 Oct. 2018.
- Seal, Lizzie. "Review of *Monster* and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*." *Contemporary Justice Review* 11.3 (2008): 291–92. Web. 31 Oct. 2018.
- Smith, Victoria L. "Highways of Desolation: The Road and Trash in *Boys Don't Cry* and *Monster*." *South Central Review* 32.2 (2015): 131–50. Web. 17 Oct. 2018.
- Thomson, Patricia. "Effecting a Startling Transformation in *Monster*." *American Cinematographer* 85.2 (2004): 101–02. Web. 12 Dec. 2018.

**Michelle D. Wise** currently resides in Nashville, Tennessee. After moving to Nashville, Tennessee in 2004, she began teaching at Tennessee State University where she is currently Assistant Professor of English. In 2016, she graduated from Middle Tennessee State University with her PhD in English Literature. Her primary areas of studies are Film Studies and Victorian Literature; however, her research interests vary across several areas of study such as Gothic Studies, Children's Literature, Popular Culture Studies, Television Studies, Comic Studies and Women's Studies.

**[mwise1@tnstate.edu](mailto:mwise1@tnstate.edu)**