

## ROADKILL

Monster: Based On A True Story (2003), written and directed by Patty Jenkins.

Aileen Wuornos: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer (2003); The Selling of Aileen Wuornos (1992), directed by Nick Greenfield.

From 1989 to 1990 a ragged drifter named Aileen Wuornos killed seven men along a stretch of central Florida freeway. Her MO bore the reckless signature of a dissolute and desolate life: She would hitch a ride in a car or truck with a male driver, rattle off a song and dance about wanting to get back to her kids in another state. After sussing out a likely mark with a prostitute's peculiar intuition, she proposed an exchange of quick sex for a few bucks. The unsuspecting john drove to some offroad clearing, where Wuornos drew a battered pistol and blew him away.

Some of Wuornos' victims were gunned down in their driver Others stripped for action outside, and were slaughtered buck naked. Wuornos would toss his corpse into a nearby wooded area, take his cash (little gain in most cases), and ride his car wherever the wind took her, until fear of detection made her abandon the vehicle. She knew that the authorities were zeroing in on her, but their pursuit didn't deter her from returning to her lonesome road and murdering again.

Wuornos' past reads like the history of a Jerry Springer trailer-trash guest. She was born in a seedy Detroit neighborhood. Her mother bolted brother early on. She and her brother were left in the care of a father who beat them mercilessly. He, too, took off and would later kill himself in prison. This time around, the children were sent to Kallikak grandparents who enthusiastically continued the daily round of brutal abuse, physical and perhaps sexual.

Mean streets furnished Wuornos' all the education she ever had. By her early teens she had already borne a child and given it away. The termination of a hasty marriage left her only her husband's last name -- it's eerily alliterative with the oldest profession she had begun to ply. After squandering the insurance money from her brother's early death, she returned to the streets, exchanging sex for meager sustenance. She was occasionally arrested for various petty crimes.

Her unruly life, drinking, and drugging to wretched excess gradually eroded her blond good looks. Nevertheless, in photos and on film one still sees the traces of a curious attractiveness. Her face combines something of Francis McDormand's idiosyncratic beauty with Sterling Hayden's bruised handsomeness (for confirmation on the latter score, look carefully at the visage of Hayden's hapless gunman in *The Killing* (1956)).

Wuornos was never any kind of happy hooker. As far as one knows, she disdained a pimp or madam, preferring to work solo work at the lowest rung of whoring. She stood by her gritty roadside, sporting roadhouse gear and worn sneakers instead of the street prostitute's gaudy uniform. With an impudent thumb stuck out, one hip shot provocatively at oncoming traffic, she attracted homebound husbands with a yen for the gutter as well as rough trade with more sinister urges. Often she not used well.

Writer/director Patty Jenkins' harrowing film, *Monster*, addresses the nine months of Wuornos' killing spree, during which she became involved in a passionate lesbian

affair. Jenkins theorizes that Wuornos' romance was the mainspring of her murders. According to the director's loose reading of actual circumstances, Aileen (Charlize Theron) meets a shy young woman, Shelby Wall (Christina Ricci) at a local gay bar. Shelby has been exiled by her parents to relatives, with the hope that a change of scene will make her shed her 'ungodly' desires.

Barely out of the closet, primly dressed, hunched over her drink at a grotty gay bar, Shelby would seem an unlikely love object for a wild creature like Wuornos. But Aileen is drawn to Shelby's innocence and vulnerability -- perhaps they evoked dim fantasies of a prelapsarian childhood. Shelby, for her part, is infatuated with Wuornos' manic energy, her absolute disregard for convention or authority. The two elope shortly after they meet, to live in a succession of tawdry motels.

Steamy sex between bisexual women is a staple of male oriented porn. However, in mainstream Hollywood fare lesbian love tends to be curiously chaste. It's often shot in soft focus; frequently informed by a none too subtle assumption that a gender-ambivalent heroine will eventually see the light when Mr. Right comes along (e.g. *Personal Best* [1982] ). It's greatly to Jenkins' credit that Wuornos and Shelby generate an intense sensuality that lasers off the screen.

Monster's subsequent plot recapitulates a durable cinematic subgenre of doomed lovers from low circumstances on the run. These misunderstood outlaws are often depicted as pitiable victims of a repressive society, their violence linked to, even excused by victimized pasts (e.g.: *Gun Crazy* (1949), *They Live By Night* (1949), and by a stretch *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)). While *Monster* powerfully lays bare the utter impoverishment of a throwaway underclass -- living roadkill -- Jenkins laudably avoids placing facile blame for Wuornos' crimes on her scarifying background. Indeed, it's scarcely mentioned. One infers that Wuornos' relationship with Shelby provides the first true love she's has ever known.

Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991) introduced a lesbian context to the outcast couple movie. The heroines never actually coupled; and after the parking-lot homicide which was clearly done in self-defense, their non-lethal violence constituted an often hilarious clarion call to arms against a dulled-down implicitly patriarchal culture. The feisty heroines of *Thelma and Louise* facilitate each other's evolution into liberated co-equals. But in *Monster*, Aileen is the boss while Shelby grows increasingly incapable of fending for herself, a feckless parody of the compliant suburban wife and tidy life *Thelma and Louise* ultimately reject. She can't or won't work, relying on Aileen to find the money which is supposed to help them realize an absurd fantasy of picket fence domesticity, despite the pair's 'outsider' stance.

After a pathetic attempt to find a job in the daylight world fails, Wuornos returns to the only employment she knows. But her love for Shelby now renders her serving as a disposable receptacle for a client's lust repellent. She shoots a deranged sadist who rapes, then tries to set her on fire. Thereafter (if one accepts Jenkins' explanation) she's gripped by a traumatic repetition compulsion, and cannot stop killing.

*Monster* may be read at one level as a realization of the homoerotic sizzle and revolt against masculine oppression latent in *Thelma and Louise*. Viewed as a remake, *Monster* is not nearly as well crafted or on target ideologically as its source (often the

case with remakes). It would probably fade into VCR/DVD oblivion, were it not for Charlize Theron's blazing portrayal of Wuornos which recently won her an Oscar. Theron gives one of the great performances in cinema history; it's there with Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Olivia De Havilland in *The Heiress* (1949), and Giulietta Masina in *La Strada* (1954).

Theron has radically transformed her alluring features -- she's modeled as well as acted -- into an uncanny simulacrum of Wuornos. She gained thirty pounds for the part, and artful make-up amazingly replicates Wuornos' weathered, freckled face. Theron's Wuornos seethes with turbulent impatience; a ferocious kinetic energy seems to send her body dancing in several directions at once.

Typically, Wuornos mumbles in pressured fragments, or explodes into frenetic paranoid ranting. But she also can address her alienation, the blasted lives of her peers, the venality of her captors, with startling eloquence. Her poignant yearning for Shelby and the small joys of an ordinary life articulate with crazily rationalized homicidal rage. Theron adroitly captures every nuance and contradiction of Wuornos' tormented, tormenting character. She's appalling and pitiful.

The accuracy of Theron's impersonation is even more impressive when one views Wuornos herself in Nick Greenfield's documentaries *Aileen Wuornos: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer* and *The Selling of Aileen Wuornos* -- the latter released 12 years ago. Both movies are patchwork jobs, but they do accurately describe Wuornos' life before and after the murders, as well as delineating the social canvas backgrounding the killings and their prosecution.

Wuornos' vision of her motives was slippery, inflected at any given moment by psychopathy, psychosis, or genuine insight. Initially she said she was guilty without qualification. She then turned on a dime, pleading innocence by reason of self defense. At one time or another, she presented herself as a hapless victim of male aggression, betrayed and exploited at every turn; or a profane avenging angel seeking to redress the wrongs perpetrated on the wretched of the earth by an unjust system.

Greenfield discovered there was at least a grain of truth in many of her allegations. Wuornos maintained she began killing after her first victim, Richard Mallory, raped and threatened to kill her. Subsequent to her trial, it was revealed that Mallory had previously served ten years for violent rape in another state. Her public defender was an inept pot-smoking wannabee rock star. Her real lover, Tyria Moore, who knew fully of Wuornos' crimes, never served a day of imprisonment in return for ratting out her lover.

Although Wuornos erratically spurred an orgy of publicity, others connected with her case sought more robustly to cash in on prospective TV or movie rights. These crass unworthies included her attorney (who Greenfield intimates may have wanted her dead in aid of creating a more powerful narrative arc) and three members of the Florida police department. The media also profited hugely from Wuornos via tabloid coverage and a sensationalist docudrama. Even Greenfield, for all his good intentions, does not refrain from inserting himself clumsily into his films as a high minded truth seeker.

Wuornos' last and most despicable exploiter was Jeb Bush, who wanted her executed to ramp up his gubernatorial campaign. Wuornos had been imprisoned for 12

years on death row at this point. Although she knew Bush wanted her dead, she confessed her guilt, quite possibly because she could no longer tolerate confinement.

She also had gone quite mad. She told Greenfield that a mother ship -- arguably a psychotic elaboration of the mothering she never had -- would create a one woman rapture, taking her up to Jesus (one wonders if she had ever watched *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977]) and identified with Richard Dreyfuss' alienated hero). On the evening prior to her execution, several psychiatrists found she was sane enough to be killed. What gain these Dr. Deaths sought clear. Perhaps it was merely a paycheck in exchange for an odious night's work. But one never knows what knavery is afoot when a Bush is in sight.

The origins of Aileen Wuornos' homicidal binge have never been satisfyingly elucidated. One could, for instance, blame a conflation of her horrific childhood, a genetic predisposition towards psychopathy, and a periodic dissociated state after barely escaping death her first victim's depredations. Jenkins, chiefly cites romance gone terribly astray. One underscores, however, that the overwhelming majority of women who have suffered the same terrible backgrounds and degrading experiences like Wuornos' do not kill. Indeed, it's far more likely they would die at the hands of some malevolent mysoginist.

Given a confluence of problems, what finally tipped the scales to precipitate Wuornos' road kills? A forensic psychiatrist told me that in years spent studying the minority of mentally ill who murdered he never had been able to tease out the 'x factor' separating them from the majority who didn't. I don't believe Wuornos demonstrated the diabolic signatures of true serial killers like Ted Bundy and Ed Gein. The 'x factor' of these hideous creatures has proven even more resistant to discovery. Years back, I participated in a discussion about *Silence Of The Lambs* (1985). One speaker was an amiable Texas FBI profiler who had extensively interviewed Bundy, Gein, and others of their heinous ilk. Someone asked their diagnosis. "Well, let's see", he drawled, "You folks are using DSM-III, right? I guess I'd put Ted and Ed somewhere around ...DSM-22."