

More of a Monster Than Hollywood Could Picture

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The movie's horrific rape scene is grueling to watch. In a car, a terrified prostitute is bound at the wrists and tied to one of the door handles. Already bloodied and beaten, she is viciously sodomized by the man who picked her up by the highway. Somehow, she breaks free and, wild with rage, bravely turns the tables on her attacker. She grabs a gun from her bag and fires bullet after bullet into his chest. The audience, watching breathlessly, feels a rush of sympathy for her.

So, as portrayed in the movie "Monster," begins the one-year killing spree of real-life serial killer Aileen Wuornos, played by Charlize Theron. A beautiful actress who stunningly transformed herself into a dead-on facsimile of the chunky, rough-looking Wuornos, Theron is a top contender for the Best Actress Oscar and has already won a Golden Globe award. The buzz about her performance has brought the independent film significant attention. What bothers me is that moviegoers will think that scene of torture it depicts is true.

With "Monster's" sympathetic take, Hollywood has put its boot print on a piece of history. And as Aileen's biographer, I find the movie's distortions disturbing. The filmmakers acknowledge upfront that "Monster" is fictionalized, that it is only "based upon" a true story. But will anyone notice this disclaimer, let alone pay attention to it? Already, most people seem not to. Reviewer upon reviewer has referred to Aileen's saga as depicted in the movie as true.

To be sure, the hitchhiking prostitute who confessed to killing seven men in Florida in 1989-90 and was executed in 2002 was no JFK or Malcolm X, two other real-life figures whose stories were altered for the big screen. But by retooling her into a victim who began killing to fend off a rapist, "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 perpetuates the comforting yet erroneous belief that women only kill when provoked by abuse. But women kill for other reasons, too, as Aileen's real life amply demonstrated.

While we would rather not accept this, we should. When we change the story of this wounded but vicious woman to make her more a heroic victim than a coldblooded killer, we miss an opportunity. Far more valuable than another cookie-cutter Hollywood defense of a downtrodden, abused woman would be a film that confronted the truth of Aileen's life and rage directly, both for the window that truth offers into the psychology and pathology of female murderers, and for what it says about women's capacity for violence, as well as American society and the culture of celebrity and fame it nourishes.

At first, I was hesitant to criticize "Monster" (might it seem like sour grapes because writer-director Patty Jenkins didn't option my book?). But after 30 years in journalism, I feel a deep attachment to facts. And the movie's treatment of them is something I can't let go unchallenged.

I began studying Aileen soon after her 1991 arrest. She had gunned down complete strangers, shooting them multiple times, sometimes in the back, as they tried to flee. Her victims fought for their lives as desperately as any female murder victim. Calculatingly, she covered her tracks, wiped away her fingerprints and made off with their cars, cash and possessions. She admitted that she killed to avoid leaving witnesses to her robberies, which I believe she conducted when she felt that her relationship with her lesbian lover was in peril, since she believed cash was a way of shoring it up.

But beyond this, Aileen craved fame. She had told friends that she wanted to do something no woman had ever done before. She had repeatedly expressed fantasies of leading a Bonnie-and-Clyde-style outlaw existence (though she ultimately acted alone) and going down in history. She wanted a book to be written about her life. She wanted society to view her as a heroine.

The source for the movie's rape scene is clearly Aileen's own jaw-dropping court testimony. She first publicly aired this cinematically dramatic account at her trial for the murder of her first known victim, 51-year-old electronics shop owner Richard Mallory, a full year after her original confession to police. Initially, she had told detectives that Mallory was nice and that they had spent five fun hours together before she killed him. She said variously that she shot him because he wouldn't take off his pants, because he wasn't going to pay her, and because he'd paid her but she was afraid he was going to take his money back. But she didn't say he'd raped her until she took the witness stand.

Her rape account, however, simply didn't match the physical evidence. She said Mallory was coming toward her when she first shot him, yet a firearms expert testified that a hole in the back of his sleeve indicated the gun had been fired from behind. Asked to explain why the bullet's trajectory didn't match her story, she said, with chilling detachment, "I thought he was so decomposed you couldn't tell." Mallory was found fully clothed, his pants zipped, his belt buckled, and his pockets turned inside out as if they had been emptied.

Even more important was the testimony of Aileen's lover, Tyria Moore, a jovial, very hefty, openly gay woman with missing teeth who was often mistaken for a man. (In another instance of Hollywood's romanticizing touch, Moore is replaced in "Monster" with Selby, a rather winily dependent young woman struggling to come out as a lesbian, played by the winsome Christina Ricci.) When detectives first caught up with and interviewed Moore, she was very scared, and they were convinced she was truthful. When she later testified against her lover, she stuck to the story she had told them. She described Aileen coming home and casually declaring, as they watched TV, "I killed a man today." Aileen drove Mallory's car when she and Moore used it to move. She behaved normally. She made no mention of, nor bore any visible signs of, an attack. That the volatile Aileen would not have cursed out a brutal rapist to Moore simply beggars belief.

In "Monster," so pervasive is the sense of Aileen as a victim that any true sense of menace is absent. No one I spoke to who had seen the film reported feeling any chills of fear, of the kind you might get watching a film about notorious male murderers such as Ted Bundy or Richard Ramirez. Since "Monster" paints Aileen as the victim of her victims, it's hard to shake the empathy one feels for her. Yet the real Aileen was so violently volatile that I certainly wouldn't have wanted our paths to cross in a dark alley. She could be scary -- and people trying to understand what she did should know that.

I'm not without empathy for Aileen. Researching her childhood in Michigan, I felt great sadness as I pieced together the misery of her life. Abandoned by her mother before age 2, she was raised by her alcoholic grandparents as their own. Though her accounts varied wildly, I do believe she was sexually abused as a child. She began selling her body at age 11 or 12. It's highly likely she endured rapes over the years; most prostitutes do.

But "Monster" suggests that her rage sprang whole from a brutal attack and that she thereafter just carried on killing. In reality, her seemingly uncontrollable furies first manifested themselves in childhood. With no apparent impulse control, Aileen so scared or repelled her peers that she was treated as a pariah. Her mother's sister, with whom she was raised as a sibling, told me how the adolescent Aileen once terrified her by holding a kitchen knife to her throat over a trivial babysitting dispute. At around age 20, Aileen spent a couple of weeks under her birth mother's roof. The woman was so petrified of her that she barely slept.

And what about her victims? The media routinely lump them together as her "johns." Yet, excluding those whose bodies were found naked, it's just as likely that some were simply good Samaritans lending a helping hand, since Aileen's modus operandi was to hitch rides, claiming her car had broken down. These men have been demonized in a way in which we would rarely demonize female homicide victims. And that has brought incalculable pain to some of their families.

After Aileen's conviction, it did come out that Richard Mallory had been convicted of a sexual assault at age 19. But his record had been clean for decades. Prostitutes whom he frequented described him as a nice man and a generous tipper.

I know that Hollywood routinely whitewashes or changes the truth. But doing that obscures the moral message of Aileen Wuornos's real life. I've got nothing against Charlize Theron. Her physical transformation in "Monster" is eerily good and her acting mesmerizing. I'd polish her awards myself. And I'm not against the movie, either -- as entertainment. But fictionalized or not, it's about a real person, and I can't help feeling that it's trying to fit Aileen's story into a more politically correct mold than the reality allows. It all but guarantees that she and her murders will end up on the microfiche of collective memory in a way that is fundamentally inaccurate but closer to what her own hopes for her legacy were.

I don't think she quite deserves that. I'll admit it was chilling to see her sentenced to death. She was severely damaged goods and mentally flawed. Yet many have endured far worse than she. Ultimately, she was irredeemably dangerous. She killed in cold blood, cutting down men who had lives and wives and families. That's a truth not even Hollywood should pretty up.

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