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"There is a lot of s**t I can't do anymore, but killing isn't one of them":

The representation of female serial killers in U.S. cinema and television

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To Gogga, my first reader.

To my Mom, the first person to ever believe in me.

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ABSTRACT

"The great American art form isn't music or film or television.
The great American art form is murder. We watch it, we celebrate it, obsess over it"

Based on a true story (2023), episode 1

In the last three decades, the figure of the serial killer has become a sensation in the United States, a personality for the media to obsess over and turn into a celebrity to be worshipped. The term "serial killer" entered the American popular employment in 1981 and, given it was first employed to define a male serial killer, men have always been perceived as more "notorious" (or, rather, "infamous") than their female counterparts. Female-perpetrated murder is a rare occurrence, all the more when the murder is born out of motives or carried out with means that do not meet the ones stereotypically associated with femininity. Given the lack of research in this regard, the aim of this dissertation is to examine the media representations of female-perpetrated serial murder by taking into consideration two instances of queer, mentally ill and unattractive female serial killers. The cases this study will be focused on concern the earliest-registered U.S. female serial killer, Aileen Wuornos, and the latest fictionalized representation of female-perpetrated serial murder in the United States, Andrea Greene, protagonist to Amazon Prime Video's series *Swarm*.

INTRODUCTION

"Murderers are not heroes. But killing—whether motivated by passion, greed, thrills, madness, ideals, or desperation—is an extraordinary act; not an honorable one, to be sure, but undeniably extraordinary. And extraordinary acts—even depraved ones—tend to have the effect of elevating the perpetrator to [an] iconic cultural status"

The Murder Mystique: Female Killers and Popular Culture, X

In the last 30 years, US media have been saturated with news concerning serial killing, as well as movies or TV shows about infamous serial killers. It is safe to assume that the serial killer is perceived to be the superstar of 20th century "wound culture" – i.e., "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (Seltzer 1998: 2). However, American people seem to have a tendency, when thinking of serial killers, to conjure up the images of smarter-than-average white males acting on sexual motives; who are usually associated with a troubled past and with a desire to keep "trophies" from their victims' houses or corpses. Just think of Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy for example: they shared the same motive (a need to be in control, expressed during sexual acts) as well as the tendency to keep parts of their victims' bodies close to them.[1] In addition, all three of them were seemingly brought up in a poor environment and were physically and emotionally abused by their own family members or friends, which is considered an influencing factor in their criminal behavior.

[1] Bundy would preserve the heads of the women he'd killed to perform sexual acts on himself (Keppel, 2005: 378); Dahmer would eat his victims' flesh and keep the bones (Norris, 1992: 34-35); Gacy would bury his victims underneath his own house (Cavendish, 1990: 1915).

Since people seem to be fascinated with the background, upbringing and motives of the serial killer, the media have manufactured a "serial killer persona" with a career – relying on the authority of law enforcement and psychologists – and serial killers have achieved a celebrity status (Fox & Levin, 2005: 37). As forensic psychiatrist Park Dietz puts it: "the media help disseminate the message that it's good to be a serial killer…There are rewards to such violent behavior – loyal fans, marriage proposals, splashy headlines" (qtd. in Schmid, 2005: 16). Considering the American public is deeply fascinated with "atrocity exhibition" (Seltzer, 1998: 2), the media tend to show the humane side of the killer in order to have the audience empathize with the criminal and sell the story (Muraskin & Domash, 2006: 2) – no matter how accurate. In so doing, many choices made by the media to recount a story of serial killing actually seem to glorify the killer (Roy, 2002: 96).

And yet, do the media reserve the same treatment to women serial killers as well? In talking about female serial murder, the media seem to ask "What was her motive? Was it in any way justifiable?... In what ways is this murder different from those committed by men?" (Nalepa, 2013: X).

Due to the high percentage in feminicide and violence against women, there is a tendency to think that women are incapable of any kind of physical violence. This may derive from the collective conception of women as "loving" and "nurturing," hence unable of committing a violent act of any nature.

What happens then, when a woman is found guilty of a crime that cannot be ruled out with "self-defense"? What happens if this woman is affected by a non-specified, non-diagnosed mental illness? And what if she does not meet society's expectations in regards to her sexuality nor fit the beauty standards ordinarily attached to womanhood?

The aim of this work is to shed light on the representation, within U.S. cinema and television, of female serial killers, who happen to be also unattractive (according to social standards), queer, and mentally ill.

There is a lack of research on the topic: female killers represent a rare occurrence, and even when serial murders are investigated, female offenders are seldom taken into consideration. As will be outlined throughout this work, most female serial killers act with other felons – usually their partners – when they commit murders. The two study cases analyzed here, instead, feature female serial killers acting on their own.

By taking into account queer female serial killers (a "minority" within a "minority"), I will explore the public perception of both homosexuality and serial killing as abnormal, unhealthy, "monstrous" (Schildcrout, 2014: 156; McIntosh, 1968: 190). Since it considers both serial killers and homosexuals to lack morality and to be inherently violent (Schmid, 2005), society tends to vilify the queer, turning them into a violent threat. The connection between a minority and a sense of threat extends to mentally ill people: in our collective consciousness, in fact, a person who is affected by mental illness is depicted as inherently violent, a depiction that is worsened in the media representation (Harrison, 2023: 65).

In the cases I am going to analyze, the killers negotiate specific images about femininity, sexuality and serial killing that have emerged – and solidified – in popular culture. Interestingly, the first study case will revolve around the first acknowledged American female serial killer, whereas the second study case will focus on the latest example of female serial killer – though fictionalized – to have been brought to the screen in a TV series. The former is Florida-based prostitute Aileen Wuornos, executed in 2002 for the murders of seven men; the latter is Andrea Greene, protagonist to Amazon Prime Video's *Swarm*.

The two happen to share additional characteristics aside for their gender and sexual orientation: for example, their killing methods and behavior are not consistent with those of

typical female serial killers, thus both are depicted as "male-like," given that they employ weapons – rather than poison – to kill strangers – rather than family members. As a consequence, they represent a rare occurrence (manly methods and behaviors) within a rare occurrence (female-perpetrated serial murder).

This work is divided into four chapters. The first focuses on the theme of violence in relation to women, as they are often victims but can also be perpetrators. The Chapter also provides an introduction to serial killing in general and female serial killing in particular.

Typically, a serial killer is a person who murders three or more people in the span of more than one month, with a cooling-off period in between killings: nevertheless, some authorities extend the threshold to four killings or lessen it to two (Hough & McCorkle, 2016); whereas some others exclude the cooling-off period. The two most prominent studies of recent years on the topic of serial killing have been written by Eric Hickey (1991) and Peter Vronsky (2004; 2007). As Hickey questions the possible reasons behind serial murder behaviors, considering "facilitators" such as alcohol consumption and a desire for power; Vronsky, too, attempts the analysis of genetic, biological and environmental factors to explain a serial killer's behavior. Although, given their rarity, the characteristics of female serial killers are seldom taken into account when defining "serial killing," both authors acknowledge the reality of female-perpetrated serial murder. On the one hand, Hickey samples 64 examples and suggests the creation of a new categorization to fit female killers. Vronsky, instead, focuses extensively on the topic by devoting a research to it: his findings concerning female killers' motives reveal that they overlap with male serial killers'.

Nevertheless, in recent years Marissa Harrison has sketched a profile of the typical female serial killer (2015), pointing out how she diverges from male serial killers (2019) and how traumatic childhood experiences yield the chances of psychopathy in adult life (2023). The

definition of "serial killer" employed in the present work is the one provided by Dr. Harrison in 2023.

The second Chapter will focus on the representation of male and female serial killers in the media, which is often marred by sensationalism. Significant examples of real-life or fictionalized violent women in cinema, television and documentaries will be discussed.

Chapter 3 will center around the figure of Aileen Wuornos, who killed 7 men between November 1989 and November 1990. The events that shaped Wuornos' life will be outlined and the circumstances of the murders (particularly that of Richard Mallory, Wuornos' first victim) will be clarified, so as to exemplify the media representations of the case. Wuornos' mental health and sexual orientation will prove central in the films brought forward as examples.

Namely, I will be analyzing three movies centering around different periods of time in Aileen's life: *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (1992), TV movie by Peter Levin, with Jean Smart in the leading role; *Monster* (2003) by Patty Jenkins, starring Charlize Theron in the role of the killer; *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogywoman* (2021) by Daniel Farrands, starring Peyton List as Lee. In addition, I will also be analyzing two documentaries by Nick Broomfield – *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003) – to serve as testimony for Aileen's final months of jail and her subsequent execution. Since the documentaries present Broomfield interviewing Wuornos, Aileen's presence is predominant and her version of the events is provided in her own words and voice.

Finally, Chapter 4 will focus on Andrea "Dre" Greene (played by Dominique Fishback), a fictional black female serial killer protagonist to Amazon Prime Video's TV show *Swarm*. The show follows Dre's descent into a spiral of violence following the death of her sister, with whom she shared the admiration for Houston-based black singer Ni'Jah. As

Dre feels there are similarities between Marissa and Ni'Jah, her killings aim at punishing those who speak ill of either of them. Furthermore, as Dre is a young black woman, the issues of the representation of black women, black queer and black violence in the media will be exemplified.

I will insist on the socio-economic environment of black American communities, stressing the importance of topics such as the depiction of crime, family and poverty; then, I will investigate the impact of stereotypes and stock-characters on the creation of black female characters in television and cinema. The stereotypical conception around and about black women will also resonate in the analysis of Dre's personality, life and motives.

In conclusion, I will discuss the accusations of "misogynoir" against the series' co-creator, Donald Glover: Glover, in fact, received criticism for his portrayal of an animalistic, irrational and yet dull protagonist, as well as for his merely hinting at issues of mental health, gender identity and sexual orientation within the character of Dre.

CHAPTER 1

WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND SERIAL KILLING

1.1 Violent women: An impossible occurrence

The conception dominating the media that women would not be able of committing serial murder can be explained through a variety of reasons (Schurman & Kauflin, 2000: 13). To begin with, female serial murderers are extremely rare: according to Dr. Marissa Harrison, out of all the murders committed in the United States, only 2% is perpetrated by a serial killer and only one out of 6 serial killers is a woman. Consequently, that 2% significantly drops to 0.3% (Harrison. 2023: 37).

Another reason behind this belief is linked to the major public issue of violence against women. This problem represents, in fact, a deterrent for the media's acknowledging and portraying female serial killers, due to the popular belief that women are biologically incapable of committing any harm. As a matter of fact, women are usually depicted in the media as wives and girlfriends of successful men, committed mothers and attractive figures, objects to be desired; they are perceived to be "loving" and "nurturing," which makes them unable of committing a violent act of any nature. Furthermore, due to the high percentage of cases involving violence against women as well as feminicide, women are for the greater part depicted in the media in the role of victims, rarely ever in that of offenders.

Deeply rooted in gender inequality and discrimination at the expenses of women, as well as in the abuse of power and ineffective laws and norms enforced by the State and Nation, "violence against women" has been defined by the United Nations as "any act of gender-

based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UNWomen.org). As it prevents the full and equal participation in society of a large group of people, violence against women not only impacts the lives of the individuals who undergo it, but also of their families and society as a whole. Furthermore, this term is sometimes, also employed to define episodes of targeted violence against LGBTQIA+ groups, in which cases it refers to "violence related to norms of masculinity/femininity and/or gender norms" (UNWomen.org). According to the World Health Organization, globally 1 in 3 women experiences episodes of violence throughout her life.

The most common form of violence against women worldwide is also the most intimate: domestic violence (UNWomen.org). Domestic abuse, also known as intimate partner violence, is characterized by a pattern of behaviors enforced "to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. It encompasses all physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person" (UNWomen.org). The years of the Corona-virus pandemic (2020 – 2021) saw a peak in domestic abuse reports in the United States. "Historically, there's been a problem with how men have been taught to view women… they are treating women like their property. Like, 'This person belongs to me. If I can't have her, nobody can have her'" says North-East Mississippi District Attorney Scott Colom. Colom joined in a *The Guardian* study concerning domestic abuse in the United States aiming at discovering whether domestic abuse has a racial component to it. In order to achieve this goal, *The Guardian* worked together with representatives from the State of Mississippi (the population of which is 39% black people) and from the State of Vermont (an almost exclusively white State, with 92% of the population

being white).[2] The study found that, although Vermont is, on the whole, less affected by domestic abuse than Mississippi is, victims are in both cases likely to drop charges: the reasons for this may vary but are nonetheless rooted in dependency. “The accuser may rely on the accused for money or housing, because he may be the father of her children, or because she is emotionally attached to him and doesn’t want to be the cause for him going to jail,” Sarah Fair George, Vermont’s State Attorney, explains *The Guardian*. As a consequence, the slight amount of women who do not drop charges, is in many instances killed in the interlude between the initial arrest of the perpetrator and the beginning of trial.

According to the website sanctuaryforfamilies.org, of all the feminicides committed in high income countries in 2023, 70% occurred in the United States. The term “feminicide” refers to the intentional killing of women on the basis of their being women and, though it is usually employed to refer to murders perpetrated by intimate partners, it has come to comprehend any killing of women or girls. Research has been conducted regarding the escalation of crime and violence during the Corona-virus pandemic, and the newspaper *The Guardian*, together with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, showed that the homicide rate for black women in 2020 increased of 33%, which is three times higher than white women’s rate in the same period. This statistic translates into a preposterous means of 5 black women killed each day.[3] Out of the 1,821 black women and girls killed across the United States in 2020, 1/3 were victims of a partner or family member, 16% was victimized by a friend, neighbor or acquaintance and the remaining was murdered by strangers, that is to say by people that shared no relation with the victim.[4]

Other instances of violence against women are: sexual violence (including sexual harassment, rape and corrective rape), genital mutilation, child marriage, online or digital

[2] Cf. Worldpopulationreview.com, updated January 2023.

[3] As 75% of the murders of black women in 2020 was perpetrated with a gun, it can be easily stressed that a reason behind such high percentages in feminicide is the gun violence crisis that has controlled the United States over the course of the last couple of years.

[4] Sanctuaryforfamilies.org estimates a total of 2.6 killings per 100.000 women per day, in 2021 alone.

violence – including cyber bullying, doxing (i.e. the public release of identifying information about the victim) and revenge porn (i.e. the release on the internet of sexually explicit images or videos, generally by a former partner, to humiliate and immiserate the victim).

Though startling – and sadly ordinary –, such examples of violence against women do not exclude the likelihood of men dying at the hands of their partner. According to the 2018 United Nations Office on Drug and Crime Global Study on Homicide, intimate partner violence perpetrated by women only comprises 5% of male homicides: in most of these cases, battered women act in self-defense against their abusive partners. When compared to feminicide, female-perpetrated partner murder comes across as less violent and intimate in nature, as women are more likely to be strangled, stabbed or beaten to death than to die in a shooting at the hands of their partner. Despite this, not all women who resort to kill their partner have undergone domestic abuse, just like not all the victims of female-perpetrated murder are current or former partners of the killer.

Laurie Nalepa investigated in 2013 the different possible motives that lead women to murder. She found that, alongside self-defense, women who kill do so to get revenge against their former or current partner (e.g., Betty Broderick, who killed her ex-husband and his new wife and former lover); or against their co-workers (e.g., Biology professor Amy Bishop shot on 12 other faculty members after being denied tenure twice). Two other themes that surface in Nalepa's study and that can be considered as motives in female-perpetrated murder are love (e.g., Susan Smith, who killed her two children to facilitate her relationship with a lover who did not want any children) and money (e.g. Olga Rutterschimdt and Helen Golay, who would stage hit-and-run incidents to collect life insurances they had taken out on the victims).
Although these cases present different motives as well as killing methods, they do share one element: all the victims were, to a greater or lesser degree, intimate with the killer. As will be

outlined throughout this work, this characteristic does not apply to all female-perpetrated murders.

Nalepa also finds that the notion that women are capable of killing has only recently made its way through our collective consciousness by means of popular culture (XI). The first ever female serial killer to be investigated by the FBI as well as the media was Aileen Wuornos: as will be discussed in Chapter 3, Wuornos killed 7 men between November 1989 and November 1990. Although Aileen was apprehended in 1991, before her no female serial murderer's motives and personality had been looked into by either law enforcement or the media with such interest. As recently as 1998, in fact, the FBI reportedly stated "there are no female serial killers" (Telfer, 2017).

Why is it so hard for our social imagination to conceive of women serial killers? Due to gender stereotypes and gender role expectations, embedded in Western society and spread by the media, we tend to expect serial killing to be a male-only prerogative. Roslyn Muraskin and Shelly Feuer Domash provide the most thorough explanation, when they say:

Women who commit crimes are going against society's views of how women should behave. In American society the culturally valued role for women has been that of wife and mother. Any departure from these gendered roles is believed to result in a disruption of social order. Women who deviate from traditional norms become outcasts and must be punished to set an example so other women are not tempted to do the same (2006: 118).

The reason behind the constant overlooking of female-perpetrated murder, is thus, a psychological one, that is inherently linked to patriarchy: the fear that women will transcend their traditional social roles, turning into "whores" and causing the "madonnas" to be lured into becoming criminals (Feinman, 1994: 21). The Madonna-Whore complex is born out of

the desire to enforce patriarchy, since it is linked to attitudes that aim at restricting women's autonomy. Richard Tuch argued that such a theory emerges from man's hatred of women, deriving from the frustration that he underwent at the hands of his mother: so, as to avenge such mistreatments, men sadistically attack women, who represent a substitute to their mothers (2010: 151). This paradoxical theory distributes women into two categories: the Madonna, who is suitable to be a good wife and mother, as she is nurturing and loving; and the Whore, who is unattractive in terms of sexuality and / or personality. As Clarice Feinman argues, these attitudes may derive from Greek mythology as well as from Judeo-Christian theology, given that such stories and myths represent women as having one of two natures (1994: 3) as an attempt to categorize female sexuality. To better understand such a division, a more exhaustive definition of "sexism" will be needed.

The birth of the term "sexism" is dated back to the feminist movement, as it emerged during the movement's "second wave," that is to say between the 1960s and the 1980s. It refers to any kind of discrimination or prejudice that is based on gender and, though it can affect anyone, it is more generally perpetrated against women. The aim behind this ideology is that of maintaining male domination through practices – both dogmatic and factual – that are carried out by individuals or institutions, regardless. This dogma represents a social barrier and imposes limitations as to what men – or boys – can and should do and what women – or girls – can and should do: consequently, it spreads and enforces stereotypes that are based on one's biological gender.

In a sexist environment, women are relegated to the domestic realm, functioning as home-workers, warm caregivers and loving mothers; they are depicted as less capable – if not, incapable altogether – than men at being in positions of power. Given it is established upon the idea that men are inherently more valuable human beings than women are, sexism may foster episodes of violence against women, that can be conveyed in interpersonal (e.g.,

speech, behavior, gesture) as well as institutional (e.g., laws and traditions) contexts. Sexism can be partitioned into three categories: hostile, benevolent and ambivalent.

Hostile sexism pertains behaviors that are openly adverse toward women: those who engage in hostile sexism tend to view women as manipulative, deceptive, in need to be kept in their place and willing to use seduction to control men. As Orly Bareket et al. put it, "hostile sexism targets women viewed as competitors who seek to gain dominance and control over men" (2018). To further clarify, let us think of an ambitious woman in a male-dominated work environment: if the woman has recently been promoted, she is accused of having slept with the boss in order to get the advancement. In addition, hostile sexists typically oppose gender equality as well as the LGBTQIA+ rights movement, as they perceive them to be a threat to the male established system of benefits. In other words, hostile sexism enforces negative stereotypes about women (in the aforementioned example, their seducing the boss to obtain a promotion) and predicts negative outcomes of non-traditional women (in the aforementioned example, a woman in a position of power). For the sake of our argument, whenever women are depicted in terms deriving from hostile sexism, they become Whores.

In a perspective of benevolent sexism, women are seen as fragile, innocent, inherently beautiful and in need of protection. This variety of sexism is more socially accepted, as it provides women with protection, in exchange for their acceptance of a more subordinate role in society: as such, it is more likely to be endorsed by both men and women. Despite the name, though, it still frames one sex as weaker than another. Benevolent sexists focus their attention and praise on a woman's appearance, rather than on her values and attributes; they believe her worth equals her role as a mother, a wife or a girlfriend and support policies that make it harder for women to work and be independent (Glick & Friske, 1996). Benevolent sexism reinforces positive stereotypes of women, thus predicting positive outcomes of traditional gender roles: women should be thin and beautiful (a notion that, oftentimes, leads

to episodes of body shaming); they should be well-behaved, docile, amiable and gracious; plus, they are expected to take time off their jobs to take care of children and / or elders, as caregiver positions are better filled by females (given that men are depicted as too impersonal and assertive). To put it in the words of Bareket et at., again, "benevolent sexism targets women viewed as warm and supportive, who therefore deserve men's protection and provision" (2018): as a result, they turn into Madonnas.

Finally, ambivalent sexism is a combination of the benevolent and the hostile. It was theorized by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske in 1997 and described as "hostility toward women and the endorsement of traditional gender roles" (110). People who engage in ambivalent sexism tend to justify male power, support the endorsement of traditional gender roles and may see women as pure or as manipulative, depending on the situation. Consequently, they tend to glorify traditional womanly behaviors, whilst condemning non-feminine, "un-ladylike" behaviors – again, categorizing the former as Madonnas, the latter as Whores.

Although it could be argued women serial killers represent the quintessential example of Whore, this is not exactly the case. Though their crimes and their disrespect of traditional gender roles do place them on the negative end of the dichotomy, they do not respect the tendency of the complex, rather they challenge it by means of an un-expected behavior – serial murder.

1.2 Socio-psychological theories on serial killers

The term "serial killer" was first coined in 1966 and its earliest employment dates back to John Brophy's *The Meaning of Murder*. However, it only entered U.S. usage in 1981, when it was first employed by *The New York Times* to describe Atlanta killer Wayne Williams. "Serial murder," "serial homicide" and "serial killer" have come to define the unlawful killing of three or more people over a period of more than one month, with an

emotional cooling-off period between the murders (Harrison, 2023). Nevertheless, there are as many definitions of "serial murderer" as there is research about it: some experts extend the threshold to four killings or lessen it to two (Hough & McCorkle, 2016), whereas some others exclude the cooling-off period – making it more difficult to discern "serial murder" from "murder spree." In addition, some scholars add pre-meditation as a necessary feature for serial killer behavior (Hickey, 1986).

Considering most of the information regarding serial killers and serial killing reach a wider audience by means of media coverage, crime narratives are generally filtered to further sensationalize the news and sell it as extensively as possible. By the same token, audiences' opinions regarding the occurrence of violent crimes, those who perpetrate such crimes as well as the investigative methods that the police employ to eradicate them, are shaped by the media's stance on the topic (Muraskin & Domash, 2006). As a consequence, given that the typical news-watcher is not interested in the truthfulness of the report nor in the reliability of the source reporting the news (Muraskin & Domash, 2006: 2), it becomes ever more difficult to discern myth from actual fact.

Extensive research has been conducted on serial killing since the beginning of the 19th century: nevertheless, among the most referenced studies on the matter we find contemporary scholars such as Eric Hickey and Peter Vronsky.

In his *Serial Murderers and Their Victims* (1991), Hickey investigates the lives of 203 serial killers in order to question the possible reasons behind serial murder behavior. His evaluation takes into consideration a number of 'facilitators', such as alcohol consumption, sexual fantasies and a desire for power, although he finds violent attitudes to be a common denominator to every killer sampled. Interestingly, Hickey takes account of the occurrence of female-perpetrated serial murder and stresses the need for a new categorization concerning women serial killers. Through an analysis of 64 female serial killers, Hickey not only

considers the motives and weapons employed by the perpetrator; he also analyzes the media's choice of derisive nicknames aiming at underlying the perpetrator's gender rather than her actions. As a consequence, Hickey argues, female serial killers are perceived as "pseudo-serial killers" (307). Nevertheless, as Hickey also points out, because of their rarity, because of their typical choice of less violent, more discreet weapons (such as poison, rather than guns) and because women are seldom suspect of committing a violent act outside their domestic environment, a female serial killer may murder undetected for years.

Peter Vronsky's *Serial Killers: The Method and Madness of Monsters* (2004) chronicles the history of serial murder since its first testified occurrence during the Roman Empire through to the "serial killer epidemic" that impacted the United States in the mid-1960s. In order to categorize and analyze different types of offenders, Vronsky investigates the evolution of a serial killer, stressing the importance of both their childhood and adult life. The aim of Vronsky's work is to find a reason behind serial killer behavior, which he attempts via the analysis of genetic, biological and environmental factors.

Interestingly, the scholar laid-out his following study the same way, but this time his focus regarded female-perpetrated serial murder exclusively. *Female Serial Killers: How and Why Women Become Monsters* was first published in 2007 and investigates historical cases of female serial murderers, commencing with the early instances of Ancient Rome until the mid-2000s. In this study, Vronsky argues that women kill for the same reasons men do (to exert power and control), but usually avoid sexually assaulting or mutilating their victims; in addition, he cites statistics showing 16% of serial killers apprehended since 1820 (and up until 2006) were women – either acting alone or partnered with a male or female offender.

Though these studies are still considered as cornerstones within the study field of female serial killers, research has been implemented in recent years by psychology professor Dr. Marissa Harrison and her team at the Pennsylvania State University.

First published on *The Journal of Forensic, Psychiatry and Psychology* in 2015, Dr. Harrison's study "Female Serial Killers in the United States: Means, Motives and Makings" investigates the motives, methods, mental health and victim choice of 64 female serial killers who committed their crimes on U.S. soil between 1821 and 2008, so as to design a more general profile for women serial killers. The data showed that the typical female serial killer is white, average or above-average looking, educated, belonging to middle-high class, who has been (or is) married and has held a caregiver position (either as a mother or health care worker). As per this study, 40% of the sampled killers has experienced mental illness and their most common motive is financial gain, with poison as the preferred method of killing. The typical "FSK" generally targets both sexes, killing her victims in the suburbia, and is sentenced to jail for her crimes. In addition, experiences of childhood abuse (physical and / or sexual), childhood illness and substance abuse are prevalent in the history of the typical woman serial killer. Finally, Harrison suggests an evolutionary reading to the figure of the serial killer, a theory which she will take up again in her 2019 study.

"Sex Differences in Serial Killers" (Harrison, 2019) is considered a watershed in the study field of serial killers, as it is a first attempt at directly confronting the characteristics of male and female serial killers. The study draws on a sample of 110 serial killers, evenly distributed in males and females, active between 1856 and 2009 on U.S. soil. Building on the ancestral division of men "hunting" and women "gathering" – in other words, collecting fruits and plants (4) –, Harrison argues "sex differences in motives between serial murderers follow sex-specific mating strategies" (4): that is to say, as women were in charge of providing for and taking care of the family, profit is the most common motive in female-perpetrated serial murder. By the same token, as men's purpose was procreating, male perpetrated serial murderers are most typically driven by sex-gratification. As Harrison puts it: "in the ancestral environment, to maximize genetic fitness, women would benefit from seeking long-term,

stable partners with resources to invest in them and their offspring, and men would benefit more opportunities" (5). Dr. Harrison, thus, justifies the low percentage of sex-driven female-perpetrated serial murder with the mating choices made since ancestral times. Nevertheless, as Dr. Harrison herself argues, the portrayal of ancestral and evolutionary tendencies may not answer entirely to the interrogatives related to serial killers (14).

Finally, in January 2023 Dr. Harrison and her team published another study, more lengthy and comprehensive than the previous two, *Just as Deadly: The Psychology of Female Serial Killers*. The aim of this work is proving female-perpetrated serial murder, although more rare than male perpetrated serial murder, is equally sheer and lethal. This study builds on the previous ones in stating that the most common motive of a "FSK" is hedonistic, that is to say she kills for profit, thrill or comfort: as per Dr. Harrison's findings, in fact, such killers were presumably raised in a lower class environment and took extreme measures to obtain financial stability (86). Dr. Harrison argues that previous research has shown "the confluence of traumatic experiences and mental health issues likely created violent proclivities in the FSKs" (179): to further exemplify this connection, she goes on to argue that abuse, illness or adverse experiences of any kind underwent during childhood change the way the brain adapts to information while growing up, and may lead to the development of one (or more than one) psychiatric disorder, which causes brain alteration, increasing chances of later life psychopathology.

1.3 Characteristics of women serial killers

In 2016, a study conducted by Dr. Mike Aamodt at Radford University showed the United States to be the birthplace of more serial killers than any other country in the world: the data reveals 65.78% of the world's serial killers are born in the USA. Though the reason behind this is unclear, Brett Nava-Coulter, professor of Sociology of Violence at Tufts

University (Massachusetts), argues it has to do with easier gun access as well as poor mental health treatment. Given their rarity, the characteristics of women serial killers are seldom taken into account when defining "serial killing." As a consequence, collective consciousness has come to consider female serial murderers as a myth. Since "no one believes that a woman could kill multiple victims" (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000: 13), and since the majority of reported and investigated serial killer cases are perpetrated by young white men, female-perpetrated serial homicide has been overlooked and underestimated by both the media and the law enforcement. Psychological research studies focus on the mind of the male serial perpetrator and the term "serial killer" has come to carry the characteristics of male serial killing into our collective consciousness. It should, thus, come as no surprise that female serial killers are not as represented in the media as their male counterparts as, Dr. Harrison's 2023 study finds, only one out of 6 serial killers is a woman. As a consequence, considering only an estimated 2% of all the murders committed in the United States between the years 1821 and 2008 was carried out by a serial killer, taking 1/6 of that percentage would result in a 0.3 % possibility of a woman serial murderer.

Both male and female serial killers share background characteristics: for example, both are likely to have undergone neglect and / or physical, sexual or emotional abuse during childhood years at the hands of a family member or family friend (Scott, 2010) and both are likely to be affected by psychopathy (Skeem, 2011: 100); in addition, both are likely to get a high score on one – or more than one – of the MacDonald triad tests.[5]

At any rate, though they do share the aforementioned characteristics, the two groups differ greatly in many aspects that concern serial murder. To begin with, the most common motive in female-perpetrated serial murder is hedonistic, that is to say, the killing is committed for profit, thrill or comfort: in other words, women are more likely to kill for

[5] The MacDonald Triad is a set of three factors which are said to be predictive of future violent tendencies. Such factors are: pyromania (i.e. an obsession in setting either small or big fires), enuresis (i.e. consistent bed-wetting beyond the age of 12) and zoo-sadism (i.e. hurting, torturing or killing pets and animals).

financial gain, while sexual motives are extremely rare. On the other hand, men are more likely to kill for sexual gratification (Fox, 2018; Harrison, 2019). Furthermore, women serial killers seldom engage in "behaviors unnecessary to murder" (Wiest, 2011: 72) such as stalking, kidnapping, rape, mutilation, cannibalism and necrophilia, as sadistic motives rarely come to pass in such occurrences (Vronsky, 2007: 33). On the contrary, this trait is predominant in male perpetrated serial murder: MSKs, in fact, tend to stalk, "hunt down," their victims before killing them (Harrison, 2019: 4), they are persistent, as they patrol their victim and study their routines in order to find the right time to attack (Duntley & Buss, 2012).

Another difference lies in the choice of victims. Women serial killers are more likely to target people they share a degree of intimacy with (ranging from acquaintances to family members), whereas men serial killers are more likely to victimize strangers (Gurian, 2009). Of note, male serial killers are usually more physically aggressive (Harrison, 2019: 6), whereas female serial killers tend not to leave physical marks: nonetheless, Anne Campbell (1999) argued that women can be aggressive when it comes to acquiring or safeguarding necessary resources. Alongside motives, methods also differ: whereas female serial killers are more likely to use poison, men serial killers are more likely to shoot or asphyxiate their victims (Call, 2021). Curiously enough, both Aileen Wuornos and Dre Greene represent an exception, given that, as will be outlined in the following chapters, their backgrounds and methods overlap with the general profile of men serial killers more than to that of women serial killers.

Generally, female serial killers do not move geographically (Hickey, 2016: 32), whereas male serial killers tend to operate interstate: this could have to do with the fact that most men serial killers are not in a relationship at the time of the killings, whereas the most part of women serial killers are either married or in a long-term relationship (Harrison, 2019: 12).

Another aspect that needs to be highlighted is the portrayal sketched by the media of both male and female serial killers: whereas men are depicted as evil geniuses who secretly want to get caught, women are not depicted as special in any way. The media have, in fact, wrapped up female serial killers into one category, the "black widows": this particular type refers to women who kill several people – typically partners – for financial reasons via the employment of low-profile weapons, namely poison. As a consequence, the main trait assigned to "black widows" is their necessity of having a relationship with their victims, being close to them. Although David Kelleher and C.L. Kelleher (1998) argued that the majority of female serial killers fall into the "black widow" category, and while it is true that they are more likely to have a relationship at the time of the murders than male serial killers are, not all women serial killers are "black widows". As has been outlined thus far, in fact, not all women serial killers murder their partners – or only their partners.

The media's underrepresentation of female serial killers reflects in the nicknames assigned to them: the monikers appointed to male serial killers recall the brutality of their crimes (e.g. "The Boston Strangler," "The Milwaukee Cannibal," "Jack The Ripper"), whereas those selected for female serial killers are more frequently related to their gender (e.g. "Grinning Granny," "Jolly Jane," "The Angel Maker"; (Harrison, 2019: 12). One additional difference lies in the relationship the killers have with the media: on the one hand, in fact, women serial killers are more reluctant in releasing interviews (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000); on the other hand, men serial killers tend to brag about their crimes (Vronsky, 2004).

One final distinction can be found in the convictions determined for the two categories. When facing a jury, in fact, a male serial killer is more likely to obtain the death penalty; conversely, female serial killers are less likely to be executed and more likely to be incarcerated for an extended period of time (Harrison, 2019: 12).

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN SERIAL KILLERS ON TV AND SCREEN

2.1 The rise of (women) serial killers in U.S. media

In the last three to four decades, the figure of the serial killer has become ever more popular, transforming into a celebrity, a personality to worship and obsess over. But why is the topic of serial murder so fashionable, nowadays?

That of serial killing was initially perceived to be an issue mainly impacting the United States,[6] a matter which was "frequently attributed to the excess of pathological American culture" (Haggerty, 2009: 168) and that is now regarded as an attack on society. Serial killing has become a social problem and, as such, is thoroughly covered by the media. Given that media narratives generally shape what societies know, come to view and think of crime, it may also come to influence – and alter – the way the audience sees offenders as well as the justice system (Muraskin & Domash, 2006).

Serial murderers, in fact, represent a never-ending source of profit for the media: during the initial stages of the hunt, the killer is still at large and the victims' families may be willing to talk publicly (Gekoski et al., 2012); when the perpetrator is caught, coverage is devoted not only to how they were caught or the time they are serving in jail, but also to matters that do not involve their crimes, namely their day-to-day life and childhood (Gekoski et al., 2012). In addition, media coverage is dedicated to trial, death sentence and execution (if warranted) along with anniversary of crimes (Wiest, 2011: 95). The media's attempt at influencing, and

[6] cf. "Serial Killer Statistics" by Dr. Mike Aamodt, September 4th 2016.

thus controlling, the issue of serial killing dates back to 1984,[7] when, in order to obtain a funding from the Senate for what was to become the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime, the FBI claimed that 35 serial killers had murdered over 5.000 victims (Jenkins, 1994). The issue was, consequently, blown out of proportions and turned into a matter of social security, thus enabling the FBI to expand their funding – and jurisdictional power (Schmid, 2005).

A further possible reason to rationalize some people's fascination with serial killers is the enjoyment of the feelings deriving from adrenaline, that is released in our bodies when experiencing fright (Harrison, 2016: 10). As Brett Nava Coulter argued, some people are drawn to the macabre in order to leave their mundane lives behind: "the more grisly something is, the more it exits the realm of reality and enters the realm of fantasy, and the more fascinated we are by it." The same applies to the interest towards experiences related to dark tourism: as Philip Stone (2005) argues, tourists are drawn to sites associated with pain, suffering and death as a way to heighten their sense of morality, while finding comfort in their personal distance from these occurrences (Barton & Brown, 2012).

The quintessential example is the Museum of Death, located on Selma Avenue, Los Angeles. The museum is filled with death-related symbols as well as torture devices and deathly instruments, such as an electric chair and the guillotine employed to execute French serial killer Henry Landru in 1922. The exhibition is adorned with pictures re-creating famous crime scenes and practical demonstrations are held for the use of embalming tools. Finally, a room is dedicated to serial killers and decorated with newspaper clippings and letters sent to well-known serial murderers by the owners of the museum, JD Healy and Catherine Shultz, dating back to when they first started their macabre collection in the 1970s.

[7] For instances of serial killing taking place before this time-frame in the United States, cf. Anna De Biasio (2016).

A desire to enjoy frightful experiences while maintaining a safe distance also applies to fictionalized serial murder storylines, a favorite of recent TV shows and movies. Cult movies such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or *Psycho* (1960) enable viewers to indulge in their fascination with serial killers in the safety of their own homes. Furthermore, throughout the 20th and 21st century, true-crime has developed into its own genre, now so popular even non-fictional accounts of homicides are of interest. There are websites through which to purchase items that either recall those possessed by serial killers (e.g., Ted Bundy's 1968 Volkswagen Beetle), t-shirts carrying punch-lines related to serial murder printed on them (e.g., a t-shirt, on sell on E-bay, reading "Burn, Bundy, Burn. Bundy's last charge in life," alongside a sketch of Bundy sitting on the electric chair) or items formerly owned by famous serial killers (e.g., paintings by John Wayne Gacy).

The collection of "murderabilia" (Fox & Levin, 2005: 37) – that is to say, items through which to be reminded of famous murders –, puts viewers in touch with violence and placates their curiosity, whilst enlarging the celebrity status of the perpetrator. Serial killers have, in fact, come to represent the extreme version of the anti-hero, deemed "idols of destruction" (Schmid, 2005) because they merge society's interest in death and violence with the idea of the rebellious outlaw: as such, they have gathered a "fandom," a fan-base (Hickey, 2015: 67). Serial killers' fans want to believe that their idols have been gravely misunderstood because of their flaws, that they can be re-deemed and become good people if only met with pity and love. Therefore, though serial killers inspire profoundly negative feelings, they also evoke fascination or even admiration.

Serial murderers embody the culture of violence dominating the modern era (Leyton, 2005), as their moral wickedness reveals issues within the Western society in general and American society in particular. With modern era, American culture has undergone changes that could represent another reason behind the popularization of serial killers. To begin with,

due to the expansion of city centers, it is now impossible for citizens of the globalized world to intimately get to know their neighbors one-on-one: as a result, people live in a "society of strangers" (Haggerty, 2009: 175) and in constant fear of being injured, killed or otherwise abused by someone that they do not know.

Secondly, fascination with brutality, a byproduct of the American culture, characterizes modern-age America because of its glorification of violence (Castle & Hensley, 2002), especially where the military is concerned: whenever conflicts arise, America is depicted as morally and legally allowed to go against an "enemy" that is often dehumanized, so as to secure psychic distance and detachment from the awareness of having caused someone's death (Haggerty, 2009: 179).

Finally, it could be argued that the increasing interest in the phenomenon of serial murder is due to a rise in serial killing cases. In actual fact, such a rise could be a perception leading back to an increased awareness of the phenomenon, improved police investigation, reporting procedures, record keeping and crime scene analysis (Wiest, 2011: 28), as well as population growth and increased attention from the media (Hickey, 2016: 313). Before the advent of the media, the greater part of serial killing cases would either go undetected (that is to say, victims were regarded as missing persons) or no link was found between victims killed by the same person in different States. Furthermore, this perception is enhanced by the fact that FBI has recently edited the definition of "serial murderer," lowering the victim-threshold from three to two (Walters et al. 2015), causing an increase in the cases labeled as perpetrated by serial killers.

What about women serial killers, then? As Georgie Weatherby perfectly summarizes, "the female killer is such a rare occurrence in modern times that the general public tends to resort to a heightened or frenzied state whenever such events happen" (2008: 8). Given that the female offender represents an anomaly, an abnormality, she is depicted accordingly by the

media, through the reinforcement and propagation of stereotypes (Hodgkinson et. al, 2017). Since the 1970s, the only women whose arrest is deemed newsworthy are those who do not respect the dictates of society, the "doubly deviants" who do not conform to societal standards nor to appropriate gender behavior, in their committing crimes usually reserved to men (Easteal, 2015: 35). Such defiant women become outcasts and "must be punished to set an example so other women are not tempted to do the same" (Muraskin & Domash, 2006: 118). Because of their unnatural actions, female perpetrators are usually depicted in the media as unstable or insane, evil manipulators or sexual deviants, and their actions are linked back to a hormonal imbalance, a disorder in their reproductive system or a medical condition (Easteal, 2001: 22). Hence, they are seen as aberrations to true womanhood, they are masculinized and demonized, caricatured as monsters and portrayed as 'femme fatales' who employ their sexuality to lure their victims (Naylor, 2001: 168).

By means of sensationalism, stereotypes and misogyny, female offenders are cast out of the protective sphere of femininity (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006: 29) and used as a cautionary tale to discipline women about womanhood. The anomalous behavior of women serial killers is depicted in the media by means of words such as "violent, swearing, impatient, unable to love and sexually promiscuous" (Naylor, 2001: 168) and accompanied with descriptions and pictures of unattractive and overweight women. Taking this into account, the media representation can certainly be a reason behind the sensationalism of female serial killers as women offenders are usually depicted, in Western society, as far more dangerous than their male counterparts, because their crimes are the result of pathological disorders that turned them into monsters (Keeney & Heide: 1994).

The first instance of the media representing a female perpetrator as a threat to masculinity is found with Francine Hughes' case in 1977. Hughes was charged and tried with her husband's murder and hers was the first case involving a battered woman killing in self-

defense (Jones, 1980: 288). Her acquittal was perceived to be a legal hunting-period on men, a perception driven by the fact magazines and newspapers were only reporting cases of women that had not been condemned. This increased the idea that women "were rarely if ever convicted of murder" (Jones, 1980: 292) by notion of temporary insanity.

Though it was depicted as unfounded at the time of Hughes' arrest, the notion Western society tends to view female criminals as victims and is, thus, reluctant to convict them, turned out to be true. In fact, through a study of U.S. newspaper stories published between 2000 and 2003, Jessica Wozniak and Kathy McCloseky found that men who killed their partners were held accountable in 98.6% of cases, whereas women killers only 43.3% of times (2010: 946).

In the 1970s, due to the interest within the feminist movement around the topic of spousal abuse, the issue of battered women became central in U.S. media, so much so that *Ms. Magazine* devoted the entire Gazette section to the topic in the August 1976 issue. At the time, it was only possible for the abuser to be arrested if assault occurred at the presence of the police: therefore, considering the intimate nature of spousal abuse, it was unlikely that battered wives could be able to prove their enduring abuse. After Hughes' case made the headlines, due to the uncommonness of self-defense narratives (Noh et.al., 2010: 120), women who killed their partners were labeled as insane or showing symptoms of Battered Woman Syndrome[8] and considered as transgressors to gender boundaries (Hinds & Stacey, 2001: 170). As Marianne Noh argues, "members of the media may rely on a particular 'angle' or 'frame' to construct their accounts, rather than attempting to provide an objective or 'balanced' report of incidents when a battered woman kills" (2010: 123). The crimes committed by women are, in fact, usually over-criminalized in the media due to the

[8] Battered woman syndrome is considered to be a sub-category of post-traumatic stress disorder, resulting from the physical, psychological and / or sexual abuse endured at the hands of the partner. It can lead to depression, anxiety or even health issues and can result in the development of "survival personality," that is to say the person acting out of fear to avoid further harm (Bensley et. al., 2003: 38-44).

perpetrator's gender and to the fact that the public is not aware or even interested if a man commits the same crime.

As mentioned, whenever the media is covering a female-perpetrated crime, unattractiveness is usually employed to justify the felony (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 23). In addition, information of past sexual exploitation is used against the perpetrator (that is to say, the woman), so as to "attract attention to the sexual dimensions of women and / or their violence and away from other elements" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 8). Contextual details are either minimized or excluded altogether (Sandman, 2022: 250), thus turning criminal narratives into sexualized stories. Furthermore, when covering cases of women killing men, the media employ direct quotes from those who knew the victim as testimony to his character; when the opposite scenario occurs, the stress is put on the abuse that the victim had endured at the hands of her harasser (Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010: 934).

It could, thus, be argued that the increasing media fascination with female serial killers is due to the rising awareness that women do not only kill in self-defense. In 1984 already, Ralph Weisheit demonstrated that 73% of female homicide offenders was also motivated by economic reasons and that 26% was *only* motivated by economic gain – as Hickey puts it: "for some, the needs for economic and psychological well-being are virtually the same" (2016: 315). Furthermore, a surge in targeting strangers was studied in women serial killers: such a choice of victim enhances the media coverage, especially when concerned with local killers (Hickey, 2016: 332).

The perception that female-perpetrated serial murders are on the rise is also mirrored in contemporary films, TV shows and true-crime documentaries, that are more than ever focusing on violent women.

2.2 Cinema

The media's fascination with women serial murder is exemplified in the employment of the theme of female criminality in various entertainment mediums (Schechter, 2003). The representations of violent women in cinema that I will examine are also useful to exemplify the parameters behind the choice of the serial killers for the study cases in Chapters 3 and 4.

Most of the studies conducted on the cinematic representation of serial murders committed by women are qualitative or quantitative research-oriented analysis, aiming at clarifying the relation between the cinematic representation of female serial killing and the audience's response. On the one hand, as for quantitative research, the most thorough study was conducted by Hickey in 2016: he found over 500 movies have been made about serial killers between the years 2000 and 2015 alone, thus stressing how the topic achieved social and critical success over the years. On the other hand, as for qualitative research, in his 2021 study, "The Portrayal of Female Serial Murder in Film," Corey Call analyzes the content of 38 films featuring acts of female-perpetrated serial murder in order to understand what information the public may glean about female serial murderers from films.

Some of the more recent movies featuring female-perpetrated serial murder concern a protagonist driven by a motive different than profit. In *Friday the 13th* (1980), though certainly a serial killer, Pamela Voorhees is driven by a desire to avenge the death of her son, Jason, drowned because of the neglect of the camp counselors. In *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), Jennifer seeks vengeance against the four men that brutally raped her and left her to die in the forest by torturing and killing them herself. In *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2* (2003-2004), Beatrix Kiddo, known as The Bride throughout the movie, is a former member of the assassination squad Deadly Vipers, who has her wedding crushed by Bill, leader of the group and father of her un-born child. Waking up from a 4-year coma to find her betrothed dead and her baby vanished, the Bride vows to kill all those that wronged her, beginning with a hospital

worker who had been selling her body while she was unconscious, making her way to the Deadly Vipers responsible of the massacre at her wedding, topping it off with Bill.

The protagonists to *Tragedy Girls* (2017) are mentally ill high school seniors turned serial killers to earn more followers for their homonymous true-crime blog. To do so, they kidnap serial killer Lowell Lehmann and blame murders that they commit on him. In *Orphan* (2009), Esther is a 33-year-old dwarf woman posing as an orphaned girl so as to seduce foster fathers, start a relationship with them and kill foster mothers. The reason why neither is involved in this study concerns the fact that they do not possess all the characteristics: though mentally ill and committing their murders for profit, the Tragedy Girls are not individual serial killers and none of these killers belong to a LGBTQIA+ group, nor is ever deemed "unattractive" throughout the respective films. In *Basic Instinct* (1992), serial killer Catherine Tramell engages in a relationship with detective Nick Curran while writing a novel about her next crime, his homicide. Although Catherine is a bisexual woman (hence, belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community) who performs her murders in ways unconventional to female killers, she cannot be described as "unattractive": on the contrary, she is portrayed as a femme fatale who employs her sensuality to get what she wants.

1977 *Suspiria* concerns a coven of witches involved in human sacrifices to maintain the power the cult's matriarch holds over their dance Academy. Similarly to *Tragedy Girls*, the murders are performed by the whole cult rather than by an individual killer. Additionally, the crimes are committed in Germany, where the movie is set, rather than in the United States. Finally, the killers are moved by a need to maintain their cult powerful, hence their motive is linked to profit: nonetheless, the fact that the murders are perpetrated through supernatural means renders it impossible to label the cult's disciples as "serial killers" in the conventional sense. The same goes for *Carrie* (1976): victim to lifelong bullying at the hands of her peers in school and abusive behaviors at the hands of her despotic, religiously fanatic mother,

Carrie executes her revenge through means of telekinesis, causing the death of most of her classmates in the school gym during prom night and then stopping her mother's heart, once back at home. It must be stressed that Carrie's killings cannot be considered "serial" as they all happen on the same night, hence she must be regarded as a "mass murderer," rather than a serial killer.

In the adaptation of another Stephen King novel, *Misery* (1990), the antagonist is a mentally unstable serial killer, ex-nurse Annie Wilkes. During his captivity in Wilkes' home, writer Paul Sheldon finds a scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings about the accidental deaths of Wilkes' patients, both elderly people and infants, as well as Wilkes' own father's. Though no mention is made of her *modus operandi* in the novel nor in the movie, it is safe to assume that, given no foul play was suspected and the cases were shut-off as "accidental," Wilkes would employ poison, a weapon conventionally associated with an "Angel of death." Nonetheless, she also proves to be prone to behaviors unnecessary to murder, such as torture on her favorite writer, Paul himself. In addition, she is said to have been married to a physical therapist, but the marriage only lasted one year due to her "mental cruelty." Her marital status allows us to presume she is a straight woman, hence not fit for this study.

Finally, two among the most well-known movies featuring female-perpetrated murder revolve around self-defense. In *Enough* (2002), Slim finds out her husband has been cheating on her: in order to end their marriage, she has to put her life in danger and end the chain of abuses. *The Burning Bed* (1984) follows Francine Hughes' trial for the murder of her violent, alcoholic husband, Mickey, after thirteen years of domestic abuse. Both Slim and Francine seek the help of the police as well as that of the abuser's family, but are accused of having done, said or worn something that has caused the man to react. Additionally, both are threatened by their abuser, who considers himself the breadwinner of the family, whereas

both women are housewives. It is self-evident that neither can be involved in this study, as they claimed one victim each and killed out of self-defense instead of profit.

2.3 TV shows

TV shows represent a relatively novel attraction, if compared to cinema. Nonetheless, in recent years the theme of female brutality has found its way into mainstream television as well. The depiction of male brutality on screen has not only been accepted, rather cultivated as a peculiarly masculine trait. On the contrary, female-perpetrated violence is generally portrayed as acceptable or appropriate whenever they are avenging a wrong. A fitting example is represented by the relationship between Perry and Celeste in *Big Little Lies* (2017-2019): engaged in a mutually abusive and toxic drifting marriage, the two often fight one another physically. Nevertheless, Perry clearly comes across as the abuser, whilst Celeste is just as clearly depicted as the victim. When, at the end of season one, Perry is accidentally killed by one of Celeste's friends attempting at defending her from his beatings, this crime is justified as a reaction to the abuses Celeste had to endure.

When a woman character is not depicted as a victim, she is, more times than not, portrayed as a heroine. As an example, let us consider the title-character to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003): unwillingly fated to battle supernatural evil forces, the Slayer is characterized by uncommon physical strength, agility and accelerated healing. However, not every quality to Buffy's characterization can be led back to her being the Slayer: in fact, she is invariably willing to sacrifice her life to further the cause and protect the people she loves.

The presence of positive protagonists similar to Buffy in female-led TV shows has been ascribed to a need, from female audiences, to recognize themselves in fictional characters (Womensmuseum.wordpress.com, 2017). Nonetheless, this does not imply every fan-favorite woman character to be a positive one. A suitable example can be found in the

female protagonist to *The Blacklist* (2013-2023), FBI Agent Elizabeth Keen. A desk-bound profiler turned active field agent, Elizabeth's goal is initially that of tracking criminals off the Blacklist, thus turning to violence to fulfill her tasks. Nonetheless, as the series progresses, she undergoes heavy losses – such as the death of her husband or having to leave her daughter behind – which turn her into an ambiguous, vindictive, mean-spirited avenger, willing to sacrifice anyone and anything to get the answers that she feels she deserves.

Another example of fan-favorite violent woman is Villanelle, the deuteragonist to *Killing Eve* (2018-2022): a trained Russian assassin, Villanelle is cold-blooded and reckless, unpredictable – a characteristic not usually associated with female characters –, due to her ability to hide what she is feeling and thinking. What makes Villanelle likeable is her ability to offer "a window into a life most women never get the chance to lead, a life defined by pure female desire and rage unfettered by financial worries, domestic obligations, and the quotidian violence of men" (Bastién, 2019).

The female audience is, thus, attracted to darker characters, especially antagonists, just as much as to positive ones. This is the case when the character's motives come across as understandable and when her personality or background is plausible to resonate with. A proper example is asylum nurse Mildred Ratched, protagonist to the homonymous series (2020), prequel to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). The quintessential "angel of death," nurse Ratched gains her position through means of blackmail, and represents the horrors of institutional correction in her being detached from her patients and capable of exploiting her authority. Through the show, she performs homicides or encourages patients to end their own life to be able to remove her foster brother – a serial murderer – from the asylum. The TV show version of Nurse Ratched is a more humanized rendition than the original one: given a first name and a family, none of which she possessed in the 1975

rendition, it is easy to sympathize with her self-appointed task of saving her brother whilst rooting for her romantic relationship to thrive.

Female-perpetrated murder is such a popular theme in contemporary television that TV shows, particularly limited series, are being run about true-crime stories as well. In the span of the last 18 months alone, two mini-series have been produced about Candy Montgomery. In both *Candy: A Death in Texas* (2022) and *Love and Death* (2023), the story is told of a 1980s housewife charged with killing her lover's wife with 41 blows of axe. Candy was found not guilty on basis of self-defense when she argued victim Betty Gore attacked her with the murder weapon, following a confrontation about the affair Candy was engaged in with Betty's husband.

Another TV show based on a true-crime story that aired around the same period of time is *The Thing about Pam* (2022). It concerns Pam Hupp's involvement in the death of Betsy Faria: the sole beneficiary of Faria's life insurance, Hupp testified against Betsy's husband during his trial in 2013, but was herself found guilty when his sentence was overturned. She is currently serving a life sentence for an unrelated murder committed in 2016.

Thus, on what grounds are these killers not included in this study? In both the historical case of Candy Montgomery and the fictionalized one of *Big Little Lies*, the murderesses did not commit serial murders. Furthermore, in both instances the homicide was performed in self-defense. *Killing Eve*'s Villanelle does not fit the pattern as she is an assassin, an enforcer, who is contacted and paid by a party to kill a target (Heide and Keeney, 1994). *The Blacklist*'s Elizabeth Keen does not fit the sample because, as an FBI agent, her killings are due to her job, and she does not derive any sort of pleasure from them. Buffy Summers is motivated by a noble cause, an obligation to prevent criminal supernatural behavior, which morally justifies her killings. Although belonging to a LGBTQIA+ group, Nurse Ratched is portrayed in the series as an "Angel of death," given that she intentionally

harms the people in her care to fulfill her goal. Much in the way of *Misery*'s Annie Wilkes, thus, no foul play is suspected and the deaths are considered "accidental." Finally, Pam Hupp does not fit the sample not only because she does not belong to a LGBTQIA+ group, but also because the methods that she employs to kill her victims would allow the deaths to be ruled out as accidental.

2.4 Documentaries

In the last several decades, the genre of true-crime has established itself as a growing medium, as its own category. Such a rise was consequent to the audience's interest in the Netflix show *Making a Murderer* (2015-2018), which allowed the streaming platform to expand their true-crime production. The interest around true-crime genre derives from its allowing a re-enactment of the events, its creating a narrative for the case as well as forging a relationship between the audience and the case itself. Viewers are attracted by the possibility of witnessing violence in the safety of their own homes and out of harm's way: women in particular have been found to be interested in true-crime stories, especially if they provide insight in the killer's motives and / or strategies to avoid or flee capture (Spanner).

Nevertheless, true-crime has also been criticized for promoting the erasure of the victims from the serial killing narrative. As has been thus far outlined, the stress is often put on the personality, secrets and early life of the killers, hence the victims are only regarded as casualties (Cheng & Flynn, 2023). Another critique that has been moved to true-crime is its employment of mental illness to build a narrative complex and mysterious enough to attract the public. Featuring interviews of psychologists detailing the misdiagnosed mental illness that a killer was affected by, further stigmatizes the theme of mental illness, as does the depiction of mentally ill killers as "monsters."

Given that women serial killers constitute a small percentage of serial perpetrators, the greater part of true-crime documentaries regards male serial murderers: this does not mean, however, that no documentary has been produced around a female serial killer.

Rose West: Born Evil? (2021) is a documentary investigating the life of English serial killer Rosemary West who, between 1973 and 1987, tortured and murdered 9 young women with the aid of her husband, Fred. She was also convicted of the murder of her own stepdaughter, whom she had killed in 1971. Physically and sexually abused by her paranoid schizophrenic father since childhood, Rosemary grew to exhibit sexually charged behaviors and started a relationship with 27-year-old Fred West at age 15. Consequently, she became a parent to the daughters he'd had from a previous relationship and she started abusing them while Fred was serving time in jail. Working as a prostitute in the family home, West would abduct, rape and kill young women, who were then buried in the house's premises. In 1992, Fred was arrested for raping their 13-year-old daughter, and Rosemary was also arrested for child cruelty: as a consequence, the children were placed into foster care and police started investigating the disappearance of the couple's eldest daughter, Heather. Heather's corpse was to be found underneath the house's patio in February 1994 (Sounes, 1995: 227), allowing for the arrest of the couple. While awaiting trail, Fred committed suicide; Rose, on the other hand, was sentenced to life imprisonment (Sounes, 1995: 332).

Another woman serial child murderer who acted alongside her partner and whose story inspired a documentary is Myra Hindley. *Myra: The Making of a Monster* (2003) revolves around the relationship Hindley had with Ian Brady, alongside whom she killed at least 5 children between 1963 and 1965. The two had started a relationship in 1961 and would initially spend their lunch break reading accounts of Nazi atrocities – Hindley had even got in the habit of copying an ideal of Aryan perfection, bleaching her hair and wearing red lipstick (Lee, 2010: 93). The couple was arrested when Hindley's brother-in-law contacted the police

and reported them. Convicted to life imprisonment, Hindley claimed that she had only taken part in the killings because Brady had drugged her, was blackmailing her with pornographic photos, and threatening to kill her sister (Topping, 1989: 39).

A similar motivation was brought forward by Canadian serial killer Karla Homolka, who, between 1990 and 1992, kidnapped, raped and murdered three minors, including her own sister. Homolka's crimes were committed with the aid of her husband, Paul Bernardo, and Homolka stated that she only partook in the crimes out of fear for her own life, given Bernardo was abusive. The evidence against Bernardo, whom, she stated, was the sole perpetrator of the murders, laid in Homolka's testimony, hence her credibility as a witness had to be preserved and her involvement in the cases virtually diminished. Her status as willing accomplice to the rapes and murders only emerged after she'd already been convicted to 12 years of imprisonment for manslaughter. These cases inspired the *Ken and Barbie Killers: The Lost Murder Tapes* docu-series in 2021.

Another example of a documentary dealing with serial child murder is *The Angel of Death* (2005), about English woman serial killer Beverly Allit. Working as a nurse, Allit killed 4 infants, attempted at murdering 3 more and caused severe bodily harm to an additional 6 in the span of 59 days between February and April 1991 (Appleyard, 1994: 287). Allit, who was convicted to 13 consecutive life sentences, was not found mentally ill, though it is believed she would illustrate symptoms to or physically falsify illnesses in patients under her care to attract attention on herself – conforming the definition of Munchausen syndrome by proxy (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 324).

Neither of the afore delineated cases are sampled for further analysis in this study as the events happened in the United Kingdom or in Canada, rather than in the United States. Moreover, the majority of the crimes outlined are perpetrated by a couple of killers, rather than an individual killer.

As regards women serial killers active on U.S. soil, the instances of true-crime documentaries are fewer. To begin with, *Murders at the Boarding House,* a 2021 docu-series concerning the crimes that Dorothea Puente, also known as "the death-house landlady," committed between 1982 and 1988 in Sacramento (California). Puente, a diagnosed pathological liar with unstable personality, ran a boarding house to aid and assist alcoholics, homeless people and mentally ill individuals: she was convicted of three murders, but her victim count is as high as nine elderly and mentally disabled tenants.

A second example is Amy Bishop: professor of biology at Huntsville University (Alabama), Bishop shot a total of 6 colleagues during a biology department faculty meeting in March 2010, killing 3 and injuring 3 more. Having been denied tenure and the appeal to revise the decision, Bishop was facing the possibility of losing her teaching position: nonetheless, the meeting during which she opened fire was not being held to discuss her tenure. After her arrest, numerous previous incidents involving Bishop – including her fatally shooting her 18-year-old brother in 1986 – were looked into by the police. No true-crime documentary, movie or TV series has ever been produced on the Huntsville shooting, however Bishop was the protagonist of one *Snapped* episode in 2013 and two true-crime books (*A Professor's Rage: The Chilling True Story of Harvard PhD. Amy Bishop, her Brother's Mysterious Death and Shooting Spree that Shocked the Nation* and *Murder Untenured: Amy Bishop's Rampage*) were published in 2011 and 2013 respectively.

One last example is *Manson: The Women*, a 2019 docu-series involving four women members of Charles Manson's "Family." Made up of approximately 100 followers – the most part of which were middle-class women, attracted to hippie culture and fascinated by Manson himself –, the "Family" was based in California and active between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Manson would run the cult through hippie-style principles (such as acceptance

and free love); furthermore, he alone would decide when acolytes were to eat, sleep, have sex – and with whom – or take LSD – the intake of which he would dictate (Winn, 2017: 168). None of the four female members featured in the docu-series was actively involved in the 1969 Tate-La Bianca murders that made the "Family" infamous. Nonetheless, three out of four were incarcerated on different counts throughout the 1970s: Gypsy served 90 days for witness intimidation; Blue served 10 years for conspiracy; Squeaky was sentenced to life imprisonment after attempting the assassination of President Ford in 1975. As far as Snake is concerned, she was never actively involved in any felony.

While they were all young women when they first joined the "Family," Snake – regarded as the youngest member of the cult – was only 13 years old when she was first brought to the commune by her hippie parents and given written permission to live with Manson. In addition, though they all joined the commune during the founding year of 1967, Squeaky was one of the historical members of the group, the second woman (after Mary Brunner) to join Manson's community. As far as 2019. Blue and Squeaky were still loyal to the crusade and its leader, whereas Gypsy and Snake had disassociated themselves from the "Family."

The U.S. true-crime instances delineated above are not sampled in this study for various reasons. Amy Bishop cannot be considered a serial killer, given that her victims were all claimed in the span of one day: consequently, she is to be referred to as a "mass murderer." Though a serial killer whose motive was profit, Dorothea Puente does not belong to any LGBTQIA+ group, as she had been married to three different men by the time of her first murder. Finally, the Manson family's women would not act on their own initiative, rather they were brainwashed and prompted – either directly or indirectly – by the cult's charismatic leader, whom they came to view as a messiah.

The only American female serial killer who has been the protagonist of various documentaries is Aileen Wuornos, whom many still consider as the first woman serial murderer in the history of the United States. Two of the documentaries regarding Aileen will be analyzed in the course of the next Chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THE MULTIPLE PORTRAITS OF AILEEN WUORNOS

3.1 The forgotten childhood of Aileen Wuornos

Though cases of female-perpetrated serial murders have been reported long before she was detected by the FBI, Aileen Wuornos is still regarded as the first woman serial killer on U.S. soil in American popular culture. Given the frequency of murder in the United States, the notoriety of criminal cases depends not so much on the brutality of the attacks nor on the number of casualties, but rather "on the attitude the media has toward saleable material" (Jenkins, 1993: 56). Thus, serial killing cases are required to feature a component that is shocking to the audience in order to arouse attention from the media.

In Aileen's case, the media was attracted by various features. To begin with, due to the rarity of female-perpetrated serial murder outside the killer's own family, the media as well as law enforcement had seemingly never considered the possibility of such an occurrence. In addition, the fact that Aileen worked as a prostitute would translate into her falling more easily into the category of the victim rather than that of the perpetrator of a violent crime, as far as the collective consciousness was concerned. Sex workers are, in fact, usually victims of homicides: as a consequence, Aileen represented a glitch in the American social mind. Moreover, considering that Aileen's victims were her own clients, she would target members of higher-status groups than her own (Wiest, 2011: 148). An additional element to be considered regards her killing method: unlike other women perpetrators, Aileen would employ a gun (rather than poison); she was also physically strong and could become aggressive when provoked, which means that her behavior was not consistent with that of the

typical woman killer. Wuornos' sexual orientation was also a feature that made her "more deviant in society's eyes and clashed with the socially constructed role that women should fill of the puritanical heterosexual wife and / or mother" (Muraskin & Domash, 2006: 132). Finally, the status of first American female serial killer was appointed to her because of the media's attempt at obtaining movie rights to cover her story before Wuornos had even been charged with a felony (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 216), further sensationalizing the popular depiction of her as a deviant, while at the same time generating sympathy (Horeck, 2007: 154) towards her.

Given that Wuornos represents the first study case of this work, various filmic representations inspired by her story will be analyzed throughout this Chapter. Namely: *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* (2021), which concerns the events – though heavily fictionalized – of Wuornos' life between March 1976 and July 1977; *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (1992) and *Monster* (2003), both revolving around the murders that Wuornos committed between 1989 and 1990, her relationship with Tyria Moore and the aftermath of her arrest; finally, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003), both serving as testimony for Aileen's final months of jail and her subsequent execution.

An aspect of Aileen's life that is seldom shown in cinematic representations of her story is her early life and childhood, which can be reasonably considered important for understanding how the traumas she endured as a child impacted the woman she was going to be.

The second child of 17-year-old Diane Wuornos and 22-year-old Leo Pittman, Aileen Carol Pittman was born in 1956. The couple had wedded in 1954, when Diane was only 14 – perhaps because Leo's grandmother lied about their ages (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 4) – and had welcomed a son, Keith, in the following year. Aileen never got to meet her father as

Leo, an abusive man with a difficult character and a deviant sexuality, took his own life in 1962 while serving a life sentence in a maximum security mental institution for kidnapping and raping a 7-year-old girl that he had taken across state lines (4). Diane had filed for divorce when she was 7 months pregnant with Aileen and, at age 21, she walked out on her children: it was 1960 and the children were left to the care of their maternal grandparents, Lauri and Britta Wuornos (Nalepa, 2013: 116). Aileen was only 4 at the time and being separated from her mother at such a young age translated into subconscious mental trauma.

The Wuornoses raised Aileen and Keith as their own biological children alongside their uncle and aunt and only told them the truth when Aileen was 11 years old.

It could be stated that the Pittman siblings were only removed from a dysfunctional family environment to be put in another one. Raised in Troy (Michigan), Aileen was often victim to Lauri's ferocious beatings. An authoritarian and an alcoholic who would abuse his wife and children, Lauri would have Aileen wash and condition the brown leather belt he had used to beat her (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 6). Neighbors recall the curtains tightly drawn (4) and classmates tell of how "Lee always had bruises on her arms, cheeks and chin" (7). The only person Aileen seemed to get along with was her older brother, Keith, with whom, it is said, she would have sexual intercourse.

Although she was drawn to the idea of becoming a nun, Aileen was soon involved in troubles. She developed an interest in matches when she was 6 years old and was involved in at least two incidents concerning fire, suffering facial burns when she tried and start a fire with a lighter fluid, and arm burns, when she accidentally started an explosion (6). A loner, Aileen was a "poor student with some artistic talent" (9) who would skip classes and report low grades. She had a destructive tendency and explosive temper that the school officials tried to improve by administrating a mild tranquilizer (Wuornos v. State, 1994). Additionally, Aileen was affected by a hearing impairment that was never properly treated, and also had

trouble concentrating. Wuornos' tendency to withdraw in her personal world whenever things went wrong, her inability to make friends and her difficulties in learning (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 228) clearly represent early signs of trauma: in keeping with Dr. Harrison's 2023 study, the abuses she underwent changed the way Wuornos' brain adapted to information, translating into violent behavior and yielding increased chances of later life psychopathology (179).

Wuornos reportedly had her first sexual encounter at age 11 (Nalepa, 2013: 116) and soon started exchanging sex for goods (mainly cigarettes and alcohol). By age 12 she was a heavy drinker, would refuse psychological help, resort to shoplifting and live intermittently in the woods to escape home.

In 1970, when she was 14 years old, Aileen became pregnant. The paternity was unknown and, though scholars believe the child might have been either Lauri's (Nalepa, 2013: 117) or Keith's (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 9), Aileen identified the father of the baby as a family friend who had raped her (Wuornos v. State, 1994). Aileen was 6 months pregnant when she shared the news with her grandparents and was sent to a home for unwed mothers, where "the staff found her hostile, uncooperative and unable to get along with the other girls in the same boat" (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 9). Wuornos gave birth to a baby boy in March 1971 and immediately put him up for adoption.

Once back to Troy, Aileen permanently left her grandparents' house and settled in the woods. When, in July 1971, Britta died of liver failure (she, too, was a heavy drinker), Lauri asked for his grandchildren to be removed from his house. Although now a ward of the State, Aileen dropped out of school and took up prostitution to make a living (14).

A few years later, in 1976, Lauri committed suicide by means of gas inhalation: Aileen, who had found the lifeless body (13), only attended the funeral to blow cigarette smoke in his face. That same year, Keith also passed away due to complications of his esophageal cancer.

Driven by grief for the death of her brother, Wuornos tried and commit suicide by shooting herself in the stomach.[9]

Of the events that characterized Aileen's childhood, very little is featured in any given movie or documentary on her life. In *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003), Diane Wuornos states Aileen's behavior to derive from her dangerous breach birth. In *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* (2021), a dying Keith blackmails Aileen to lure her into meeting him: when Keith mentions the abuses that they both endured at the hands of their grandfather, she snaps and kills him.

When Aileen is shown as a child in the opening scene of *Monster* (2003), she has bruises on her face, suggesting she is a victim of physical violence. Later on in the movie, she reveals her father and a friend of his physically abused her, which led to her getting pregnant when she was 14. Aileen also confesses having been kicked out of the family home just after having given birth – though no mention of the time she spent living in the woods is ever made. A reference to her relationship with her siblings is also made when Aileen tells her girlfriend Selby that she would always take care of them even after she'd been kicked out: this implies she was older than her siblings, but, in actual fact, she was the youngest.

Finally, *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (1992) presents Aileen confessing to Tyria that the child she had had when she was very young was the fruit of the physical abuses that she would endure at the hands of her grandfather.

The late 1970s and early 1980s mark Aileen's descent into a destructive spiral. Starting to work as a prostitute aged 16 (Wuornos v. State, 1994), Wuornos was arrested for the first time while in Colorado in May 1974. Charged with driving under the influence, disorderly conduct and with firing a .22-caliber pistol from a moving vehicle, she did not show up at her court date and was consequently also charged with failure to appear

[9] Between the years 1970 and 1978, ages 14 through 22, Aileen attempted suicide six times (Myers et al. 2005).

(Reynolds, 2004: 116). In 1976, at age 20, she settled in Florida, where she began working as a highway prostitute four days a week at the least (Wuornos v. State, 1994). Her days were filled with hitchhiking and financial uncertainty until she met Lewis Gratz Fell. 69-year-old president of a yacht club, Commodore Fell first met Aileen on the highway: whereas he was romantically interested in her, she was more intrigued by his wealth – that he had derived from railroad stocks and shares. The odd – couple married off rather hurriedly while in Kingsley (Georgia), two months after the death of Lauri Wuornos (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 16).

Issues arose in the marriage right away: while in Georgia, Aileen was involved in altercations at a local bar and was arrested for assault. Furthermore, Fell tried and impose his will on his much younger wife, threatening to stop her allowance to have her cooperating. As a response, Aileen seemingly beat him with his own walking cane and pointed a meat skewer to his throat (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 20). After this event, Fell filed a restraining order against his wife and their marriage was annulled shortly thereafter, after only 9 weeks, in July 1976. Consequently, Wuornos briefly moved back to Michigan, where she was arrested for assault and disturbing the peace, having thrown a billiard ball at the head of the bartender of *Bernie's Club* (Reynolds, 2004: 116). Within days from her arrest, on July 17th, her older brother Keith died, aged 21, of throat cancer. Aileen, who was the beneficiary of his army's life insurance, spent $10.000 in the span of three months to buy luxuries – including a new car she was shortly thereafter to crash in an accident – and paying fines that she had been issued on charges of drunk driving (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 21).

In the years that followed, Aileen moved to and settled in the State of Florida, where her troubles with justice continued. In May 1981, she was arrested for armed robbery of a convenience store, where she stole two packs of cigarettes and $35, "memorably wearing a bikini as she brandished a .22-caliber pistol" (Nalepa, 2013: 118). Convicted to a three-year

sentence, she was released after 18 months, in June 1983. Less than a year after her release, Wuornos was again arrested for attempting to pass forged checks at a bank in Key West. Finally, in January 1986, she was arrested – under the name Lori Grody – for car theft, resisting arrest and obstruction of justice, in Miami (Reynolds, 2004: 117-118).

3.2 Mrs. Fell. *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman (2021)*

Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman, 2021 movie by Daniel Farrands, concerns Aileen's early days working as a highway prostitute in Florida, her early crimes and her marriage to Lewis Fell. The movie can hardly be considered a biographic film, rather it is a thriller deeply rooted in 1980s horror movies – particularly *Halloween* (1978), which most of all inspired Farrands in the making of this and other movies about high-interest media cases concerning crimes perpetrated by or against women (Decker, 2020).[10]

The movie opens with Aileen telling of how, since she was a child, she has been obsessed with damsels taking charge of their own destiny through means of a weapon of destruction. Fascinated with these figures, she would chase a dream of fame that is, now, on the verge of becoming true. It is the night before her execution and Aileen is releasing her final interview to documentary-maker Peter,[11] who wants to capture a part of Aileen's life that has not yet been featured in the media. Hence, she tells of how she got to Deland (Florida) in 1976, under the name "Lee."

On July 4th, she approaches a small group of people around her age and befriends Jennifer Fell: Jennifer is intrigued by Aileen's ability to stand up for herself and invites her to sleep over at her father's house. In actual fact, Fell's only daughter, born to his first marriage, was named Katherine: though little is known about her, it was possible to place her birth year

[10] Among the director's most well known movies are, in fact, *The Murder of Nicole Brown Simpson* (2019) and *The Haunting of Sharon Tate* (2019).

[11] As Nick Broomfield was the sole reporter Aileen released any statement to during her time on the death row, it is plausible that the character of Peter is based on him.

between 1928 and 1932. This would mean that she was not Aileen's peer at all, as Katherine would have been aged 44 to 48 when the events of the movie unfold, whilst Aileen was just 20. As a consequence, Jennifer, the character that is based on Katherine, is portrayed as much younger in the movie to shorten the age gap between her and Aileen, allowing the formation of a more spontaneous bond between the two.

After having spent the night at the Fells', in the morning Aileen meets Jennifer's father, Commodore Lewis Fell. Although in the movie Jennifer states her father is a recent widower, as a matter of fact, before marrying Aileen, Fell was a divorcee. Additionally, the real-life Wuornos and Fell met through her job as a prostitute. In any case, a mere two weeks after their first meeting, the two got married.

The movie's portrayal of events proceeds with the wedding night, during which Aileen goes out to *The Last Resort Bar*, once Fell is asleep. At the bar, she meets a man, with whom she takes drugs: upon fighting the man, who is about to rape her, in front of the police, Wuornos is charged with assault and spends the night in jail.

The unfolding of the real events, though, was rather different. As Wuornos and Fell are reported to have wedded in March 1976, the events concerning her arrest of July 13th did not take place on their wedding night: on the contrary, considering their marriage only lasted for about 9 weeks, the couple had already parted ways by that time. In addition, Aileen was arrested in Michigan, not Florida, as suggested in the movie. Finally, when, in the movie, Aileen is arrested at *The Last Resort Bar*, she claims self-defense: upon her real-life arrest at *Bernie's Club*,[12] Wuornos was not acting in self-defense, but rather she was the one that started conflict, by throwing a cue-ball at the head of the bartender (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 18).

[12] The fact that Aileen's 1976 arrest takes place, in the movie, at *The Last Resort* bikers' club is inaccurate for two main reasons: first of all, the club had not been opened yet; secondly, it is at *The Last Resort* that Aileen is arrested for the seven murders she had committed, in 1991.

The American Boogeywoman depicts Aileen as independent and stubborn, given that she refuses any help from other people, stating “I don’t need no one.” A smart woman with a temper, she is looked down on by other people because of the way she looks: Aileen’s movie persona is arguably shaped on terms of hostile sexism, as Wuornos comes across as a manipulative thief and a liar, who is willing to use seduction to get her way. Such a perception will turn out to be more than just a prejudice as, throughout the movie, Wuornos is able to substitute Jennifer as beneficiary of Fell’s fortune and to become an authorized signer of all of the Commodore’s personal accounts.

Victor Miller, Fell's business advisor, reveals to Jennifer that Wuornos is a convicted felon: as Aileen has started stealing checks from Lewis' study and cashing them to finance her addictions and luxurious lifestyle, Victor offers her a $10.000 settlement to divorce Fell. Nevertheless, Aileen refuses the money because she is aware of her husband’s net worth, stating “My husband is worth millions and so am I.” When their confrontation turns physical, Aileen kills Victor and his son Grady in self-defense and disposes of their bodies in the Fell Mansion.

It is necessary to stress that the very fact that Aileen is the protagonist of the story allows the audience to comprehend her actions and desires more easily (Hickey, 1991). Her internal monologues further humanize her, allowing the viewer to empathize with her and feel her emotions. Still, Wuornos is an unreliable narrator who is directing her narrative in a way that allows for the justification of her crimes as self-defense: the rendition of events, thus, aims at conveying the idea that every man she had met throughout her life wanted to either harass her, exploit her or rape her. As a consequence, each male character in the movie is a potential harasser or killer. This goal is further clarified when Aileen is blackmailed by her brother Keith with visual evidence that would prove her responsible for the Miller murders. Keith, who is about to die of esophageal cancer, opens up with Lee about how his new-found

faith has helped him overcome the traumatic memories of the abuses their grandfather put them through. Upon reminiscing about those upsetting childhood times, Wuornos snaps, first asphyxiating her brother with a pillow and then shooting him in the head.

Having stolen from Fell's bank account, Aileen is now leaving Deland, but is stopped by Commodore Fell. Lewis reveals that he has been convinced by Jennifer to move his fortune to another account to keep it from his wife, after finding out about her tumultuous past from Wuornos' mother, Diane. Caught in the act of stealing and tangled in her own lies, Aileen tries to kill both Lewis and Jennifer, but her attempt is unsuccessful. Finally, as the Fells witness Aileen's fall into the ocean, they are led to believe she has drowned to death: instead, she is rescued by local fishermen in the area of St. Johns River. The movie ends with Aileen resuming her job as a prostitute on the Florida highways.

A feature to be considered when dealing with the fictionalization of events in *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* regards the crimes that Aileen commits. In the movie, in fact, Wuornos is responsible for the murders of her own brother Keith as well as Victor Miller and his son. As regards Keith's death, no foul play was ever suspected given that, as fictionalized filmmaker Peter stresses in the course of the movie, his passing was led back to his illness. In addition, the character of Victor Miller is imaginary, that is to say no person by that name or sharing any characteristic with him was involved with either Aileen Wuornos or Lewis Fell in those years. Hence, it could be argued that additional murders have been attributed to Aileen so as to portray her as a more ruthless and monstrous killer, as though the seven murders she did indeed commit were not gory enough.

One further aspect to be discussed is Aileen's physical appearance in the movie. Through a clean face and revealing clothes, Wuornos is turned into a deadly woman, a femme fatale, whose main characteristic is her "quality of to-be-looked-at-ness" (Doane, 1991: 45), that is to say her attractiveness.

Aileen's appearance proves to be essential during the scene of her first meeting with

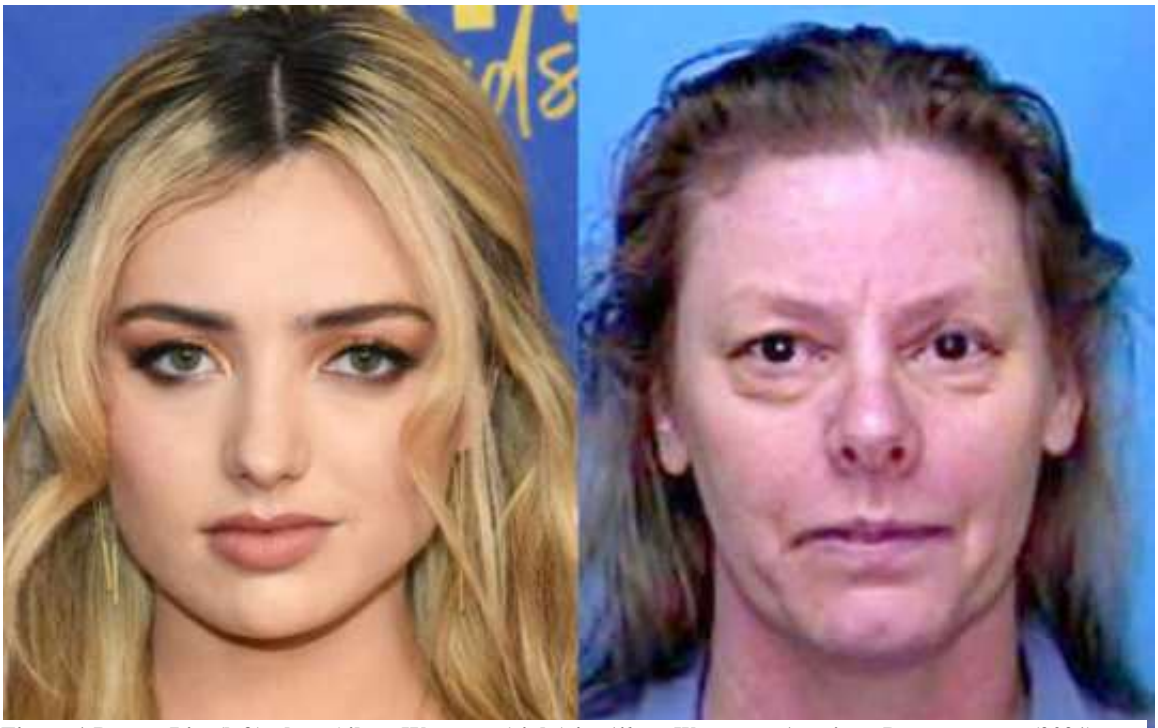

Figure 1 Peyton List (left) plays Aileen Wuornos (right) in *Aileen Wuornos: American Boogeywoman* (2021).

Commodore Fell. Having spent the night at the Fells, her clothes in the wash, Aileen puts on a robe that she finds in the bathroom, then moves to the kitchen for breakfast. Upon her entrance in the room, Jennifer asks her to put on something else, explaining the robe used to belong to her mother, but Lewis stops her and, staring at Aileen's breasts with insistency, states "You look perfectly fine in that robe."

As far as camera work is concerned, two types of frames are most used in the sequence: single and 2-shots. 2-shot frames are the dominant type: interestingly, the two characters involved in the frame are either Jennifer and her father or Aileen and Fell, so as to suggest that the two couples are mutually exclusive. It is not a case, in fact, that Aileen and Jennifer never share a 2-shot frame in this scene. Such an interpretation is corroborated when, later on in the narration, Aileen tells Fell that, since they got married, Jennifer hates her, as she has taken her father from her; to this, Fell replies "no woman will ever take me away from my daughter."

As regards single-shots, the intentions they convey shift with every framed character. In particular, Lewis' smile proves that he is already rather attracted to Aileen, mainly because of

her physique, as he continues watching over her as they chat. Conversely, Jennifer does not look pleased by her father's interest in Lee, rather uncomfortable: she moves away from the two and even turns her back on them, so as to hide her facial expression. Finally, Lee looks satisfied, almost cheerful as, for the first time, she chuckles: she seems to be enjoying Fell's attentions, she is at ease and makes him laugh by signing a song to him. Still, her main interest clearly lies in the family mansion, as she inquiries about Fell's former job and assets.

Perhaps, the choice of a good-looking actress to play the role of Aileen is a need to align the representation of Wuornos with the conception that the collective consciousness has of a female serial killer, that is to say a "respectable and sometimes attractive woman who harbored homicidal intensions behind a façade of feminine mystique" (Vronsky, 2007: 138). Although the main reason behind the casting of conventionally attractive actors in the role of villains in Hollywood movies has mostly to do with movie marketing strategies, such a choice is also entangled in human cognitive biases. In particular, it has to do with the so called "halo effect". Also referred to as the "physical attractiveness stereotype" (Liebregts et al., 2020), it is a psychological "phenomenon whereby evaluators tend to be influenced by their previous judgments of performance or personality" (Bethel & Knapp, 2010). This effect makes it so that the acknowledgment of one quality (namely physical appearance) facilitates the overlooking of other traits, whether positive or negative. As a consequence, in the case of movie villains, the audience will respond not to the character's personality, but rather to the actor's previous performances, their attractiveness and charisma.

In the case of *American Boogeywoman*, it is through Peyton List's beauty and sexual allure, that Wuornos' propensity to violence and crime are ignored by the spectators. In keeping with the definition of "femme fatale," the character of Wuornos is not the subject of male power, but the carrier of her own, deadly, power which enables her to pursue her aspiration of living a wealthy life. An ambivalent figure, she embodies male concerns regarding loss of familial

stability and the centrality of the self (Doane, 1991: 2) in her rejecting the role of the devoted wife, which is thought to translate into a disruption of the social order.

3.3 Damsel of death: *Monster (2003)*

By 1986, 30-year-old Wuornos was going by the name "Lee Blahovec" (Nalepa, 2013: 119) and had openly proclaimed her homosexuality, engaging in a relationship with Tyria Moore. A 24-year-old Born Again Baptist (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 32) originally from Cadiz (Ohio), Moore had recently been evicted and was living with a friend, Cammie Greene (whose name Aileen will then pick up as one of her aliases), while working as a laundry maid at the El Caribe Hotel, in Daytona (31). Moore, who had just collected an insurance payment after a car accident, met Wuornos at the *Zodiac Bar* in South Daytona, in June 1986 (31). "With her strawberry-red hair, freckled face and stocky build" (32), Tyria uncannily resembled Leo Pittman, the father Aileen never had the chance to meet. Due to her fear of abandonment, deriving from her borderline personality disorder, Wuornos "would do anything to keep her, even kill if needs be" (40).

Their relationship was characterized by a constant moving from a cheap motel room to another, as they were often evicted for fighting loudly (39), trashing the rooms, doing drugs and getting drunk at nighttime (Nalepa, 2013: 119), other than failing to pay the rent. Since their work schedules were rather different – Moore had a routine and Wuornos did not –, Aileen asked Tyria to cut back on the hours she was working (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 40), which resulted in Moore quitting her job. Hence, Wuornos' prostitution money was their only income: Lee "was now a troublesome, loud-mouthed, hard-drinking hooker" (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 37), which caused her appraisal to diminish – and their lifestyle to be ever harder to support. The two maintained their relationship throughout 1990, the year Aileen killed 6 of her 7 victims.

Aileen's first victim, 51-year-old Richard Mallory, was murdered on the night between November 30th and December 1st, 1989. Mallory had spotted Aileen on the Florida highway, picked her up and spent the night drinking beer and smoking marijuana together with her (Nalepa, 2013: 120), before entering a wooded area where to engage in sexual acts. The version of events that Aileen provided to law enforcement changed considerably, over the years she spent in jail, from this point onward. During her earliest confession, on January 16th, 1991, Wuornos stated she felt like Mallory was going to "roll her" (Wuornos v. State, 1994), that is to say take her money, and rape her before they made sexual contact altogether. Hence, she had grabbed the gun she would carry for protection and accused Mallory of wanting to rape her while shooting him – whilst Mallory denied the accusation. At trial, Wuornos changed her version of the facts, stating Mallory had admitted he did not have enough money to pay her fee: upon her collecting her clothes to leave, he had tied her at the wheel, beat her and raped her (Nalepa, 2013: 120). When Mallory eventually untied her and urged her to lay down, Wuornos, fearing for her life, reached out for the gun and shot him three times (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 47).[13] "He begged for help. I didn't know what to do. I figured, if I help this guy and he lives, he's going to tell on me. And then I thought, hell, he deserves to die. He deserves to die for what he tried to do to me… I just watched him die" (IX). After disposing of Mallory's body, Wuornos stole some of his possessions in order to either pawn them or gift them to Ty; she then drove off the murder scene on board of the victim's Cadillac (Nalepa, 2013: 120).

Mallory's corpse was found by a group of hikers several days later, on December 13th, 1989. His car had already been found abandoned in the Ormond Beach area, a short distance from the motel Wuornos and Moore were staying in at the time. Upon examining the driver's seat, police found it had been pulled as far forward as it could go, thus suggesting Mallory was not

[13] Though Aileen's statements to law enforcement were inconsistent in regard to essential points of the murder, including the number of times that she had shot Mallory, the autopsy revealed two bullets in the left lung to have been the cause of his death (Wuornos v. State, 1994).

the last person to have driven the car. His death was initially ruled out as an isolated murder (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 59).

One year after Mallory's murder – and one month before Aileen's arrest –, the victim's former girlfriend, Jackie Davis, provided law enforcement with a description of his personality. Davis revealed Mallory was an alcoholic who was violent to women; a volatile and heavily indebted businessman. In addition, Davis disclosed that Mallory had served time for burglary and undergone therapy for an unspecified sexual dysfunction he was affected by (Chesler, 1993: 596). In 1958, Mallory had, in fact, been committed to the Patuxent Institute of Maryland, on charges of housebreaking with intent of rape (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 66). During the 11 years he served at the penitentiary, Mallory sexually molested a nurse, engaged in numerous fights and even escaped the facility.[14] At Wuornos' trial, the defense was denied access to Davis' testimony and witnesses corroborating Davis' portrayal of the victim were rejected by the court (Chesler, 1993: 596). The defense's attempt at justifying the murder by means of self-defense was discarded and Wuornos was sentenced to the death penalty on January 31st, 1992 (Dwyer & Fiorillo, 2007: 54-55).

After a cool-down period of five months, in May 1990 Aileen killed two more men: David Spears and Charles Carskaddon. Spears, aged 47, was declared missing on May 19th, 1990 and his naked body was found on June 1st. He had been shot six times. Carskaddon, who was 40 years old, was shot nine times on May 31st, 1990, and his body was found on June 6th. At trial, witnesses testified to have seen Aileen driving Carskaddon's car, which she had stolen after killing him. Furthermore, Aileen had stolen some of Carskaddon's belongings, among which was a gun, that she pawned soon after the murder (Wuornos v. State, 1995).

On July 4th, 1990, Wuornos and Moore were involved in a car accident while driving a grey Pontiac Sunbird that belonged to Aileen's fourth victim, Peter Siems. Though Wuornos

[14] Captured again in 1961 on board of a stolen car, Mallory had tried and abduct a young girl (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 67).

confessed to the murder, his body was never found: additional evidence against Wuornos were a suitcase stored in Aileen's storage locker, recognized as Siems' by his son (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 87); and Aileen's palm print on the interior door handle of the car (Wuornos v. State, 1994).

65-year-old Siems was presumably on his was to New Jersey when he came across Moore and Wuornos: he seemingly picked the two women up and brought them to Georgia, where he was killed and his body was disposed of (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 83). Given that no exact date was provided by Wuornos to Siems' murder, it is not possible to determine the exact moment Wuornos and Moore stole the car, hence for how long they had it before the car crash.

When the accident occurred, Moore was driving the car: she was scratch-less, whereas Aileen, who was rather drunk, got injured. Wuornos dashed out of the car and, at the approaching of other cars, hid into the woods, screaming and throwing beer cans; she pulled off the rear number plate and threw it, alongside the car keys, in the woodland. When witnesses approached them, offering help, they refused and asked them not to call the police, denying that they had been involved in a car crash altogether. Upon law enforcement's intervention, witness Rhonda Bailey sketched an identikit of the women (Macleod, 2003). When a media campaign was started to locate them, their identikits were spread along with the following description:

Two women are being sought as possible suspects in the shooting deaths of eight to twelve middle-aged men who were lured to their deaths on the Florida highways. Suspect #1 is a white female, five feet eight to five feet ten, with blonde hair, who is twenty to thirty years old. She may have a heart tattoo on her upper arm. Suspect #2 is also a white female, five feet four to five feet six, with a heavy build and short brown hair. She may be wearing a baseball

cap. These women are armed and dangerous and may be our Nation's first female serial killers (Chesler, 1993: 934).

Some of the victims' belongings were eventually found in pawnshops. One of the pawnshops held a receipt bearing Aileen's print: since she had been convicted in the State of Florida, samples of her prints were found in police database (Howard & Smith, 2004: 332).

In the final months of 1990, namely between July and November, Aileen killed an additional three victims: Eugene Burress, Charles Humphreys and Walter Gino Antonio.[15] Burress, aged 50, was reported missing on July 31st and found on August 4th, shot twice. Humphreys, aged 56, also shot twice, was found the day after his murder, on September 12th, 1990: unlike Wuornos' other victims, he was fully clothed. Antonio, Wuornos' last victim, was found on November 19th, 1990, nearly naked and shot 4 times: tying Wuornos to his murder, the yellow and white gold ring with a diamond set that Antonio would usually wear, which Wuornos gifted Moore upon the latter's return from Ohio after Thanksgiving holidays (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 115).

Monster, 2003 movie by Patty Jenkins, concerns Wuornos' relationship with Tyria Moore as well as the murders she committed between 1989 and 1990. Still considered the most faithful account of Wuornos' life and crimes to this day, the movie was released in January 2004, capitalizing on Wuornos' execution of October 9th, 2002. Although it generally received positive reviews from critics – being crowned "the best film of 2003" by film critic Roger Ebert (Ebert, 2004) –, *Monster* also received harsh criticism for its portrayal of Wuornos as a victim and of her victims as abusers. In particular, Sue Russell, Wuornos' biographer, lamented how "*Monster* conveniently transforms her into something we can stomach far more easily than we can a woman who's a ruthless robber and murderer. It

[15] Berry-Dee & Wuornos (2006) also argue the possibility of an eighth victim, Curtis Reid, who was reported missing on September 6th, 1990. Reid's sister identified some of Curtis' belongings in Wuornos' storage locker, but no evidence was brought forward to connect Aileen to Reid's disappearance (98).

perpetuates the comforting yet erroneous belief that women only kill when provoked by abuse" (Russell, 2004*)*.

Much in the way of *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* (2021), the movie opens with Wuornos voicing-over how, when she was a child, she wanted to be a movie star, while flashbacks of her life fill the screen – hinting at how she was abused by her grandfather and soon started exchanging sexual acts for cigarettes or money. The next sequence features an adult version of Aileen sitting in the rain, contemplating suicide on the Florida highways, in 1989. Changing her mind, Wuornos enters a gay bar, where she meets Selby Wall. Wall clearly represents a fictionalized persona of Tyria Moore, whom Wuornos had met in a gay bar, only the year was 1986, not 1989. Due to Tyria's refusal of having her name used for the making of this film, Jenkins resorted to creating a fictionalized version of her.

Initially hostile towards Selby, Aileen states she is not interested in her company as she is not gay: when Wall explains she would like to spend a fun night before going back to her dogmatist family in Ohio, Wuornos spends the night drinking beer with her and accepts to sleep at her place. The two engage in a relationship and Wuornos soon confesses she works as a prostitute.

Vincent Corey's murder's scene re-enacts and corroborates Wuornos' account of Richard Mallory's murder, presenting Corey's refusal of paying Wuornos' fee, tying her at the wheel and raping her. When her life is threatened (Corey, in fact, asks: "Do you want to die?"), Wuornos unties herself and shoots him in the chest, then flees the scene in his car.

The reason behind the overlapping of the movie's rendition with Aileen's account at the trial derives from director Patty Jenkins' choice of reaching out to Wuornos in April 2002. At the time, Jenkins, who had always been bothered by the sensationalism around Wuornos' case, suggested they write the script for the movie together to let the world know the truth. Nevertheless, by September 2002, and presumably after Jenkins' rejection of a paid interview

with her, Aileen lost all interest in the project: "surely anyone can read between the lines of this bitches [sic] intentions, whose [sic] definitely just after the money," she writes childhood friend Dawn Botkins (Wuornos, 2011: 335). Regardless, on the night before her execution, Wuornos left Jenkins all of her personal letters, which the director employed to script the movie (Byrd, 2017).

Aboard Corey's car, Wuornos goes to Wall and convinces her into staying in Florida one more week to spend time with her at a hotel, which she will pay for with the money she stole from Corey. Selby, thus, moves out of her friend's house, informs her parents she has decided to stay in Florida and moves in with Lee. Still emotionally upset after the rape, Lee decides to quit prostitution and, just like other serial killers, tries and get a qualified job (Wiest, 2011: 140): since she has no college degree or experience and she is rather harsh in interacting with people, though, her interviews invariably end in rejection.

A pivotal scene to comprehend the couple's dynamics as well as the unfolding of the plot takes place soon after. A full shot frames Aileen's entrance into their room at *The Diamond Motel*: as she calls out for Sel, the latter cries from the bathroom. Lee rushes to the threshold to find Selby attempting at cutting off her cast with a blade: to stop her from harming herself, Aileen promises to take her to see a doctor, to which Selby replies "Stop it, like you care." A close-up shot shows Lee's expression turning pensive while she asks "What are you talking about?". Selby goes on to inquire about Aileen's decision to quit prostituting: "You said we were gonna party, party, party… Well it hasn't been a fucking party!". On the contrary, Wall laments that, since Aileen has stopped working as a prostitute, the two have been starving.[16] Finally, when Selby accuses her of aiming at being supported and doing nothing in return, Wuornos exasperatedly confesses having killed her latest client.

[16] In *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (1992), a very similar scene is present in the aftermath of the car crash of July 4th. In this case, though, Moore tries and talk Aileen into stopping prostituting altogether because of the dangerousness of the job, hinting at how hotels are always looking for maids. Aileen, however, states that she can handle the johns and continues working on the highways.

Interestingly, the dialog is constructed on the alternation of over-the-hip shots and close-up shots, with the latter exclusively employed to frame Aileen. Over-the-hip shots are usually employed to frame dialogic sequences: it allows the framing of one character's face (the one who is sitting or kneeling), whilst the other character's hip is showed in the foreground. In this particular case, Selby is sitting by the sink, so whenever her face is shown on camera, Aileen is only visible to the hip. I argue that the reason for the employment of this particular type of shot is connected to the topic of the characters' conversation: in fact, it is by means of Lee's body alone that the couple has been able to make a living. Although Selby never openly asks Aileen to go back to prostitution, the shot suggests a power imbalance within the couple, with Selby being the one in control: this interpretation is sustained when, by the end of the sequence, stunned by Selby's accusations and upset for proving unable to provide for Selby, Aileen accepts to go back to prostitution.

In the second part of the scene, over-the-hip shots are substituted with close-up shots, alternating between frames of Aileen and frames of Selby. My argument is that the close-ups want to convey two different meanings: on the one hand, Aileen is finally confessing to the murder of Vincent Corey, arguing that murder was her only alternative to get rid of Corey and be able to meet up with Selby. On the other hand, Selby cries without uttering a word: it is, thus, difficult to determine whether Selby's are tears of anger towards Aileen or of astonishment after Lee's confession.

Though the goal of the director is to humanize Wuornos by painting her as a traumatized victim of rape, Wuornos now becomes "irrationally vengeful, looking at all men as guilty until proven innocent, assuming that all men want to abuse women and therefore should be killed" (Schildcrout, 2014: 176). The choice of "trying to fit Aileen's story into a more politically correct mold than the reality allows" exposed Jenkins to critiques for demonizing the victims "in a way in which we would rarely demonize female homicide

victims" (Russell, 2004). In addition, as the murders are committed for material gain, the fact that the movie presents Aileen and Tyria quickly spending money on luxuries causes that "any sympathy you might have for Wuornos after the rape begins to evaporate" (Holden, 2003).

In the movie, Aileen's assassination of a second victim leads to the theft of the man's car, which Wuornos and Wall will crash in an accident. After the wreck, the women are approached by a couple of elderly neighbors offering help, but they refuse. Upon fleeing the crime scene, Aileen, ignoring Selby's crying and whimpering, wipes fingerprints off the car

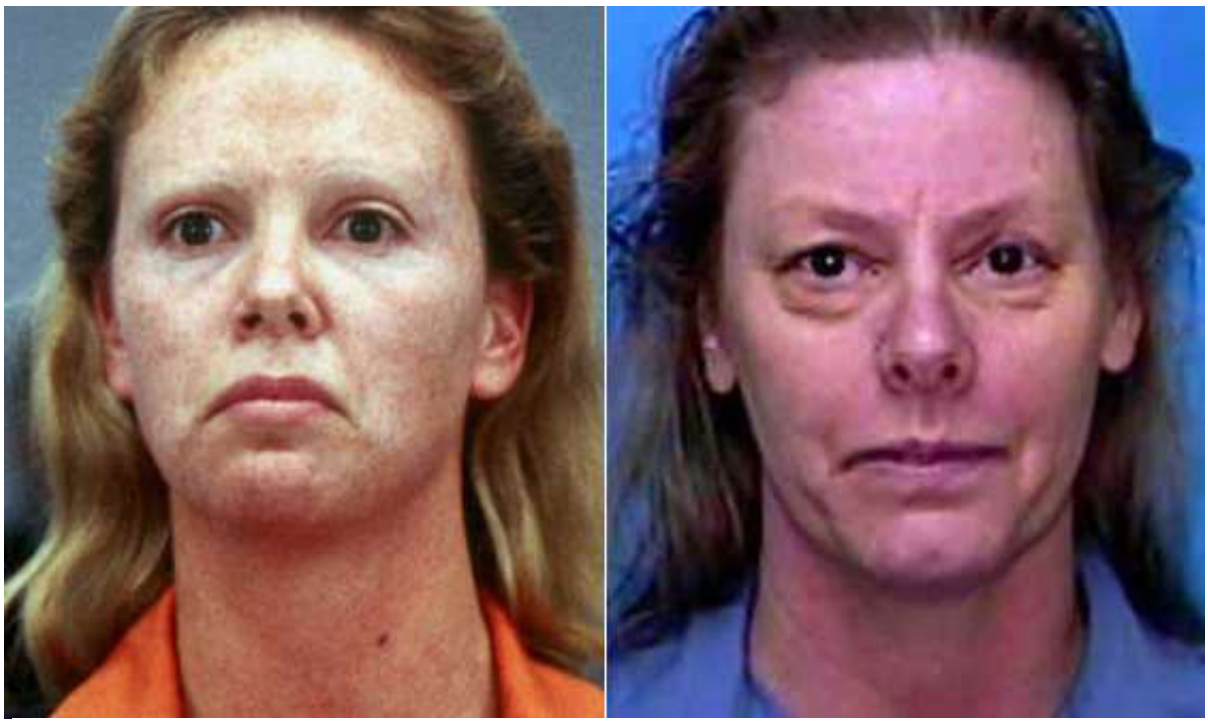

Figure 2 Charlize Theron (left) plays Aileen Wuornos (right) in *Monster* (2003).

and pulls off the rear number plate, hiding it in the bush. Once home, although Selby begs her not to reveal anything, Aileen confesses that she has killed another man. Fearing law enforcement has already been informed of the car crash, Wuornos suggests they leave town, stressing how the murders she has committed represent their "shot at a real life." The details provided in the movie match with the accident Aileen and Moore were involved in on July 4th, 1990 while driving Peter Siems' car. Two significant aspects have been changed in this rendition of events: first of all, Peter Siems was Aileen's fourth victim rather than her second;

additionally, the real-life Wuornos got injured in the car crash, whereas in the movie both are uninjured. Still, *Monster* presents a faithful telling of the events.

Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story (1992) also portrays the events of July 4th, 1990 and opens with the accident Wuornos and Moore were involved in. In keeping with the factuality of events as well as Patty Jenkins' rendition, the TV movie presents Tyria as the driver when the vehicle falls into a pit. As Aileen tries to destroy the evidence of their presence on the car, Tyria cries and inquires after what she is doing.

At this point in the narration of *Monster*, Selby finds that sketches of the both of them have been spread in the media: hence, she decides to leave Florida, on a promise to get back once things have settled, and gets on a bus to Ohio. Though in the movie Selby leaves as soon as she finds out that the police is hunting them down, in actual fact Moore and Wuornos were on the run together for 6 months and only parted ways in December 1990.

On the day Selby leaves, Wuornos spends the night at a bikers' bar she usually frequents. She is eventually lured outside by two undercover detectives, who arrest her on an old warrant. When Wuornos calls Selby from jail, Wall reveals that police went to Ohio to interview her parents, that her picture is in the papers since they crashed the car and that she fears "you [Wuornos] are gonna let me go down for something you did." Realizing the police are listening in and wishing to protect Wall from her crimes, Aileen confesses to the murders. The movie ends with Selby testifying against Lee in court.

Some significant details are to be considered when approaching the fictionalization of events *Monster* employs to tell the story of Aileen Wuornos. To begin with, the characters of Selby Wall and Vincent Corey are based on Tyria Moore and Richard Mallory, so their names are never revealed to the audience. In addition, director Patty Jenkins speeds up the timeline of the events, as Wuornos had been dating Tyria for several years before killing for the first time, while in the movie they had just met when Aileen starts killing. Furthermore, the movie

provides the idea that Aileen is arrested on the very night Selby leaves for Ohio: in actuality, about one month passes before Wuornos is arrested. In addition, before being apprehended, Aileen had been living a fugitive life together with Tyria for several months.

Finally, much in the way of *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* (2021), a conventionally attractive actress was chosen to play the role of the killer in *Monster*. Director Patty Jenkins, in fact, attracted criticisms for her casting of Charlize Theron in the role of Aileen. The budget Jenkins had secured for the movie consisted in $1.5 million, which caused her to put stylistic choices aside in favor of performance, stating: "I needed to be able to cut every single take to get what I needed out of it" (Byrd, 2017). As far as Theron's interpretation is concerned, she was awarded the Academy Award Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role a little over one month after the movie's release, for her ability to detail her interpretation with manners that resembled Wuornos rather closely. Despite the resemblance, the audience still seemed to see "a conventional fantasy of beauty – say, a domestic goddess in a *Life* magazine ad from 1954, or a prettily drawn Breck girl" (Denby, 2004).

Documentarian Nick Broomfield was also involved in the initial stages of the movie, as he sent Theron a draft version of his 2003 documentary *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* to aid her preparing for the role (Rose, 2004). Although Broomfield praised the physical changes Theron had achieved as well as her interpretation of Wuornos, he also criticized *Monster*'s inability to thoroughly discuss Aileen's life and death.[17]

3.4 On the run. *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story (1992).*

After having crashed Peter Seim's car, their sketches spread in the media, the relationship between Tyria and Aileen started falling apart. According to Wuornos, Moore

[17] In particular, Broomfield argued that Aileen's being executed on an election year would have prompted debates about the death penalty: a reason he brought forward to justify this conviction is the involvement of Florida Governor Jeb Bush, brother to president George Walter Bush, in the signing of Wuornos' execution papers (Rose, 2004).

expected a wealthier lifestyle than the one they were leading: “she [Moore] always wanted a brand new car or a rented one, she wanted clothes, she wanted an apartment with plush furniture” (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 100). On December 3rd, 1990, upon their eviction from the Fairview Motel, in Harbor Oakes, Moore and Wuornos put an end to their runaway life (123), and Tyria got back to her family house for a time before moving in with her sister in Pennsylvania. Aileen, on the other hand, spent the nights getting drunk and grieving her broken heart. Now 34, but rather older in terms of physical appearance and mental state, Wuornos’ mood would swing from aggressive and abusive to friendly; virtually homeless, she would carry a suitcase and sleep outside the bars she had been drinking in (130).

On January 9th, 1991, she was finally arrested while at *The Last Resort*, a bikers’ bar she regularly visited. Detectives of Marion, Citrus and Pasco counties had, in fact, joined forces, suspecting a serial killer was at large, to further investigate and find common features to the murders that Wuornos had committed. They found the murders shared several characteristics, including: victims being middle-aged men who were not only killed but also robbed; killings being carried out using a small caliber weapon (a .22 gun), loaded with copper-coated and hollow-nosed bullets (112). Upon comparing National police database with witness reports, police dug up Moore’s driver’s license and criminal record; through National Crime Information Center, police departments from all over Florida, Michigan and Colorado finally confirmed that Lori Grody, Susan Blahovec and Cammie Greene were all aliases to the same person – Aileen Wuornos (125).

On the night of January 9th, undercover detectives Mike Joyner and Dick Martin, posing as bikers, followed Aileen from the *Port Orange Pub* and spent the night befriending her to gain her trust. Though surveillance was scheduled to last throughout the evening hours, the detectives discovered a party of bikers was to convene at the bar and, fearing Lee would easily escape in the crowd, arrested her on an outstanding warrant for Lori Grody on charges

of illegal possession of a firearm (132). No media announcement was spread about the capture of the serial killer.

On January 10th, Tyria was located by Major Henry, Captain Vinegar and Detective Munster, who flew to Scranton (Pennsylvania) to interview her about Wuornos' crimes. On this date, Moore agreed to testify in court against Lee in exchange for immunity from prosecution (133). In addition, she sought to sell her version of events for the production of a television movie, for which the detectives would act as consultants, receiving a sum of $100.000 each (134).[18] The following day, Moore returned to Florida: checked into the Dayton Motel, she was put under 24-hour surveillance and instructed to stage calls to have Wuornos confess.

Aileen's confession was chronicled by the media as the killer's final, desperate attempt at proving Moore the love she felt towards her: "Let me tell you why I did it, all right?...Because I'm so…fucking in love with you, that I was so worried about us not having an apartment and shit, I was scared that we were going to lose our place, believing that we wouldn't be together" (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 141). Nevertheless, in actual fact, it was not without resistance that Aileen surrendered. During their taped calls, Wuornos tried and secure Moore's verbal compliance without requesting it directly: "Just do me a favor. Just don't worry and, you know, shut" (Reynolds, 1994: 170). Upon starting to suspect their calls could be taped, Aileen rephrased the query into "Don't worry about anything" (170). When Tyria directly referred to the accident they were involved in aboard Peter Siems' car, Aileen had her suspicions confirmed. Although she promptly came up with a fake alibi, hinting at "those…two guys that picked us up" (178), Tyria denied any such event. Hence, Lee snapped:

[18] *Overkill* depicts flawless investigations being conducted by the task force, thus, providing a portrait of hardworking, ethically driven detectives whose only goal is discovering the truth about the murders. Nevertheless, shortly after the release of the movie, Captain Vinegar and Detective Munster were moved to other counties, while Major Henry was fired due to bugged conversations about movie deals for Aileen's story.

“Oh God. I'll bet you ten bucks you got somebody sittin' there and you got a little tape recorder and you're tryin' to pin me with this shit” (178).

At this point, sure that Tyria was cooperating with the police, Wuornos resorted to threatening her by mentioning the storage locker they hid the victims’ belongings in. In so doing, Wuornos wanted to remind Tyria that her involvement in the murders could be proved, given that a driver’s license receipt in her name as well as a golden heart with her name engraved on it were kept in the storage locker (181). In the following years, Wuornos repeatedly stated “I was sure it was being taped. The way she was talking. I felt it” (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 142).

On January 16th, five days after her arrest, Aileen was appointed two assistant public defenders and confessed to the murders (146). During the confession, Wuornos continually stressed Moore’s innocence, so as to clear her name: “the only reason I’m doing this is because…number one, I’m guilty, number two, my girlfriend is not. She doesn’t – didn’t know anything” (158). Throughout her taped confession, Lee confused the murders because “a lot of times I was drunk…and after I’d done it, you know, I’d go and get drunk” (171). Wuornos also renewed her plea of having murdered those men out of fear for her safety and robbed them to get her money’s worth and vengeance (184). As shown in Nick Broomfield’s *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003), over the years Wuornos recounted the self-defense plea, stating that she had only committed the murders to avoid having witnesses to her robberies. Russell went as far as to argue Wuornos would commit murders whenever she felt like her relationship with Tyria was in jeopardy (Russell, 2004). Finally, during her first confession, whenever she thought that she was saying something incriminating, Wuornos would re-tell that portion of the story in a different manner – even when her appointed attorney suggested she refrained from speaking (Nalepa, 2013: 121).

Wuornos' urge into confessing probably derived from her belief that, much in the way of the circumstances that had shaped her life, neither her early crimes nor the murders she had committed were her fault (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 162): she considered herself a victim of fate, which is in keeping with psychopathy.[19] A formal diagnosis of psychopathy, anti-social behavior and borderline personality disorder finally came when psychiatrist Wade Myers and his team assessed her during her time in prison (Harrison, 2023: 177). At trial, they testified on how Aileen's symptoms "might have influenced both her decision to confess to the murders to legally protect her lover Tyria Moore, and, more important, to commit the murders out of a (possibly delusional) fear of being raped" (capitalpunishmentincontext.org). As psychologist Dr. Jethro Toomer put it:

[The] totality of the data is consistent with a diagnosis of a borderline personality disorder, the existence of which is life-long and has adversely impacted Ms. Wuornos' overall functioning and adaptive capacity…This disorder is characterized by a pervasive pattern of instability in mood, affect, identity and interpersonal relationships present in a variety of contexts and situations…Her overall functioning has been characterized by the existence of mini-psychotic episodes, where reality is blurred and she is unable to adequately test reality. Her condition is chronic and unpredictable (qtd. in capitalpunishmentincontext.org).

Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story (1992), TV movie by Peter Levin, corroborates Tyria Moore's version of events. Much in the way of *Monster*, *Overkill* was released in a time in which Wuornos' crimes were still thoroughly covered by the media: in fact, the movie first

[19] Per Christopher Patrick et al. (2009), among the symptoms and early signs of psychopathy are: impulsivity, disregard for safety, lack of empathy, remorselessness, pathological lying, antisocial behavior, criminal versatility and manipulative behavior (913-938). All these symptoms and signs, Aileen showed in the course of her life.

aired on CBS in November 1992, 10 months after Wuornos' conviction to the death penalty, on January 31st of that same year.

The movie's portrayal of Wuornos is that of a strong-willed woman with a tendency towards anger, so much so that she becomes upset at Tyria's desire to spend time with her own sister, Amy, who is in Florida on a visit: Tyria goes as far as to state "It just seems like you are angry with people all the time." Nevertheless, a humane side to Wuornos is also shown, as she is often seen giving out money to people in need, causing Moore to complain about her generosity. In *Overkill*, thus, Aileen comes across as the one spending the most money in the couple; in *Monster*, on the other hand, Tyria is depicted as wasting money on alcohol, cigarettes and amusement. Another difference between the two movies has to do with the very portrayal of Wuornos: whereas in *Monster*, she behaves in accord to her belief of being a victim to society; in *Overkill*, she exploits her traumas to justify her anti-social tendencies.

The movie concerns the period of time during which Major Henry, Detective Thompson (a character based on Captain Vinegar) and Detective Munster of Marion, Citrus and Pasco counties create a task force to analyze the common features to the murders. Upon noticing that all the victims have been killed in the woods, and each car's driver's seat has been found as far forward as it could go, the detectives start pondering the possibility of a serial killer, namely a female hitchhiker, to match the description of either one of the women involved in the July 4th car accident. Thus, they instruct reporters to leak the suspects' identikits as a way to get to the killers: it is through the aid of the citizens of Florida that the detectives are able to learn the names of Wuornos and Moore, allowing for a hunt between Ohio and Daytona.

Tyria is the first one to see their sketches on TV, but keeps it from Lee: fearing of getting caught, she asks for money to her family and heads back home to Ohio. The following morning, Aileen disposes of the victims' stolen belongings that she had hidden in her storage

locker and, upon returning home, she finds Tyria has left. Similarly to *Monster*, *Overkill* does not cover the couple's life on the run, suggesting Moore left as soon as she had learned of the murders.

The final section of the movie recounts the events concerning Aileen's arrest at *The Last Resort Bar*, as well as Moore's cooperation with law enforcement to get Wuornos to confess. On the one hand, unlike *Monster*, *Overkill* portrays Moore's reaction to Wuornos' arrest, as she seems to be upset for exchanging Aileen's freedom for her own safety. On the other hand, similarly to *Monster*, the movie avoids mentioning Wuornos' attempts at keeping Moore quiet.

The most important aspect to be considered as far as the fictionalization of *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* is concerned has, once again, to do with the physical appearance of the fugitive couple. As has been outlined for the cases of both *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* and *Monster*, *Overkill*'s director Peter Levin was, in fact, criticized for his casting of Jean Smart in the role of Aileen, and Park Overall in the role of Tyria Moore. Critics found that Smart and Overall's seductive silhouettes and fresh complexions did not appropriately represent the appearance of neither Wuornos nor Moore. Though the movie describes how the couple did not lead a luxurious existence but, rather, had hardly enough money to live on, the actresses' appearance gives the audience a fairly different illustration of their lifestyle. While Overall and Smart's version of Tyria and Aileen wear revealing clothes (one example is their being shown hitchhiking bra-less after the car accident) and make-up on their faces, have glossy hair and shiny teeth; in actuality, the two were almost toothless and were generally described as unattractive (Froelich, 1992). In so doing, Levin aligns to Hollywood's traditional marketing move of casting an attractive actress in the role of a negative character, so as to allow the audience to overlook her most negative traits. The quintessential example of how this turned out to be a triumphing measure lies in the

aforementioned *Basic Instinct*. Released in the same year as *Overkill*, the movie's protagonist, Catherine Tramell, is a serial killer who charms the detective working on her case by means not only of her sensuality but also of her wit.

Born out of Tyria Moore's collaboration with law enforcement, *Overkill* corroborates her version of facts, providing a detailed but one-sided retelling of the events leading to Aileen's incarceration. This could be thought of as the reason why, out of the four corpses the police find throughout the movie, only one murder is shown on screen. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the murder provided in the movie aligns with Aileen's claim to self-defense: when her confrontation with her victim becomes physical, she is reminded of her grandfather's abuses and shoots the john in order to set herself free.

Finally, as far as the representation of the couple's dynamics is concerned, it is never openly stated that Tyria and Aileen are engaged in a homosexual relationship (Hilsman, 1992): nevertheless, Aileen is depicted as a jealous person and the fact she would not trust any other woman around Tyria – not even her own sister – is stressed throughout the movie.
A significant scene to comprehend *Overkill*'s representation of the bond between Wuornos and Moore takes place at *Sea World*, where Aileen, Tyria and the latter's sister, Amy, spend the day towards the beginning of the movie. As they are passing-by, Aileen rashes to a mendicant, sits beside her and starts a conversation. This causes Tyria to lament to her sister "I wish she could hold onto it [the money], but she never does. As soon as she gets it in her hands you can kiss it goodbye." As Amy wonders whether Tyria is uncomfortable in regards to Aileen's job, Ty admits she is, but goes on to argue: "Lee's an older sister to me like I am to you. We take care of each other, and for her I'm the only family she's got, there isn't anybody else. At least, not worth knowing. She needs me." Through means of this line, Aileen's dependence on Tyria's affection becomes clear: hence, in *Overkill* the stress is put on Tyria being the only source of love in Aileen's life – although the relationship is clearly

imbalanced, as Aileen seems to be more interested in Tyria's affection than Tyria is in Aileen's. Similarly, in *Monster*, their relation is one of co-dependency, as Aileen goes as far as to state that she resorted to the murder of Vincent Corey to get to meet up with Selby. Additionally, whereas in *Overkill* Tyria works as a maid, which means the both of them have a job and contribute to their livelihood; in *Monster*, Selby is in-between jobs and this intensifies her economic dependency on Aileen's job.

The scene employs only two different frames: 2-shots and single-shots. Similarly to the scene analyzed in *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* (2021), 2-shot frames are employed to show two different couples: on the one hand, Aileen is only shown from afar, smoking and chatting with a beggar; Tyria and Amy, on the other hand, are framed together discussing Aileen's personality. The frames allow for the construction of a dichotomous couple: whereas Tyria and Amy stand side by side, conversing, Aileen is on her own. In fact, even though she is sharing the screen with another person, Lee appears as a loner, as she is not involved in the sisters' conversation, rather they do not approve of the choices she makes. As regards single-shots, besides one framing Amy, they are only employed to focus on Tyria: this choice can be explained by the fact that, in this scene, she is sharing her opinion on

Figure 3 Jean Smart (left) plays Aileen Wuornos (right) in *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (1992).

Aileen's life choices, in which she plays an active part.

As the aforementioned scene has clarified, Moore and Wuornos often refer to each other as close friends, best friends or as close as family members, hence no mention is ever made of a romantic involvement between the two.

In my opinion, the ambiguous portrayal of the relationship between Moore and Wuornos can be explained in social and personal terms. To begin with, as the movie was released on television in 1992, the controversy and misconception around HIV, during the crisis that impacted the United States for the period going from early 1970s to late 1990s, was still taking place (History.com). As HIV became the dominant threat to U.S. public health by the late 1980s, it was the leading cause of death for American men between the ages 25 to 44 in 1992, and consequently established itself as the leading cause of death for all Americans between 25 and 44 in 1994 and 1995 (History.com). Although a widespread misconception caused HIV to be considered a disease that only affected gay men, among its primary victims were also immigrants, racial minorities and users of intravenous drugs. Regardless of the notion that straight people could also contract HIV, which made its way into American households in 1991, gay people still were – rather, are – victims to the most severe discrimination (History.com). As the number of infected people in the U.S.A. only started decreasing in 1999, when *Overkill* first aired the country was still facing a harsh epidemic: it is, thus, possible to assume that director Peter Levin wished to avoid associating the movie to any LGBT rights movement, as it would have translated into a direct link to the HIV debates. Interestingly, aside for the aforementioned *Basic Instinct*, only one additional movie regarding a non-heterosexual woman protagonist was released in 1992, and that movie was *Claire of the Moon*. Being an erotic movie concerning the involvement of a straight writer with a lesbian psychiatrist, it can hardly be taken as a realistic portrayal of lesbian relationships in the early 1990s.

The personal reason for the omission of Aileen's romantic involvement with Moore in *Overkill* can be traced back to the very person of Tyria Moore: as Moore was involved in the making of the movie, it is possible that her dogmatist family did not know about the real nature of her relationship with Wuornos. Consequently, they believed their bond to be based on friendship and co-habitation, and would not accept a rendition that suggested otherwise. Hence, the only movie regarding Aileen's life that openly depicts her love affair with Tyria is *Monster*.

Aileen herself commented on the making of this movie while on trial for the murders of Eugene Burress, Charles Humphreys and David Spears, as shown in Nick Broomfield's *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992). Wuornos argued this movie to be the inaccurate tale of an abused child who imagined killing her father whenever she killed a man; and a sadistic killer who derived pleasure from inflicting suffering to her victims. Under the same circumstances, Wuornos also voiced her belief that police wanted to profit from movie deals about her life, hence did not arrest her earlier, allowing for the killing of more victims. In addition, she stated of having confessed to the murders in order to prevent the making of movies about her case. Nevertheless, as Nick Broomfield demonstrated in that same documentary, the first conversation between Florida law enforcement and major U.S. film studios took place one month before Wuornos' arrest, thus suggesting "that evidence was ignored because it would reduce the value of the story. Hollywood was interested in a story about 'America's first female serial killer' " (Mentor, 1998: 89).

3.5 On the death row: *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer (1992) and Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer (2003)*

Aileen Wuornos sat on the death row for more than 11 years before being finally executed through means of lethal injection on October 9th, 2002. During the time she served at

the Broward Correctional Institute in Pembroke (Florida), Lee was often kept in solitary confinement – sometimes without her clothes to prevent her from attempting suicide – and was a victim to verbal abuses and threats on the part of both guards and inmates. Though she could not see nor hear properly, her requests of hearing aids or glasses were rejected, as were her requests for a gynecologist's appointment due to heavy bleeding (Chesler, 1993: 960). Furthermore, she was denied contact visits and lost 40 pounds (956): such a massive loss of weight derived from her refusing to eat, as she suspected that prison matrons were tainting her food with dirt, saliva or urine (Wilson, 2002). During her time in jail, Wuornos was repeatedly assessed to determine whether she was fit to stand trial, as the lawyers she was appointed tried and prove that she was not. Nonetheless, she was invariably found sane and competent to not only stand trial but also, when the time came, to be executed. As far as Aileen's mental state during that period is concerned, Christopher Berry-Dee, author of *Monster: My True Story* (2006), found that, although Aileen was mentally competent when she committed the murders, her mental state had been deteriorating since the beginning of her sentence in 1992.

While awaiting trial, Aileen would live in the belief that she was going to profit from selling her story to the media: "she felt famous and continued to talk about the crimes with anyone who would listen…with each retelling, she refined her story a little further, seeking to cast herself in a better light each time" (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 199). On January 28th, 1991, Wuornos was indicted for the murder of Richard Mallory and, by late February, for the Spears, Humphreys and Burress murders. Her appointed attorney, Ray Cass, negotiated a plea bargain which resulted in Wuornos pleading guilty and receiving 6 consecutive life sentences: since the Florida State Attorney pursued a death sentence, though, she was then brought to trial for the Mallory murder.

Shortly thereafter, Lee was informed that a law of the State of Florida, the Son of Sam Law, prevented her from selling her story.[20] Upon this discovery, Wuornos booked a hearing for a change of lawyer in February 1991, lamenting how: "Cass was always talking about books and movies before and after I got indicted…to me they [Cass and his associate, Armstrong] are a clan of people that are just interested in making money. They're not interested in my case" (220). What she did not reveal, though, was she and Cass had just negotiated a deal with Hollywood filmmaker Jacqui Giroux, allowing her to tell Wuornos' story in a feature film by the title *Angel of Death*, in exchange for a $60 payment a month for life (Clary, 1991).[21]

Wuornos' trial for the murder of Richard Mallory only took 13 court days and she was found guilty 91 minutes after the jury had left the courtroom (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 200). Many factors contributed to such a speedy conviction. To begin with, Wuornos, the only witness for the defense, invoked the fifth amendment right (allowing her to avoid answering questions that could incriminate her) 25 times. Excerpts from her videotaped confession, provided to the jury, showed that Wuornos felt no remorse for her actions (200). Furthermore, on grounds of the Williams Rule, evidence of collateral crimes was allowed in order to show a pattern of criminal behavior: as a consequence, a dozen men testified to having engaged in sexual acts with Wuornos, although they were aware prostitution is a felony in the State of Florida (Nalepa, 2013: 122). Finally, though Wuornos' confession had already been spread by the media, the jurors were selected from an area in which she had killed: moreover, the 5 men and 7 women that made up the jury firmly believed in the death penalty (Chesler, 1993: 964).

As Nick Broomfield shows in his *The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992), on January 27th, 1992, upon hearing the guilty verdict, Wuornos exploded with rage. "I'm innocent," she

[20] The Son of Sam Law was designed to prevent criminals from profiting from the publicity of their crimes and authorized the State to seize the money earned in such deals and use it to compensate the victims (Kealy, 2000). Though this measure was to be enforced in the State of Florida up until 2002, when Nick Broomfield first approached Steven Glazer and Arlene Pralle for his *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, in 1992, he was asked for a payment to interview Aileen and was told the law had been lifted.

[21] Although an Internet Movie Database (IMDb) entry for Giroux's movie is found on the actress' page, I was unable to retrieve any excerpts of the movie and am, thus, unable to confirm whether it was ever produced.

shouted, “I was raped! I hope you get raped! Scumbags of America!.” The next day, the sentencing phase of the trial began: although experts of the defense testified that Aileen was the mentally ill victim to a traumatizing childhood, who suffered from borderline personality disorder, the jury recommended that the judge sentence her to death through means of the electric chair – a sentence he confirmed on January 31st, 1992 (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 204).

At that point, Trish Jenkins, Wuornos’ second public defender, was discharged for not revealing Mallory had served time. Hence, public defender Steven Glazer was hired by Aileen’s new adoptive mother, Arlene Pralle. Glazer’s first decision was to prevent Aileen from standing trial again by switching her plea from “not guilty” into “no contest”[22]: on May 15th, 1992, thus, Wuornos received three more death sentences for the murders of David Spears, Eugene Burress and Charles Humphreys. As shown in Nick Broomfield’s 1992 documentary, when she received the sentences, Wuornos made an obscene gesture, muttered “Motherfucker” to the judge before shouting “May your wife and kids be raped right in the ass.” Wuornos finally pleaded “guilty” to the murders of Charles Carskaddon and Walter Gino Antonio, receiving two more death sentences in June 1992 and February 1993 respectively (Wiest, 2011: 42).

Arlene Pralle and Steven Glazer are central figures to Nick Broomfield’s documentaries about Aileen’s time in jail, as they were Wuornos’ intermediaries.

Arlene Pralle was a Born-Again Christian, a horse breeder who, like Wuornos, had been abandoned by her parents and had attempted suicide (Chesler, 1993: 967). In Broomfield’s 1992 documentary, Pralle shares how she and her husband Robert decided to legally adopt Aileen after seeing her picture on a newspaper in November 1991 (Clary, 1991): “There’s something in her eyes that tells me she is not capable of doing what she is accused of,” Pralle

[22] Also referred to as “no defense,” a “no contest” plea waives the right to trial: although the defendant does not claim “guilty” nor “not guilty,” for purposes of sentencing, the criminal is considered guilty (law.cornell.edu).

said. After two and a half weeks of pondering, Pralle finally wrote Wuornos a letter, in which she expressed her belief that she had been saved by the love of God going through her toward Wuornos. Aileen replied with another letter, in which she stated that, upon her first arrest, she had prayed God to send a Christian woman her way: Wuornos, thus, thought of Pralle as the answer to her prayer and, before receiving her first death sentence, was planning on living on the Pralles' farm, breeding horses and wolves for a living.

Steven Glazer also came from an abusive family and formerly worked as a musician before turning to law. In Broomfield's *The Selling of a Serial Killer*, Glazer appears as a childish and selfish defender in his singing a parodied version of "The Great Pretender" by The Platters on camera, turning it into "I'm a public defender"; as well as in his performing "The Iron Lady" by Phil Ochs – a song about a man about to die on the electric chair – in Aileen's cell after her May 15th, 1992 conviction. He also comes across as ruthless given that, though he had repeatedly stated that the only reason why he had pleaded "no contest" was Wuornos' wish to end her life, he confided Broomfield that, if Wuornos had pleaded "not guilty", he would have had to withdraw from the case, as he did not have the sources to sustain her in the courtroom.

Though an intense media coverage was devoted to how Wuornos and Pralle would exchange phone calls, letters and poems daily, as well as to how Pralle would visit Wuornos in prison once a week (Clary, 1991), Broomfield demonstrates in his 1992 *The Selling of a Serial Killer* that Arlene had not seen Lee for two consecutive months. During her interview with the director, Wuornos herself clarified Pralle repeatedly urged her to plead guilty, as her numerous trials were "killing her new mom." Doubtful about the goodness of heart of Pralle and Glazer, Aileen revealed both provided her with ideas on how to take her own life: "I think their motive was just to make money…they are not on my side."

Pralle and Glazer indeed were the figures responsible for negotiating deals – and appropriating the money – to have reporters interview Aileen during her time on the death

row. Broomfield himself paid $10.000 – cash and on camera – to get access to the inmate. Though Pralle claimed that Aileen did not want the money for herself but rather to allow her new parents to use it to pay off the farm (Clary, 1991), Arlene refused to release any interview to Broomfield before Lee received her money. Wuornos' suspicion of Pralle and Glazer's motive was confirmed when, after her conviction for the Buress, Humphreys and Spears murders, Pralle approached the cameras and stated: "Our State has the death penalty, so why not go for it? She could be home with Jesus in a matter of few years."

In the weeks before her execution, Aileen gave a series of interviews to Nick Broomfield for his second documentary on her case, *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003). Wuornos had celebrated the release of Broomfield's 1992 documentary, as it had allowed the creation of a more elaborated narrative, in which Aileen was the victim of her family, her clients and the police: as she wrote childhood friend Dawn Botkins on March 5th, 1994, "since Nick's documentary…I am finally getting the break I need" (Wuornos, 2011). Wuornos had also mentioned that, if Broomfield ever wanted to interview her again, she would grant him permission, free of charges (107).

Wuornos' grateful and welcoming attitude towards the filmmaker, though, was short-lived. In a 1998 letter to Dawn Botkins, in fact, she wrote "Nick didnt [sic] understand any of the ways Steve an [sic] Arlene did things together...Nick got the wrong impression! And in my mixed emotions so did I!" (219). Aileen's change of heart towards Broomfield may have derived from her belief that he had "used the interview for revenge back at Steve and Arlene" (268). Aileen's sitting hostility for Broomfield peaked in the year 2000, when she wrote Botkins that she had notified him that she had no intention of collaborating with him again (273). As the execution neared, though, Aileen reached out to the documentarian and requested a final interview, which would culminate with frames from the killer's execution day (295). At that point in her trial, Aileen was refusing any contact visit and the only person she allowed

visitation to was Broomfield. The documentarian was also the only media member present at the execution room on October 9th.

Wuornos released her final interview on October 8th, 2002, the day before her execution. The interview took place at the presence of 15 jail guards, and Aileen was handcuffed the entire time: "Now I know what Jesus went through," she stated.

During their conversation, Wuornos once again argued that police had been aware she was the perpetrator of the murders since after Mallory's body was found, but had allowed her to keep on killing to turn her into a serial killer. She went on to state that police had her under surveillance through means of a "sonic pressure" to her head, which allowed them to control her brain. In the final stages of the interview, Aileen also retracted her self-defense plea and told Broomfield that she would "select" the men she was going to kill upon her first catching sight of them – a claim she withdrew when she thought the cameras were off. Wuornos, who had already petitioned the Florida Supreme Court in April and June 2001 to dismiss her legal aid and terminate all pending appeals by cause of her hatred for human life (Zarrella, 2002), finished off the interview stating: "You have to kill Aileen Wuornos because she will kill again."

Wuornos' sentence was carried out by lethal injection on October 9th, 2002, at 9.47 in the morning, at Florida State Prison. Her final words were: "I'd just like to say I'm sailing with the Rock and I'll be back like Independence Day with Jesus, June 6, like the movie, big mother-ship and all. I'll be back" (Berry-Dee & Wuornos, 2006: 213).

During the years of Wuornos' trial, articles primarily focused on her personal life, revealing details concerning her childhood, which diverted attention from her hideous crimes and facilitated the depiction of a killer as a victim (Wiest, 2011: 131). It is conventional, in U.S. media, to turn the killer into a celebrity around whom the coverage of the case revolves:

as a consequence, the victims become unimportant to the narrative and information about them is only provided in reports that include formal charges or courtroom testimony (134).

In the same period of time, magazines also sensationalized Wuornos' relationship with Tyria Moore in order to construct her fame of a man-hating lesbian (Schildcrout, 2014: 172). In *The Selling of a Serial Killer*, Broomfield acknowledges Wuornos' reputation while interviewing Dick Mills, with whom Lee had spent the week before her arrest: upon interrogating Mills on whether Aileen had ever shown hatred towards men, in fact, Broomfield comments "she couldn't have always hated men."

In her *A Woman's Right to Self-defense*, Phyllis Chesler argues that women are usually blamed for male violence. As society does not allow women to react to abuse, even in self-defense, those that do are seen as transgressors and ostracized, due to an association of female self-defense and female aggression (1993: 938). Referencing a 1991 study conducted by the Council for Prostitution Alternatives, the scholar demonstrates 78% of a sample made of 55 sex-workers had been raped by either their pimps or their johns at least 16 and 33 times respectively each year (950). In addition, she finds "Prostitute rape is rarely reported, investigated, prosecuted or taken seriously…almost all young prostitutes have run away from sexual and physical abuse in their homes" (Gender Bias Report, 1990: 179-180, quoted in Chesler, 1993: 950). Hence, in Chesler's work, Aileen is portrayed as an exception due to her reaction to the violence that she had endured at the hands of her family, her clients and the State. This translates into her becoming a manifesto for the feminist movement.

Nick Broomfield hypothesized the anger sitting inside Wuornos increased with the various encounters (of a positive or negative nature) she had on the road while working as a prostitute. "I think this anger just spilled out from inside her. And finally exploded. Into incredible violence. That was her way of surviving" he explained Paula Zahn, CNN reporter, on February 26th, 2004.

Regardless the number of movies and documentaries about Aileen Wuornos aiming at humanizing her figure, a vast majority of magazines and newspapers preferred to depict her as a psychologically abnormal person. This derives from the stereotypical Western conception around Aileen's gender and sexual orientation, as well as her social class, which contributed at generating a dehumanized portrayal of Wuornos, further spread by Police and the media (Basilio, 1996: 60).

3.6 Conclusion

In the following pages, I will summarize the main characteristics and features associated with Aileen's personality in the movies and documentaries analyzed in this Chapter. Firstly, I will focus on the traits to be found in every rendition; then I will move on to the attributes that only characterize one rendition.

The "victimization of self" is one of two most recurrent characteristics, as it is present in every rendition considered in this Chapter. In *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman*, Aileen narrates a story that centers around her being the victim: every man that she meets throughout the narration, in fact, wants to kill, rape or otherwise exploit her. Her sense of victimhood also extends to Jennifer, as Lee states that Commodore Fell's daughter has hated her since they have gotten married. In *Monster*, Aileen is not depicted as a careful robber and cold-blooded killer, but rather as a victim to her own victims. Although the majority of murders committed in the movie are driven by Aileen's need to defend herself, she also kills a man who wanted to aid her by giving her money and a place to stay in. In *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story*, she makes use of her childhood traumas to justify her anti-social tendencies and hatred for human life: this is particularly clear in a flashback scene providing images of Aileen's grandfather abusing her, which overlaps with Aileen killing a client who had tried and rape her. In *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, during an

interview with documentarian Nick Broomfield, Aileen states nobody is interested in her case, not even her adoptive mother Arlene Pralle or her attorney Steven Glazer: she argues that both are only interested in the selling of her case and in the money they can make out of it. Finally, in *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, sitting down with Broomfield for her final interview on the day before her execution, Aileen states: "Now I know what Jesus went through." It is, thus, clear she considers herself a martyr.

The second most recurrent characteristic, present in every movie or documentary analyzed in this Chapter, is Aileen's compulsive lying behavior. In *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman*, Lee is certainly a pathological liar: this is clear when, upon her confessing to her brother's murder, documentarian Peter points out that her involvement in Keith's death cannot be proven. In a scene of *Monster*, in order to move a potential client into compassion, Wuornos shows him the picture of two children; she then reveals her car broke down and she needs money to go back home to Miami and be with them. In *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, during her last interview with Broomfield, Wuornos confesses that her self-defense plea is a lie. Shortly thereafter, though, as she believes the camera to be switched off, Wuornos withdraws her previous retraction. As a consequence, the documentarian – as well as the audience – is left wondering which one of the two statements is a lie. As far as *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* is concerned, Wuornos' lying behavior does not come across through means of explicit remarks or actions on screen: as she is never directly asked any question by Moore or other characters, she has no possibility of lying to them. As a consequence, it could be argued that the whole movie is extremely biased in its subjectivity and partiality towards Moore's version of events: as Moore was not involved in a majority of the events leading to Aileen's arrest, in fact, it is only when Wuornos confesses to the gruesome murders that the audience finds that the pivotal events were not featured in the movie.

"Fascination with fame" is featured in two of the five representations considered in this Chapter: both *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman* and *Monster*, in fact, open with Aileen explaining how, since childhood, her deepest ambition was that of becoming a celebrity.

Now let us move on to the traits that are only present in one movie, hence characterizing only one portrait of Wuornos.

In *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman*, the title character is portrayed as a rather self-confident young woman: given that she thinks she deserves the luxurious life that she is trying and building in the Fell mansion, Lee allows no one to interfere with her goal. In addition, she is a rather ill-tempered woman who hits or threatens anyone who denigrates her. As an example, let us consider a scene in which Aileen and Jennifer go shopping: as the shop assistants look down on her, Aileen bursts in rage and storms out of the shop, while wearing a dress she still has to pay for.

In *Monster*, Aileen comes across as an ambiguous character as, although she is rather harsh with anyone who crosses her path, she appears to be ingenuous in relation to Selby. Though the two got off to a rocky start, in fact, Wall brings out Wuornos' naivety. As an example, let us consider the scene in which, sending Selby off to Ohio on a bus, Aileen has her promising that, upon her return, the two of them will be together. By this time in the movie, Wuornos knows that law enforcement is looking for her as a person of interest in a number of murder cases; nevertheless, she still genuinely hopes for a future together with Selby. Such a hope is the main reason provided in the movie to justify Wuornos' confession of the murders: her admission is portrayed as one last, desperate attempt at showing Selby her love.

In *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story*, Aileen's portrayal is characterized by anger and jealousy. As an example, let us consider her relationship with Amy Moore, Tyria's sister. In the course of the few scenes featuring Amy, Wuornos repeatedly reprimands her for being

loud and nosy; in addition, she urges Amy to get a job, if she is considering remaining in Florida for a longer time than she initially anticipated. Nonetheless, *Overkill* also depicts Wuornos as charitable, as is exemplified in the *Sea World* scene that I analyzed earlier on in this Chapter.

As far as, *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* is concerned, it is the only representation to depict Wuornos as apprehensive: throughout her last interview with Broomfield, in fact, she expresses doubts about the purity of Glazer and Pralle's intentions. Furthermore, she re-asserts her belief that police, aware of the fact that she was the killer since Mallory's body had been found, allowed her to continue killing to turn her into a serial killer. She also argues that law enforcement had been monitoring her since before the killings, employing sonic pressure to control her brain and "make it look like I was totally crazy."

One final pivotal trait that needs to be taken into consideration, although it has nothing to do with personality, is the representation of Aileen's sexual orientation. While *Monster* portrays her bond with Tyria Moore as a romantic relationship, in *Overkill* the two are said to share a deep affection, which is, though, exclusively platonic. In *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman*, through means of her marriage to Lewis Fell, it can be argued Wuornos is depicted as a straight woman. Finally, Wuornos' sexual orientation plays no part in Nick Broomfield's documentaries.

CHAPTER 4

"FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS": BLACK WOMEN SERIAL KILLERS[23]

4.1 (Mis)Representations of blackness: racialization of crime, poverty and family

When approaching criminality rates, black communities' severe over-representation in U.S. media is sadly ordinary. Although black Americans come to represent 37% of criminals shown in the news, in fact, they only constitute 26% of those arrested on criminal charges (Jan, *Black families*, 2017). Such an over-representation derives from the media's tendency to: show frames of black defendants more often than frames of white defendants; black criminals' mug shots more often than white criminals'; emphasize cases when the crime is committed against a stranger (Sun, 2018).

This disproportion derives from stereotypical perceptions of black Americans, which are connected to their legal and social status and have circulated through the United States ever since slavery times. Usually depicted as lazy, dishonest, superstitious and oversexed (Waterhouse, 1985), African Americans have been perceived as dangerous (especially men), loud and aggressive (especially women). Even the symbols that epitomized African American's self-sufficiency and hard work – like the watermelon, for example – came to represent a stereotypical portrayal of black Americans as filthy, lazy and childish. In the 1980s, these stereotypes gave way to the view of black Americans as social degenerates and criminals (Drummond, 1990) and translated into "abusive treatment by police, less attention

[23] As this Chapter will revolve entirely around the socio-economic situation of black Americans and the rarity of black serial killers, I have chosen this title as a reference to the second study case of this work. *Swarm*'s Episode six, in fact, is construed as a mockumentary titled "Falling through the cracks", focusing on the life of its fictional serial killer protagonist, Andrea Greene.

from doctors, harsher sentences from judges" (Jan, *Black families*, 2017): as of 2020 black Americans made up 13% of the U.S. population, but they also represented 40% of the incarcerated population of the country (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).

In 1965, David Patrick Moynihan stated that most of the crimes against the person – namely rape, murder and aggravated assault – were committed by black Americans (45). However, the racialization of crime in the U.S. is generally traced back to the United States v. Brignoni Ponce ruling of 1975.

On March 11th, 1973, the United States Border Patrol in Southern California stopped the car of Felix Humberto Brignoni Ponce, accusing him of driving two undocumented passengers into the country. On appeal, the officers testified that they had only stopped the car because the driver and passengers appeared to be of Mexican descent (United States v. Brignoni Ponce, 1975). The Supreme Court ruled that a roaming patrol car stopping a vehicle exclusively on ethnic or racial grounds was a violation of the Fourth Amendment; however, the Court also conceded that law enforcement officers could rely on ethnicity or race as a possible indication of illegal activity (United States v. Brignoni Ponce, 1975). As a consequence, although the ruling is regarded as an example of racial justice, its implications are rather negative: in allowing the use of one's skin color to determine whether one is engaging in criminal activities, the verdict implicitly associates race and guilt.

Through means of the Brignoni Ponce ruling, hence, the U.S. justice system allowed for a racialization of crime, turning race or ethnicity into a defining feature when it comes to criminal activity (Oni & Winant, 2014). In addition, Hugo Bedau's 1976 study finds that the punishment that the criminal justice system imposes on black people is harsher if compared to that imposed on white people who committed the same crime. As Miranda Pikipchuk puts it: "By disproportionately shielding white people from incarceration and the negative consequences that come with it, the criminal justice system has implicitly prioritized the

protection of whiteness above the rights and well-being of people of color. Thus, the racialization of crime is essentially an investment in maintaining white supremacy" (Pikipchuk, 2020).[24]

Ever since the birth of the United States, the media has shaped and defined ideas concerning race and ethnicity, which impacted the perception of and the attitudes towards non-white people (Collins, 2008). As bell hooks argued: "there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in the society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representation of race, of blackness that support...the overall domination of all black people" (1975: 2).

When crimes or violent acts are perpetrated by black women, the media's thus far outlined racialization of crime meets up with genderization. Given that conflicts among young black women and girls easily spread on social media, an assumption has been made that the trend of girl-on-girl violence is rising within black communities (Brown, 2014). Data gathered by CDC in 2015, in fact, suggests that young black women and girls tend to engage in a greater number of physical confrontations than girls of different ethnicities: thus, they are considered more prone to violence, labeled "hyper-violent gangsta[s]" (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006: 74) and met with harsher punishments.

The media's portrayal of black women as problematic and grotesque concerns both their personality and appearance. Black women are generally portrayed as loud, "argumentative, irrationally angry [and] verbally abusive" (Harris-Perry, 2011: 138). Perceived as animalistic but too immature to be taken seriously (Brown, 2014: 403), they are described as "hate-filled bitch[es]" (Henderson, 2010: 2). Furthermore, given the "public obsession with erotically tinged violence" (Brown & Tappan, 2008: 48), black women are sexualized through the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 2013), their bodies turned into

[24] Considering the two cited studies have been published 40 years apart from each other, it is clear that no major difference is detectable when it comes to the life conditions of black people in the United States.

commodities and constantly exposed to public attention. Sexual promiscuity is, in fact, thought of as a pivotal feature of the African American femininity: hence, black women are hyper-sexualized (Littlefield, 2008: 677) and usually associated with the stereotypical image of Jezebel, an insatiable sexual being.

In the particular instance of serial killing, although over-represented, African American perpetrators do not receive the same amount of coverage devoted to their white counterparts. This could derive from the fact that black serial killers are statistically less likely to engage in acts of necrophilia or cannibalism, thus causing the media to be less interested in their *modus operandi* (Lester et al., 2014: 311).

In 2014, psychologist Scott Bonn argued that African American serial killers did not exist in significant figures; and yet, the number of black American serial killers has increased from 10% in 1975 to 21% in 2011 (Wiest, 2011: 64). Even so, black serial killers have remained largely unknown to the average American public (Branson, 2013: 2).

The rising fascination with serial killers that has been investigated in Chapter 1 of this work, in fact, did not translate into an increasing number of filmic adaptations in the case of a black American perpetrator. As a matter of fact, research has shown that the celebrity status is only awarded to those serial killers the majority of the population can relate to (Penfold, 2004: 301): whenever the term "serial killer" is employed, in fact, the average American conjures up the image of a white man killing to obtain sexual pleasure. Given that black American serial killers tend to avoid deviant sexual acts unnecessary to murder, they are usually overlooked. In addition, the racial or ethnic group they belong to causes further marginalization.

Whenever film or television adaptations are produced to tell the story of serial killers, a disproportion is detectable in the portrayal of black and white serial killers. Whereas white serial killers are depicted as brilliant schemers, their black counterparts are usually portrayed as dumb or mentally challenged (Branson, 2013: 3). Moreover, as Philip Jenkins showed in

his 1993 study, even when productions concern instances of fictionalized serial killers, black actors are seldom cast in the role of perpetrators for one of two reasons: the director does not want his / her work to be categorized as black-interests-only; or he / she wants to avoid accusations of crude racial stereotypes (Jenkins, 1993: 53).

As an example let us think of the only black American female serial killer that has ever been recorded to-date: Roberta Elder. Convicted – by a jury of whites – for the murder of her husband, Reverend William Elder, in 1954, Roberta was sentenced to life imprisonment on circumstantial evidence (Fowlkes, 1954: 5). Although there is no evidence connecting her to any of the deaths she was accused of, Elder is said to have murdered at least 14 family members (among whom were two of her infant children) by means of arsenic poisoning: her goal was that of collecting life insurance policies (ranging from $50 to $3.000) on several of the deceased (Waycross Journal Herald, 1952). Dubbed "Mrs. Bluebeard," Elder was referred to as a "killer with multiple victims" – as 'serial killer' was yet to be coined – in the black press. Nonetheless, her case did not draw any attention from the white press.[25]

The primary reason for the under-estimation of black serial killers within U.S. culture is the tendency of law enforcement to overlook the majority of sudden deaths or disappearances of black people living in poor, high crime-rate neighborhoods (Jenkins, 1993: 57), rarely considering such disappearances as homicides. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that violent acts are generally committed against members of the same racial or ethnical group of the offender (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019): as per the FBI's Universal Crime Report of 2014, in fact, 90% of black people are killed by other black people, whereas only 14.8% of white people are killed by black people (Criminal Justice Information Services Division, 2014). Considering this, law enforcement's under-estimation of violent acts perpetrated by black people on black people can be attributed to their neglect of the black victims, and their

[25] The reason for the lack of interest in the Elder case might lie with the apprehension of another major female serial killer in the same year. Nannie Doss, also known as Giggling Granny, was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murders of 11 people. Doss was a white woman.

belief that such crimes "don't sell papers" (Hickey, 2006). All of these reasons might be connected to overt racism.

In his 2004 text, Vronsky listed a series of possible factors to be considered when approaching the issue of serial killing. The scholar argued that a serial murderer is also born out of environmental factors, such as biological and genetic predisposition to violence – which may cause "a pattern of often violent fantasies and obsessive thoughts that the serial killer has difficulty separating from reality" (Vronsky, 2004: 286) – as well as a dependency on parental affects, or, more often than not, a lack thereof.

Family has always been a very sensitive topic when it comes to African American communities: the media, in fact, offer a rather distorted representation of black families (Jan, *Black families*, 2017). As a matter of fact, the media tends to represent black American families as dysfunctional, overwhelmingly poor and depending on welfare to attempt a life above the poverty line: as a consequence, social security checks are stigmatized and considered an issue predominant within the black community all over the United States. In such representations, black American families are characterized by broken marriages, absentee fathers – usually criminals –, and are led almost exclusively by mothers (Moynihan, 1965: 9).

While documenting matriarchy as the primary family system in black American communities, scholars in the 1960s found this to be a disadvantage deriving from the weakened position of the black man. As Robert O. Blood, Jr. and Donald M. Wolfe noticed in their *Husbands and Wives: The Dynamics of Married Living* (1961), the black American wife's necessity to lead the family derives from the condition of poverty the family lies in as a result of the husband's unreliable job position or his being unemployed. The wife's primary role in the decision-making process is also connected to the lower-class status of the family: for Blood and Wolfe, in fact, "the label 'black' is almost a synonym for low

status in our society" (34). The scholars argue that the black American wife is forced into getting a job of her own to sustain her low-income family: whereas "high status husbands are worried about a threat to their prestige if their wives go to work" (33), such a preoccupation is not experienced in black American households. In conclusion, according to the scholars, matriarchal societies within black American families are a way to further weaken the position of the husband in unequal marriages rather than a way to overcome the patriarchal system (36).

However, considering the stereotypical attributes employed to refer to black American families and black American women throughout Blood and Wolfe's research, it is not possible to rely on this text to prove a matriarchal society does not allow black Americans to perform at the same level of their white counterparts.

The statistics I have provided here will prove useful to exemplify the socio-economic background that characterizes Dre Greene in *Swarm*.

4.2 (Mis)Representations of black women: Stereotypes in television and cinema

Television is considered as a means through which to undermine or even overcome the established stereotypes concerning black communities, but also as a potential tool to reinforce such stereotypes. Although, initially, black characters were only peripheral presences on stage, with time they became central to the development of plots and grew more complex in terms of personality. In addition, emphasis has been put on how they cohabit with their blackness as well as with other black – or non-black – characters surrounding them, turning blackness into a primary characteristic contributing to their development (Harwood, 2022).

Nevertheless, many of the black characters on television today find their origin in racist stereotypes dating back to minstrel shows. The first major display of stereotypes in relation to African Americans, minstrel shows were born out of the wave of racism that

followed the end of slavery and represented the most popular form of entertainment in the United States between 1840 and 1910 (Cockrell, 1997: 152). The sketches were mostly performed by white actors wearing blackface make-up and facilitated the spreading of racist images and attitudes through the imitation of black music and the employment of a "plantation dialect" – that is to say, an exaggerated rendition of black vernacular English (Watkins, 1999: 82). The several stock characters featured in minstrel shows embodied stereotypical characteristics generally associated with blackness: for example, a tendency to bleat like sheep and their having "darky cubs" for children. In addition, they were generally described in animalistic terms – such as their having "wool" for hair (Toll, 1974: 67).

The most popular male stock characters were: Jim Crow – an inept and irreverent slave, whose image was then substituted with the Savage Negro, after the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 –; Uncle Tom – a submissive and obedient slave who seeks white approval –; the Coon –a naïve and goofy servant who is too cynical to attempt at changing his social status (Bogle, 1973) –; and the Buck – a hyper-sexualized, animalistic figure, who was usually perceived as a threat to white girls, especially after the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (Shohat & Stam, 2014). As regards female stock characters, the main figures are: the wench – a mulatto girl who combined the physical characteristics of a white woman with the alleged sexual promiscuity usually associated with black women (Toll, 1974: 144) –, and the Mammy – a nurturing and submissive slave, who helped raising younger generations of white families (Toll, 1974: 79).

These stereotypes have been enforced since the birth of cinema and have been spread to television in the 1960s, generating a racialized objectification of black characters, especially women, turning them into one-dimensional walking stereotypes. Although 60 years have gone by, the representation of black women has only barely improved: as per Ninochka

McTaggart et al.'s 2019 study, in fact, black women characters in television are generally distributed into three typologies: the Mammy, the Sapphire and the Jezebel.

In keeping with the minstrel shows' stock character classification, the Mammy is a nurturing, self-sacrificing, submissive and maternal woman, who is usually de-sexualized and unattractive (West, 1995: 459). Due to her amiable and obedient nature, the contemporary representation of a Mammy is that of woman holding a care-giving job (e.g. therapist, doctor),[26] making it her duty to take care of others. As a consequence, when she has a family of her own, the Mammy is a neglectful parent (Walker-Barnes, 2014: 85-88). Until the birth of the Sapphire stock character in the 1950s, the Mammy could also be depicted as terribly independent in her not accepting any help and sassy on occasion. With her dark-skinned complexion and large body, the character of Mammy clashes with the Western ideal of thinness, causing black women to chase an ideal that is historically based on white beauty standards.

To further clarify the contemporary representation of the Mammy stereotype, let us now consider Miranda Bailey, one of the main characters of the popular medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* (2005 – present). An ambitious and independent black surgeon with a bold sense of humor, Dr. Bailey is an authoritarian but wise chief, a dedicated doctor and a devoted wife and mother, who, though, finds it harder to balance her career and family life the older her son gets. With her short stature, round silhouette and large breasts, Miranda Bailey embodies a take on the Mammy stereotype.

The Sapphire is a passionate, stubborn and ambitious black woman who goes against the traditional portrayal of femininity according to which women ought to be submissive and non-threatening. This stock character is employed as a cautionary tale through which to control, regulate and punish those black women who do not conform to traditional social

[26] As Janine Nabers, creator of *Swarm*, noted, in fact, black women characters usually play strong and stable presences who aim at repairing white protagonists' broken lives (Berman, 2023).

norms, urging them to be submissive and innocuous. As Carolyn West puts it: "because their passion and righteous indignation is often misread as irrational anger, this image can be used to silence and shame black women who dare to challenge social inequalities, complain about their circumstances, or demand fair treatment" (2018). Generally depicted as a deeply unhappy, aggressive, loud and bitter woman, the Sapphire allows no back talk and demands respect and integrity from those around her, particularly her partner. As blogger Abagond puts it: "Where white women are said to be 'independent', black women are said to be 'emasculating', robbing their men of their sense of manhood. Where white women are said to be standing up for themselves, black women are seen as wanting a fight. And so on. The same actions are read differently" (2008).

The Sapphire stereotype has now evolved into two additional tropes: the "angry black woman" and the "strong black woman." Whereas the "strong black woman" stereotype spreads the idea that black women can endure mistreating because of their sturdiness, the "angry black woman" spreads the idea black women's anger is irrational and unreasonable.

To further exemplify the Sapphire stock-character, let us now consider the very character this stereotype gets its name from: Sapphire Stevens, wife of one of the main characters of *Amos 'n' Andy Show* (1951-1954). Considered as the first example of "angry black woman," Sapphire resents her husband George for his laziness and incompetency as well as his tendency to exploit his friends. Nevertheless, the very fact Sapphire would direct her disapproval just at her husband differentiates her from today's representation of "angry black women": their generalized anger and hostility, in fact, cannot be put into words and is re-directed on friends or family members (West, 1995: 461).

Finally, the Jezebel is a promiscuous and insatiable sexual being who cannot control her sexuality (Collins, 2008). Her only weapon is her body, which allows her to manipulate and exert control over men. First surfaced as a way to "rationalize the pervasive sexual assault

of black slave women by white men" (Jerald et at., 2017), the Jezebel stereotype enforces the belief that sexual promiscuity is an integral part of African American womanhood: in so doing, it corroborates the reliability of media portrayals presenting black women as sexual prowlers (Littlefield, 2008: 677). In addition, it justifies the sexual exploitation of black women, affirming that they cannot be victims of sexual violence because of their lustfulness (West, 1995: 463). Perceived and portrayed as either pathetic or exotic, Jezebel images depict black women as socially and culturally poor. As an example, let us consider *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)'s Lydia Brown. Lydia is the feral and lustful mulatto housekeeper of the Stoneman family and mistress to Mr. Stoneman: her role is so limited that she is only employed to represent the "loose black woman" 's luring of the "formerly good white man" into sin (Pilgrim, 2002).

This stereotype has now developed into two additional tropes: the "bad black girl" and the "welfare queen." The hyper-sexualization that characterizes the Jezebel stereotype is conveyed, on the one hand, through means of the provocative clothes worn by the "bad black girl" (West, 1995: 462); on the other hand, through means of the "welfare queen" 's dependency on State support to take care of the many children she has had with different sexual partners.

As per the 2019 study McTaggart et al. conducted together with Variety Business intelligence, Jezebels are usually light-skinned women who wear straight hair, have thinner lips and a smaller nose – hence, they are closer to Western beauty standards. As a consequence of their promiscuity, TV Jezebels are more likely to be objectified by other characters, more likely to have at least one sexual partner and less likely to hold a stable job (8-9).

Between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the stock characters of the Sapphire and the Jezebel merged into one which was further popularized through means of Blaxploitation

movies. Blaxploitation is a sub-genre of exploitation movies, aiming at employing social events (such as black power and militancy) to shock the audience and obtain financial success (Schaefer, 1999: 42-43). Characterized by graphic violence, sex and nudity, Blaxploitation movies revolve around a black working-class person – either a man or a woman – who is a physically attractive vigilante, aiming at avenging a wrong committed against them by a corrupted police officer or a ruthless drug dealer through means of their body, intelligence and weapons (Harris & Mushtaq, 2013: 31). Although such movies aim at portraying black communities' overcoming of the white majority, they were criticized for their inaccurate portrayal of black American life experiences: written, directed and produced mainly by whites, Blaxploitation movies were condemned for enforcing stereotypes about black men as criminals and black women as Jezebel-like prostitutes (Rahner, 2004). Hence, although marketed to black audiences, Blaxploitation movies' budgets were determined on the possibility of their success among white communities (Staggers).

Even though Blaxploitation movies were short-lived, they have had a profound impact on black American culture,[27] as they have allowed black characters to regain their sexuality on screen by portraying stable – and yet extraordinary – characters in place of hyper-sexualized or a-sexualized stereotypes. Nonetheless, they have also facilitated the erasure of black queerness in their stereotypical portrayals of black characters: exemplary are Blaxploitation movies centering around a woman protagonist. In such cases, the heroine is a straight black woman facing a queer white villain, generally a brothel-owner lesbian.[28] As a way to reinforce the heterosexual image of the protagonist as well as her black racial identity, in fact, queer characters in Blaxploitation movies are almost exclusively villains, in what can

[27] In the field of hip-hop and R&B music, for example, prominent artists have embraced the image of the pimp – generally associated, in Blaxploitation movies, with the average black American man – and feature bejeweled, sexually objectified women in their music videos (Turner, 2011).

[28] Such a pattern can be observed in *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974).

be thought of as a "black and straight" versus "white and queer" dichotomy (Harris & Mushtaq, 2013: 33).

Scholars have pointed out that heterosexuality has come to be a synonym to white domination: as image theorist Guy Debord argued in 1995, in fact, the more we are exposed to given images, the more we will identify with them and reinforce the power they have over us (28). In the specific case of Blaxploitation films, the heterosexuality of the protagonist serves to further marginalize queer identities, whilst underlying the deviance of non-heteronormative sexual orientations. As a consequence, the Blaxploitation discourse creates a separation between the black identity and the queer identity, so much so that "black audience essentially argues that to be gay and / or gender deviant means being white" (Debord, 1995: 36).

Hence, in a way, although portraying stereotyped life experiences within black communities, Blaxploitation movies failed at acknowledging the reality of a minority (queer people) within a minority (black people).

The thus far outlined fragmented identity of black women finds its origin in the separation opposing gender to racial identity between the 1960s and the 1970s. Those years – interestingly the same as the Blaxploitation genre – came to represent the most important social awakening period around black communities, as both Black Power and Civil rights movement were born. Black men deemed their female counterparts to have to value their race over their gender; hence, to have to commit to the Black Power movement. Still, the 1970s was also the decade of the rise of Second Wave Feminism, which urged black women once again to have to choose their gender over their race: "black women finding themselves caught between the two felt forced to denounce feminism, as it was just something for middle class white women" (Williams, 2020).

As a consequence, if on the one hand black women's identity is fragmented into two, a racial and a gender identity, queer black women's identity faces an additional division, that of sexual orientation. Being considered as racially, gendered and sexually others, queer black women carry in themselves the stereotypes usually associated with black communities (regarding aggressive behaviors, criminality and poverty), black women (usually objectified as lustful, curvy, hyper-sexualized bodies) and black queerness (a paradox in themselves, as non-heteronormative sexualities are considered to be an exclusively white occurrence).
Such stereotypes shape the ideas on black women as well as their fictional counterparts, allowing them no depth. An example, as will be further clarified throughout the rest of this Chapter, is that of Dre Greene.

4.3 *Swarm:* The case

In the following pages, I will analyze the character of Andrea "Dre" Greene, protagonist of *Swarm*, a 2023 miniseries created by Donald Glover and Janine Nabers for Amazon Prime Video. The plot revolves around events that unfold in two years, between April 2016 and June 2018, as the protagonist commits serial killing between different States (Georgia, Texas, Tennessee, California and Washington).

A young black woman, Dre has low self-esteem, is not able to make any friends and is socially awkward: clumsy and nearly mute most of the time, Dre is characterized by her ever-lasting love for her favorite singer, Ni'Jah Hutton. Throughout the seven episodes that make up the series, little is revealed about Dre's background and family life: however, the information the spectators are provided with is enough to suggest a tumultuous upbringing.

After the death of their infant son and the failure of their family business, Harris and Patricia Jackson took in 10-year-old Andrea as their foster child, for her to be a company to their daughter Marissa and – especially – for them to gain a government check. This detail is

in line with the stereotypical conception that black American families are dependent on State support to provide for their children: still, whereas in the "welfare queen" stereotype the goal is that of cashing some extra money to face the condition of poverty the family lies in; in this case the Jacksons welcome a new family member to benefit from child support, which represents their sole income.

Andrea was a victim of school bullying: described by schoolmates as "super weird and super quiet" and insulted with names such as "stupid" or "pig," she was especially made fun of for singing a Ni'Jah song at a school talent show. Andrea was considered "a lot to deal with" by her foster parents, who rarely showed her any love: rather, she was generally forced to hide in the attic whenever parties were hosted in the house. The most devastating event of her childhood takes place during the sleepover party the Jacksons held for Marissa's 13th birthday: in the middle of the night, Andrea tried and choke a friend of Marissa's, causing the Jacksons to estrange her and kick her out of the family household. Nevertheless, over the years, Andrea keeps in touch with Marissa, her only friend and the sole person to have ever shown her any love and support.

In the remaining part of this Chapter, I will analyze the character of Andrea Greene, focusing on her relationship with her sister Marissa and her adored Ni'Jah. In addition, I will show how her personality and behavior is influenced by stereotypical conceptions about and around black women, with her physique and clothing playing a pivotal role in the understanding of her identity. Finally, I will discuss how the traits analyzed impact the representation of Dre as a black American woman serial killer.

4.3.1 Dre's relationship with Marissa

The bond between Marissa and Dre represents a crucial part of the show. In the first Episode, in fact, Dre gets a new credit card to buy front-row tickets for a concert that Ni'Jah

will have in Huston (Texas) on Marissa's birthday. Although Marissa has outgrown it, Dre still holds on to their shared love for Ni'Jah's music when they were growing up. Dre feels like she has got a debt of gratitude towards Ni'Jah, whose music has shaped her identity, as it helps her get out of her own world and connect (virtually, of course, as she is not too good at making friends) with new people who are also Ni'Jah's fans. Upon her getting the tickets for the concert, Dre posts about it on Twitter to cause jealousy: when Marissa realizes that Dre is still tweeting from the old "The Swarm" account the two of them would run as teenagers, she comments "those are not your friends, those are some crazy-ass fans who don't give a fuck about you." This remark, though lost on Dre, helps the spectators understanding that Marissa no longer belongs in "the Swarm" – Ni'Jah's fan-base – and she would like Dre to realize that the love she feels towards the fandom is not real.

Towards the end of Episode one, Dre, who was supposed to cover Marissa's shift, instead causes her sister to get fired when the shop is robbed in Dre's absence: as a consequence, Marissa decides to leave the apartment they share and to move in with her boyfriend Khalid instead. Dre has never liked Khalid as she thought that he was cheating on Marissa: nonetheless, upon his asking the reason why they never got along, she answers "you said Ni'Jah wasn't special." To this, he replies: "The fuck are you, 12?". The very night Marissa leaves the apartment, she finds out that Khalid is indeed cheating on her, hence she goes back home to Dre, but does not find her there. Although she tries and text Dre, Marissa receives no answer and, that same night, she takes her own life.

The reason Dre is not available on the night of Marissa's suicide has to do with Ni'Jah. The singer, in fact, surprisingly releases a new album, which makes Dre want to go out to party and lose her virginity. Hence, it is only on the following morning that she notices Marissa has texted her to ask for help. Left all alone, feeble and numb with pain, Dre loses their shared apartment and most of their belongings. The only item that she now has to be

reminded of Marissa is her phone, which comes to represent a memento of their bond, but also a constant reminder of how Dre let Marissa down on the night of her suicide.

In the days following Marissa's suicide, Dre starts descending into a psychopathic rage spiral, which will set off her serial killing binge. To keep the memory of Marissa alive, Dre starts sending herself text-messages via Marissa's phone, which she never lets go of.[29] As Twitter users are spreading a rumor about Marissa committing suicide over Ni'Jah's new album, Dre takes it upon herself to kill anyone who speaks ill of Marissa as a way to honor their bond. Given Marissa would serve as Dre's real-life avatar for Ni'Jah because of her beauty and confidence, the two women are combined in Dre's imagination, causing her murderous resolution to extend to anyone who criticizes Ni'Jah.[30] The metaphorical fusion of Ni'Jah and Marissa materializes itself in the final episode of the show when Dre, now going by the name "Toni," kills her girlfriend to make it to Ni'Jah's concert in time. When the performer starts singing the first few words of "Festival," the title-track of the album she had released on the day of Marissa's death, Toni gets on stage and, upon Ni'Jah's request, sings for the audience before fleeing the venue together with the singer. In the final scene of the show, Toni is riding in a limo together with Ni'Jah, whose face is substituted with Marissa's.[31]

In Episode one, unable to attend Marissa's funeral because the family does not want her there, Dre takes refuge in Khalid's house. Although Khalid shows a profound remorse for the fight himself and Marissa engaged in on the night of her death, Dre is triggered into killing him.

[29] She will even go as far as to break into the Jacksons' house to stop them from de-activating Marissa's phone number, two years after her passing (Episode five).

[30] Dre's "by any means necessary" attitude recalls that of Blaxploitation heroines rather closely, as their criminal behavior represents the means to an end (usually, a desire for vengeance). Nevertheless, such a behavior also enforces stereotypes about black Americans, implying that they have a tendency towards criminality.

[31] Still, the idea this scene is an hallucination is conveyed and corroborated not only by Marissa's face substituting Ni'Jah 's but also by the ending of Episode six. The final scene of the episode, in fact, presented a news clipping announcing the arrest of a "Man [who] Runs on Stage at [blurred-out name] Concert."

Khalid's murder scene is a rather pivotal one for a variety of reasons. To begin with, his is the first murder Dre commits in the show. In addition, through this scene the blending between Marissa and Ni'Jah is first made evident: Khalid, in fact, had not only broken Marissa's heart on the night of her death; he had also disregarded Ni'Jah in pointing out her being an average person.

The scene opens with Dre knocking on the door and asking to come in: Khalid lets her and the two sit on the sofa, watching television. Dre sharply comments on his not attending Marissa's funeral and Khalid explains that, although he really wanted to attend, he could not force himself to. As Khalid sighs "I should have been there," he bursts into tears and covers his face with his hands to hide it from Dre. As she awkwardly reaches out to pat his knees and caress his shoulder, Khalid offers her some tea.

The initial stages of this scene only present 2-shot frames, alternating a framing of the characters' sole profile with a framing of the quasi-totality of their bodies (given that they are sitting on the sofa, their torsos, legs and faces are showing): whereas the former is used throughout the dialogic portion of the scene, the latter is only employed when Dre pats Khalid's knees and shoulders. In my opinion, the choice to employ a different 2-shot frame to convey the main character's unease further enhances the ambiguity of Dre's character: although it could be argued that she is clumsily trying to show Khalid support, I believe this camera switch to show Khalid lowering his guard. Once he leaves the dimly-lit living room, in fact, the frame switches to a medium close-up shot, framing Khalid's body to his shoulders: in the background, Dre unplugs the salt lamp on the table beside her and runs into the kitchen, hitting an unaware Khalid on the head.

The frame is again switched, this time to a long shot, to show Khalid falling to the ground and crawling away from Dre while begging her to "wait, just wait, okay?". As Dre sits astride Khalid and repeatedly hits him on the head with the lamp, the greater part of their

bodies is hidden behind the kitchen counter and only their legs are showing. Interestingly, whereas Khalid's legs are completely covered in pants, socks and slippers, Dre's are partially showing through shorts.

As Khalid dies, still hidden behind the kitchen counter, a low angle close-up shot is employed to focus on Dre's face while, her eyes widened and her face covered in Khalid's blood, one single tear falls from her right eye and streams across her face. As the scene comes to an end, the frame is again switched to a long shot to show Dre getting up, the salt lamp still held to her chest, to open the refrigerator: her breath still rapid with shock – or excitement? – she starts eating out of the fridge with her hands still covered in blood.

I argue that, through this scene, the spectators are able to understand that Dre kills out of a lack of love, as she has never known any affection aside from the one Marissa gave her. In addition, the fact that she starts eating immediately after the murder, heeding no notice to the blood that still stains her hands, points out how food is Dre's sole tool to manifest strong emotions. Such an interpretation is corroborated in Kenyatta David's article (2023) arguing that Dre considers food as a "tool for dissociating from her reality."

4.3.2 Dre's love for Ni'Jah

In her article commenting *Swarm*'s ambiguous ending, Judy Berman notices "it's black women whose relationship and conflicts, similarities to and differences from one another, drive the action" (2023). Berman's observation particularly resonates when considering that the plot of the whole series only really unfolds as a consequence of Dre's ignoring Marissa's cry for help; of Dre's prioritizing Ni'Jah, her new music and the feelings and desires it arouses in her. To Dre, Ni'Jah represents an ideal of perfect womanhood, a vision of glamour and excess that she herself is not able to achieve.

Much in the way of Marissa and Dre, the latter and Ni'Jah come to embody two opposites: on the one hand, in fact, "Dre and Marissa are...twin sisters in every sense but the biological one" (Berman, 2023); on the other hand, Ni'Jah represents the alluring mother to Dre's wild child. As Christer Claus and Lars Lidberg argued in 1999, a serial killer might be the product of their inability to form a significant relationship with their mother (430): given that Dre was abandoned as a child and her foster mother never defended her from her foster father's abuses, it could be, thus, argued that Ni'Jah fills in a vacant mother figure role. Hence, due to the lack of parental affect that has characterized Dre's early life and childhood, the only person left for her to dote on is Ni'Jah. Nevertheless, due to Ni'Jah's inability – rather, impossibility – to acknowledge Dre's existence, Dre's admiration for her slowly but steadily turns into an obsession; her desire to shield Ni'Jah from any critique causes her to turn into a vigilante, further enhancing her murderous objective.

To Ni'Jah, Dre is but a *sasaeng*. Originally from South Korean, the term "sasaeng" describes obsessive fans: usually female, aged 17 to 22, their desire to gain attention from celebrities often translates into borderline criminal acts (Williams & Xiang Xin Ho, 2016) – such as breaking into the celebrity's house or harassing their family – to be carried out by either one individual or a group of people. Their objective is that of standing out from the rest of fans and being acknowledged by their "idol." To do so, they engage in activities that include (but are not limited to) opposing "anti-fans" – whose purpose is the ultimate failure of the artist – as well as getting jobs in fields that allow them to get closer to their idol or to gather information about them (Padget, 2017).

As instances of such behaviors in Dre, let us consider Episode 3. The episode opens with the killing of a man who had written a disrespectful comment about Ni'Jah on Twitter: in Dre's perspective, the man can be considered an "anti-fan," as he disregards Ni'Jah's personal and professional life. Dre breaks into his home and, sneaking around the house, hits him at the

knee with a hammer: a full shot frames the man crawling into the living room while Dre slowly follows him, inquiring: “Who is your favorite artist?”. At his response, Lil Gibble, she coldly comments: “He is nothing. But Ni’Jah. She is everything.”

At this point, the full shot is substituted with close-up shots, alternating between frames of Dre and frames of her victim, who is lying on the floor. As the man denies thinking Ni’Jah’s music is not good enough for him, Dre asks: “Then why did you say she couldn’t keep her man happy?”. Since he denies, she shows him her phone, presumably displaying a tweet he wrote, as he cries out: “Nigga, Twitter?!”. At this point, with a new switch of frame to a high-angle shot, Dre starts hitting him on the head.

After this killing, Dre drives to California to kill politician Alice Dundley, who had criticized Ni’Jah on social media and television for letting her husband harass her sister. While she is about to strike Dundley, Dre receives a text message from Marissa, telling her to follow a man whom, Dre finds, works as a sound technician for Ni’Jah’s husband’ new album release party. As the two become friends, the man invites Dre to Cache’s party: hence, unlike the majority of sasaengs, Dre does not get jobs that allow her to get closer to Ni’Jah; rather she exploits people to reach her goal. After the concert, Dre locks the man up in the refrigerator and attends the after party, where she meets Ni’Jah for the first time and bites her face.

Dre’s obsessive behavior also extends to pretending to have an intimate relationship with Ni’Jah. In Episode five, upon her return to Huston for the first time since Marissa’s passing, Dre runs into Erica, Marissa’s former boss. When asked about how her life has been since their last meeting – at Marissa’s funeral, two years before –, Dre effortlessly lies, fabricating a story on how she is now working as a make-up artist for Ni’Jah’s mother, Angie Hutton. She also tells of her first – imaginary – encounter with Ni’Jah and tears roll down her face while she says that the Huttons have welcomed her as a member of the family.

In this scene, it becomes clear to the spectator that Dre's dream is that of finding the same love that she previously shared with Marissa.

Although Dre's devotion and obsession with Ni'Jah and her music represents a pivotal point to the unfolding of the plot of *Swarm*, it also is the most criticized aspect of the show. Critiques were moved as reviewers found *Swarm*'s main concern to rest not so much on the representation of a black American woman serial killer, but rather on the notion of toxic fan-bases. Although the show's denunciation of the fandom's inherently toxic nature – to both the artist and the fan – was praised, in fact, critics also found *Swarm*'s centering around a narrative of obsession to belittle the representation of Dre's character into a stereotypical take on "stan culture."

In addition, critiques were moved to the show for its ostensibly basing Ni'Jah's personality and biography on Beyoncé Knowles', causing the show to feel like a horrific yet comedic parody of the performer's life. Among the influences played by Beyoncé on the character of Ni'Jah, we find Ni'Jah's first band being called "The glamorous' child" (an unmistakable hint at "Destiny's child," the group that started Beyoncé's career) and Cache arguing with Ni'Jah's sister in an elevator (an almost exact replica of Jay-Z fighting Solange, Beyoncé's sister). The show also features events (rather, rumors) regarding Beyoncé's life, such as her being bitten by a fan or a fan taking her own life after rumors were spread of Jay-Z cheating on Beyoncé. Moreover, when, in Episode six, detective Loretta Greene learns that the killer she is hunting is a fan of Ni'Jah, although the singer's name is bleeped, "Beyoncé" is easily readable on Greene's lips (Seale, 2023). Finally, "swarm" is more than just the show's title, as it is the name Ni'Jah's fans have attributed their fandom: in fact, it is also an allusion to Beyoncé's fan-base, moniker "Bey-hive," as a wordplay on "beehive."

4.3.3 Serial killing

As the scenes thus far analyzed have clarified, Dre does not align with the general attributes of women serial killers: on the contrary, she fairly overlaps with the profile of men serial killers. To begin with, she stalks her victims, usually strangers, following them to determine the proper time to attack; in addition, she employs weapons – instead of poison – and is physically aggressive. Nevertheless, she rarely employs either of the methods that are generally associated with male serial killers, as she does not shoot nor asphyxiate her victims. Finally, unlike the average female serial killer, Dre is not in a relationship at the time of her killings.

Whereas such assertions are accurate with regard to the greater part of the show, they do not apply to its final episode. In Episode seven, when Dre, now going by the name "Toni," moves to Atlanta (Georgia), she has no money nor a cell-phone and lives in her car, sleeping with a knife in her hand for protection. It is clear that the events that led to her moving changed Dre's perception of herself, to the point that she feels free to embrace her more masculine side by means of a new gender expression (examples are found in her wardrobe and haircut). She also appears kinder, more sensitive and more confident, so much so that she is capable of living a normal life with her girlfriend, Rashida. Nevertheless, given that Episode six closes with the issuing of a warrant for Andrea Greene on charges of murder, it could also be argued that these changes are related to Dre's need to maintain her identity a secret.

Rashida does not share Toni's love for Ni'Jah, something that will cause her demise at the end of the episode. For their first anniversary, in fact, Toni buys front row tickets for a Ni'Jah concert, to attend together with Rashida. As the scene opens, Rashida enters the living room and Toni hides the tickets. Once Rashida gets off a work call, she shares her wish to

spend the night relaxing, so as to unwind after a long day: to surprise her, Toni hands her the tickets for Ni'Jah's concert saying "They're Ni'Jah's tickets for tonight, so go get dressed."

Through means of an over-the-shoulder shot, the camera frames Rashida folding the tickets in half and pocketing them, while commenting "I'm not going. We're not…we're not going to a Ni'Jah concert tonight." As Rashida gets up from the sofa, a close-up shot reveals a heartbroken Toni mumbling: "But they're front row." To this, Rashida, only her back visible in the shot, replies: "I know and I'm not going. Are you dumb?". Upset at the perspective of not being able to see Ni'Jah perform yet again, Toni mumbles: "I thought you would like it." As the camera frames the both of them through means of a 2-shot, Rashida takes Toni's hands and angrily utters: "I…don't… like…Ni'Jah." Given that Rashida moves around the room, her figure remains out of focus – while Toni's profile is in the foreground – as she voices her outrage at the thought Toni spent an absurd amount of money to gift her something that she does not like on their anniversary. As she calls Toni a "selfish asshole," Rashida finally states: "You could've flushed the money down the fucking toilet, and honestly, would've been put to better use than giving it to that woman and her money-grubbing husband."

The look on Toni's face allows the audience to understand what is about to happen. Once more, Dre prioritizes her love for Ni'Jah over anybody and anything else. Through means of a 2-shot frame, the camera focuses on Toni as she wraps her hands around Rashida's neck, holding her down with her body weight. Initially, Rashida's arms are visible in the shot as she tries and fight Toni off of her, but as the scene proceeds only her hands are showing as she tries and push Toni away. As Rashida lies dying on the sofa, Toni whispers: "I love you and I wanted to share Ni'Jah with you." The last frame of the two of them together presents Toni asleep, embracing Rashida's corpse.

Differently than the other killings thus far analyzed, Rashida's murder is carried out through means of asphyxiation instead of blunt force. In addition, Rashida is the only victim with

whom Dre shares a certain degree of intimacy, as they are in a relationship. These characteristics cause Dre to be found half-way between male and female serial killers' *modus operandi*: in fact, if on the one hand, asphyxiation is a conventional killing method among men serial killers; on the other hand, the killing of a person the killer is close to is a feature of women serial killers.

Another feature that distinguishes Dre from the typical female serial killer has to do with her operating inter-state: women serial killers, in fact, generally do not move geographically, as they only kill in one area. As a consequence, Dre can be considered closer to the profile of male serial killers in this regard as well. As both Hickey (2016: 32) and Harrison (2019: 12) argue, female serial killers are statistically more likely to be in a relationship at the time of the killings, whereas male serial killers are not: this could impact the woman serial killer's willingness to move after each murder. In Dre's case, in keeping with theories regarding men serial killers, she moves from one State to another in the aftermath of every murder that she commits, as she is not emotionally involved with anyone. Conversely, in Episode seven, she settles in Atlanta to preserve her relationship with Rashida. Could it mean that, during this relationship, Dre is living her longest cool down period? I don't believe so. In fact, I argue that, although Rashida's is the only murder featured in the episode, Dre's murderous spree has not stopped with her moving to Atlanta. Such an interpretation is corroborated when Rashida comments Toni's busy schedule (she, in fact, states: "Toni is always working"), as well as by means of Toni's repeatedly switching vehicles of motion. As a consequence, it could be argued that Dre steals the car of her latest victim and uses it until she kills again – in a very similar manner to what is depicted in *Monster* (2003).

A final feature to be considered is the intra-racial nature of serial killing. As per the FBI's Universal Crime Report of 2014, in fact, the vast majority of murders targeting black

people are perpetrated by black people (Criminal Information Services Division, 2014). As is the case with Dre's murders, a vast majority of her victims (such as Khalid and Rashida) are black Americans. Still, this does not mean that Dre never kills white people.

In Episode four, in fact, Dre finds herself in Tennessee on the way to Bonnaroo Festival, where Ni'Jah is to perform. She is welcomed into a cult-like sorority, DecaWin, led by Eva.[32] Dre is involved in group activities – such as meditation or hiking – aiming at unlocking her female potential, for which she has to hand in her phone. Despite her repeatedly deceiving the girls by lying about her name and stating to be a close friend of Ni'Jah's, Dre confides in Eva and confesses to traumatic events of her past – including Marissa's passing. When Dre realizes Eva has shared her secrets with the other girls, she faces the leader: in turn, Eva inquiries about the blood stains on the seats of Dre's car. At this point, Dre confesses that harming people makes her happy, to which Eva replies: "You're a warrior. Like Ni'Jah." Although these words re-assure her, Dre is once more troubled when she realizes that Ni'Jah's performance at the Bonnaroo Festival has already begun. As Dre is collecting her belongings and rushing out of the sorority, Eva threatens to use the information found in her phone to aid law enforcement building a case against her. For this reason, Dre enters the car and runs Eva over multiple times.

4.4 Conclusion: Donald Glover's Misogynoir

One final aspect to be considered as far as the critical response of *Swarm* is concerned is the criticism that the show's co-creator, Donald Glover, attracted for his portrayal of black

[32] Co-creator Janine Nabers confirmed the cult to be inspired by NXIVM, a pyramid scheme, sex-trafficking, sex cult built around Keith Raniere; and even more so by DOS (Dominus Obsequious Sororium), a women-only sub-group within NXIVM (Dickson, 2019). The members of DOS were partitioned into two categories, the "masters" and the "slaves" and every slave was forced into recording false confessions, weaving rights to personal bank accounts and providing nude photographs (Meier, 2017) to be used as guarantee of the slave's willingness at fulfilling her obligations as well as maintaining the secrecy of DOS. In addition, much in the way of the fictional DecaWin members depicted in *Swarm*, the slaves were branded by carving their master's initial into their skin (Bellamy-Walker, 2018).

women characters. First and foremost, such critiques concern Glover's hit-show *Atlanta* (2016-2022), as critics and fans alike consider the depiction of black women to be rather problematic. Generally perceived as loud, aggressive and opportunistic, *Atlanta*'s female characters are basically turned into objects of horror or ridicule (Burton, 2023), provided with no complexity and described as almost cartoony, never really developing into much more than a means to allow the storylines of black male characters to progress (Turner-Williams, 2022). The lack of characterization in the portrayal of his women characters caused Glover to be accused of "misogynoir," that is to say of further prompting racist and sexist stereotypes regarding black women by relegating them into categories.

In *Swarm*, Dre never comes across as a real person, as she is occasionally naïve and clumsy, "alternately pitiful, awkward, deranged, cunning, sociopathic or…all of the above" (Horton, 2023). Although she is deeply impacted by her trauma, especially Marissa's death, with which the show opens, the guilt and suffering that is driving Dre's actions is never shown nor explained. Due to her actions throughout the show, it could be argued that Dre suffers from a dissociative identity disorder, as she switches "from stammering and awkward to uninhibited and carnal" (Hadadi, 2023). Nevertheless, the show avoids a proper diagnosis for its main character. In fact, the audience is never provided with details concerning Dre's life or childhood, even though an entire episode is devoted to Detective Loretta Greene's investigation on the life of the killer.

As a matter of fact, Episode six is construed as a mockumentary titled *Falling Through the Cracks*, in which Detective Greene collects evidence to build a profile of her suspect. Detective Greene's investigation is initiated by her discovery of Hot Cheetos chips and a silk bonnet in the house of one of the victims, an elderly white woman. The very presence of the silk bonnet surprises the Detective, as it is an integral part of her daily life: considering that the silk bonnet is generally used by black women to protect their curly hair at

night, the Detective is driven to believe that the bonnet belongs not to the victim but to the killer. Therefore, she suspects the killer might be a black woman.

Hence, she looks up cases with the same *modus operandi* (blunt force trauma, Hot Cheetos chips found onboard of stolen cars) and finds the Fayeteville case, a murder Dre had committed in Episode two at the presence of a group of fellow strippers. Interviewing one of the strippers involved, Detective Greene finds out about the presence of a fifth woman, named Carmen, who loved Ni'Jah's music. Thus, she cross-references unresolved blunt force trauma murder causes with social media profiles insulting Ni'Jah in the area of Texas – the singer's home State – to find about Khalid's murder. It is through Khalid's brother that she also discovers Marissa's suicide. Hence, Detective Greene reaches out to Marissa's mother, Patricia Jackson.

During an interview with Mrs. Jackson, Detective Greene finds cut-out photos of Andrea and is made aware of how the foster child "was a lot to deal with." Thus, it becomes clear to her that the Jacksons did not care for Andrea in the least, and only saw her as a means for a government check. To further clarify the extent to the troubles Andrea would get herself into, Patricia Jackson recounts one pivotal event: in the aftermath of her attempted chocking of one of Marissa's friends during her sister's birthday party, Andrea had apologized for spilling the milk. Mrs. Jackson was puzzled at the incoherence of the assertion.

I argue that the image of the spilled milk, that Dre had already mentioned in Episode four during a conversation with Eva, is a reference to a traumatic event dating back to before the Jacksons took her in. Although Episode four only provides hints to spilled milk, stains of blood and a distracted grandmother, it is plausible that Dre had caused the harming of a person close to her or to herself. In the same scene, Dre also recalls the event overlapped with her listening to Ni'Jah's music for the first time: still, as this event is not described nor shown

in any of the episodes, it is not possible to consider it as an additional example of how Dre's prioritizing Ni'Jah translates into her harming others.

The aforementioned lack of information around Dre's early life and childhood also extends to her sexual orientation, as the audience is only provided with hints around Dre's sexuality and gender identity. Critics are still debating on whether Dre is to be considered a bisexual or a lesbian woman. Surely, the events narrated by Patricia Jackson to detective Greene in Episode six uncover Harris Jackson's disdain for his foster daughter's sexuality – a hatred so deep that he would force Dre to hide in the attic whenever guests were visiting the family. Still, Dre's repressed sexual interest in women is only alluded at in early episodes, as she is awkwardly intimate with Marissa in Episode one and becomes uneasy around a couple of lesbian DecaWin members in Episode four.

Broadly speaking, Dre's feeling of unease could reasonably derive from an issue in her gender identity, rather than her sexual orientation. On the one hand, the transition into Toni causes the audience to perceive Dre as a transgender person because of the changes in personality and attire – in which case, the thus far employed pronoun "she" / "her" would have to be discarded in favor of a more neutral "they" / "them" at the least. Nevertheless, such an interpretation falters when, in the final scenes of the episode, Ni'Jah welcomes Dre on stage and employs feminine pronouns to refer to her.

Dre's abrupt transformation into Toni has caused critics to wonder about the reason behind the transition: on the one hand, Dre could have discovered her real self through means of her love for Ni'Jah; on the other hand, she could merely be playing a part that, she believes, would facilitate her in getting closer to her idol (Berman, 2023). At any rate, when asked about what they were trying to convey with Dre's ambiguous sexuality, co-creator Janine Nabers answers: "The fact that she is living very confidently as Tony — in a grounded, real way without any labels — is part of [her journey]. This relationship with Rashida is part

of that [her journey]. It's about coming into your own sense of self. Tony is her at her truest, most humane, present, grounded form" (Hailu, 2023). Hence, Dre's transition into Toni has to be considered as her way to come to terms with her grief and overcome her obsession with Ni'Jah, rather than as a means to embrace her real self, her sexuality or her gender identity.

Dre's lack of characterization is a direct consequence of Donald Glover's request to actress Dominique Fishback to think of her character more as an animal than as a person. Glover, in fact, explained: "I kept telling her, you're not regular people. You don't have to find the humanity in your character. That's the audience's job" (Leung Coleman, 2023). Even though Fishback has been nominated at the 2023 Emmy Awards in the category Best Actress in a Miniseries or a Movie, the reviews primarily stressed the character's inability to develop into either a hero or a villain, which in turn caused the audience to not be able to resonate with Dre or fear her.

As a matter of fact, Dre's characterization derives from a combination of several of the stereotypical conceptions about black women that I have sketched earlier on in this Chapter. To begin with, in keeping with the portrayal of black women provided by Brown (2014: 403), Dre is depicted as too immature and socially awkward to be perceived as intriguing or fascinating: for example, in Episode one, when Erica, Marissa's boss, invites her co-workers to a party that she has been invited to, she explicitly excludes Dre, as "you just sit there and watch. It makes me nervous."

Dre also appears childish whenever she envisions her first encounter with Ni'Jah: in Episode one, she shares her certainty that, upon their first meeting, Ni'Jah will immediately understand that they share a bond. An additional instance is found in Episode four, when, while at lunch with DecaWin members, Dre states her conviction that Ni'Jah's performance at Bonnaroo Festival is going to be "the biggest moment of our lives": when one of the members

states that she likes Ni'Jah's sister' music more, Dre's affectionate smile turns into a frown, as she laconically comments "she is alright."

Earlier on, I have exemplified the three stock-character typologies concerning black female characters on television and in cinema: let us now consider the characteristics of these stock-characters in relation to Dre.

Basing only on her physique, we could be led to think that Dre belongs to the Mammy stereotype because of her dark-skinned complexion and large body. Nevertheless, she does not possess the amiability and obedience that characterize a Mammy: in fact, not only does she do as she pleases, but she is also rather unpleasant towards other people – with the exception of Marissa and Ni'Jah. However, Dre partially embraces and partially debunks the Mammy's care-giving nature: on the one hand, she seems to debunk it because she kills people when they do not share her opinion; on the other hand, she enforces it, as her killings are driven by her need to defend and protect Ni'Jah and Marissa.

Whereas the Sapphire generally comes across as a loud, bossy and emasculating personality, *Swarm*'s protagonist is rather quiet and awkward: in fact, Dre can only be deemed "aggressive" or "domineering" when she is performing her murders.

The stock-character typology that most overlaps with Dre's personality and

Figure 4 One of Dre (Dominique Fishback)'s outfits in Episode one.

representation is the Jezebel, specifically the sub-category of the "bad black girl" (West, 1995: 462). In keeping with the research outlined in 4.1, *Swarm* presents a commoditization of black women via the constant exposure of their bodies: generally speaking, in fact, we find that every black woman presented in the show has a tendency to wear crop tops, shorts or even just bras.

As far as Dre is concerned, a de-sexualization of her wardrobe takes place throughout the series: in the early episodes, in fact, she is seen wearing provocative clothes showing her arms, back, legs and abdomen. Even in the scene of Khalid's murder in Episode one, Dre is wearing shorts and a cropped hooded sweatshirt: at the end of the scene, when Khalid lies dying behind the kitchen counter, the frame primarily shows Dre's bare legs. On the contrary, in later episodes, particularly episodes five through seven, her wardrobe becomes more masculine, and she is often seen wearing full-length pants, jackets and T-shirts. A reason behind such a de-sexualization might be found in Dre's transition into Toni: as she is embracing her more manly side, Dre is detaching from womanhood and, in turn, from the hyper-sexualized portrayal of black women.

Finally, let us consider the portrayal of Dre as a serial killer. Glover's idea of writing a

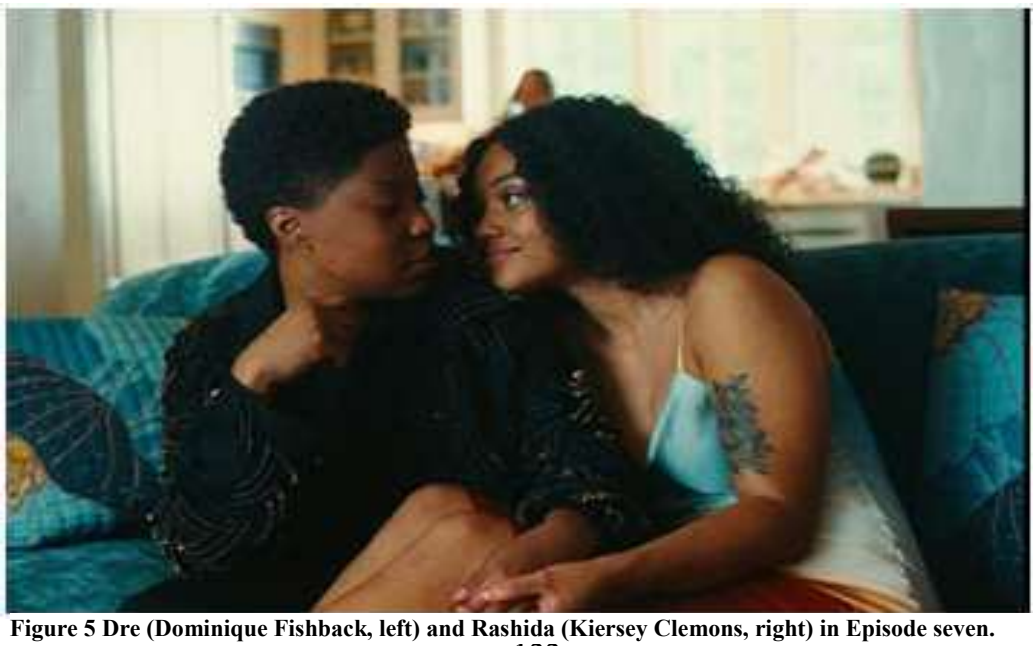

Figure 5 Dre (Dominique Fishback, left) and Rashida (Kiersey Clemons, right) in Episode seven.

show revolving around a black woman serial killer was born out of a desire to debunk the stereotypes around the innate care-giving nature of black women: co-creator Janine Nabers, in fact, revealed Berman that the initial idea came to Glover upon his reading tweets of a black woman lamenting of "watching shows where the black women were always therapists, had their shit together, or were saviors. She was like, 'What's up with that? We can be serial killers too, right?' " (Berman, 2023). Hence, the lack of television products concerning black women with violent tendencies was so evident that it only took Glover one tweet to conceive of the idea of *Swarm*. Nevertheless, although the show was born to portray the black American take on female-perpetrated serial killing, as thus far outlined, the murders do not represent the pivotal point of the production. On the contrary, in keeping with the representation of women serial killers, Dre is a below-average person – in regards to her attractiveness and intellect – and she does not come across as special in any way. In addition, aligning with the cinematic representation of black serial killers, Dre is not a brilliant mastermind, as she is never shown scheming about her next murder, leading the audience to believe that her murders are driven by momentary surges of violence. Still, the only murder that Dre commits out of anger is Eva's, as a way to defend herself from Eva's threats. In addition, every murder shown on screen is perpetrated in the victim's house, hence it is possible to assume that a certain degree of premeditation on the part of Dre was necessary. Yet, the only scene portraying Dre forcefully entering a potential victim's house is rather ironic, as she clumsily crawls her way inside the house through a window, and is detected by the owner before she can even stand up.

Thus, differently than the movies analyzed in Chapter 3 about the story of Aileen Wuornos, the features of Dre's personality, the importance of her sexuality and the repercussions of childhood traumas on her adult life are hardly hinted at. Whilst the motive behind her murders is clearly hedonistic (Harrison, 2019), what she wishes to obtain from them is debatable: on

the one hand, Dre could be seeking a thrill of sorts, in her conviction that she is protecting Ni'Jah's reputation by killing her "anti-fans"; on the other hand, her killings could work as a defensive mechanism to comfort her in the aftermath of Marissa's death.

Why, then, in a cinematic landscape that is full of fictional and non-fictional instances of serial killers who are brilliant, fascinating, cunning and even awarded a certain degree of humanity – including our own Aileen Wuornos –, does a black woman serial killer come across as stupid, dull and almost boring? I believe further research is needed to discuss the social and psychological implications deriving from such a distinction in movies and TV shows.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was filling a research gap by analyzing the representation of women serial killers within U.S. cinema and television. The cases considered are eccentric and at the same time emblematic, as they highlight the reality of a rare occurrence within a rare occurrence, namely female serial killers who are also mentally ill and belong to an LGBTQIA+ group.

The starting point lies in the fact that the notion of a woman serial killer has only recently made its way into the American collective consciousness. Previous academic research found that this type of killer is generally a woman who primarily kills members of her family through means of poison, and whose motive has to do with economic gain. Aileen Wuornos and Andrea Greene challenge the stereotypical perception of women serial killers.

In the first Chapter, issues of public concern such as sexism and gender-based violence have been analyzed, so as to uncover how women serial killers are overlooked because of their gender. The term “female serial killer”, initially perceived to be an oxymoron by law enforcement as well as the media, has, in fact, turned into a synonym for “black widow killer” in recent years. Though the idea that a woman could only kill in self-defense has been debunked, female perpetrated serial murders are still overlooked by the media because of their rarity. The studies conducted by Dr. Marissa Harrison found – similarly to the works of Hickey (1991) and Vronsky (2007) – that the typical female serial killer is likely to have undergone childhood trauma, to be driven by hedonistic motives (i.e. profit, thrill or comfort) and not to have behaviors that steer from the murderous objective, such as cannibalism and kidnapping (Weist, 2011: 72). In addition, per these studies, women killers are more likely to target people they share a degree of intimacy with, less likely to shoot or asphyxiate their victims and to display physical aggressiveness.

And yet, neither Greene nor Wuornos entirely fit this profile: although both have undergone childhood trauma, are driven by hedonistic motives and avoid raping or kidnapping their victims, they also tend to kill strangers by means of blunt force (in Greene's case) or by shooting (Wuornos' weapon of choice being a .22-caliber pistol).

Finally, when compared to men serial killers, Harrison found that women serial killers are less likely to release interviews and to face the death penalty. These assertions are true only to a certain extent when considering the case of Aileen Wuornos: although it is true that Wuornos released interviews only to Nick Broomfield during her jail-time, life imprisonment was never considered a suitable punishment for her crimes.

Throughout the second Chapter, the reasons behind the ongoing fascination with serial killing within American culture have been outlined. Perceived as a social problem, serial killing is narrativized and sensationalized through means of the media coverage, which increases the audience's interest in the figures of serial killers – so much so that the collection of "murderabilia" is now seen as a way to placate one's curiosity about the macabre in the safety of one's home. The fascination for this topic, though, also caused the belief that serial killing cases are on the rise: nonetheless, such a perception is proven incorrect when considering the improved police investigation instruments to report and record serial killing cases.

The interest in serial murder is also connected to the feeling of adrenaline that is released in our bodies whenever we are experiencing fright. Given that the topic of female violence has achieved social and critical success over the years, between 2000 and 2015 alone 500 movies have been made about it: the viewers, in fact, find comfort in their personal distance from such occurrences of death and pain, which intensifies their sense of morality.

Finally, other reasons are linked back to the glorification of violence that characterizes contemporary America, allowing the military to go against an enemy, often dehumanized, with little to no legal or moral repercussions.

Newspapers and magazines have a tendency to portray women serial killers as monstrous and emotionally unstable beings whose actions are driven by precarious health conditions. For this reason, the killers are depicted as unattractive, overweight and disagreeable, as a way to imply an overlapping of their flawed façade and their evil actions. This is not the case when considering the cinematic representations of Aileen Wuornos, central to the third Chapter. In all the three movies analyzed about her case, in fact, the directors faced criticism for their casting of conventionally attractive actresses – Peyton List, Charlize Theron and Jean Smart –, regardless of their rendition of Wuornos' allure and personality. Such cinematic portrayals, although not aiming at rendering Aileen's personality more likeable (because of her pathological lying behavior and anger issues), still managed to reward her with a degree of humanity that allowed the audience to empathize with her because of her traumatic past. And yet, the killer's physical appearance does not match the low-income life Wuornos was leading in the period of time concerned in the movies. The fictional Wuornos always wears fresh make-up, has shimmering hair and polished teeth: conversely, the real-life Wuornos, as well as the real-life Moore, hardly had any teeth and would not care much for their physical appearance.

In addition, these representations tend to victimize Aileen via the use of visuality (e.g. flashbacks) as well as dialog, going as far as to justify her crimes with the belief that Aileen was a victim to her victims. Examples of such victimization are also found in Aileen herself, as when, in an interview with Nick Broomfield on the day before her execution, she compares herself to Jesus.

In the case of *Swarm*, instead, the audience cannot empathize with Dre as, although childhood traumas are hinted at throughout the show, no details or images are provided to further understand the circumstances that shaped the killer's early life. In addition, due to Donald Glover's directorial tips concerning Dominique Fishback's portrayal of Dre, the psychological reasons (e.g. her grieving Marissa) causing her to resort to murder are never investigated. Hence, the viewers are unable to resonate with Dre's actions and motives in the way they do with Aileen's.

Differently from Aileen's physical appearance, Dre's aligns with the common portrayals of women serial killers. Given that she is rarely – if ever – addressed as 'attractive' by other characters, Dre lacks the sensuality usually associated to female serial killers (as examples, let us consider the movie versions of Aileen or *Basic Instinct*'s Catherine Tramell).

Her unattractiveness also seems to translate in a lack of the wit necessary to premeditate her crimes: Dre comes across as driven by temporary rage, whilst in actual fact, given that her crimes are committed in the victim's house, she is required a component of premeditation. And yet, as mentioned in Chapter 4, Dre is never shown studying the routine of her next victim or scheming about how to enter his / her house. The reason behind the absence of insight on Dre's *modus operandi* has to do with the fact that *Swarm*'s focal point is not that of providing an example of black woman serial killer, rather that of shedding light on the topic of toxic fan bases. Consequently, I believe further research is necessary to investigate the impact that productions portraying a fictional black serial killer have on the audience – even more so in the case of a woman killer –, regardless of the viewer's gender, ethnicity or race.

As far as the representation of queerness is concerned, the considered productions have diverging approaches. In *Swarm*, Dre's queerness is only ever hinted at throughout the series: on the one hand, Dre's interest in women is never labeled; on the other hand, the show also opens for the possibility of Dre being a transgender person. As regards Aileen, her sexual

orientation has no impact on the narrative provided in Nick Broomfield's documentaries. However, Wuornos is not depicted as a queer person neither in *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* nor in *Aileen Wuornos: The American Boogeywoman*. In the former, Wuornos' relationship with Tyria Moore is considered platonic, as they are said to share a bond that is comparable to that of family members; in the latter, Lee can be considered a heterosexual woman because of her marriage to Lewis Fell. Consequently, the only movie that portrays Aileen as a lesbian woman, outlining her relationship with Tyria Moore, is *Monster*, as they are shown living in the same apartment and confessing their love to each other.

Another feature to be considered is the representation of the killers' mental illness. Critics argued that Dre may suffer from a dissociative identity disorder and that food may be a tool for her to disassociate herself from the reality around her. Nevertheless, the show never explicitly addresses its protagonist's mental state.

In Aileen's case, it is believed that detention somehow influenced her mental state: throughout the time she spent in jail, in fact, Wuornos repeatedly stated her belief of being a victim of fate, which is to say she did not deem herself responsible of the crimes that she had committed. These are symptoms usually found in psychopathic patients: as a matter of fact, she was formally diagnosed with psychopathy, anti-social behavior and borderline personality disorder during her confinement. Nonetheless, similarly to *Swarm*, none of the movies that I have analyzed in this work tackle the issue of Wuornos' mental illness. As far as Nick Broomfield's documentaries go, he commented on the work as the depiction of a deeply paranoid and yet sympathetic human being, underlying how, although Wuornos was never found legally insane – rather, fit to stand trial and be executed –, the court considered the impact of her mental illness as a mitigating factor (Nickbroomfield.com).

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