

WOMEN WHO KILL:
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF FEMALE KILLERS IN FILM

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WOMEN WHO KILL:
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Thesis

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION

In the opening moments of the 1992 movie *Basic Instinct* we come across a couple that is having passionate sex in a bedroom. While engaged in the act, the woman seductively wraps two scarves around the man's arms and ties them to the front of the bed. Kissing his lips and caressing his body, the woman reaches behind her, grabs onto an ice pick, and repeatedly stabs the man in the chest with it. Smiling as she does so, the woman literally bathes in the man's blood as he lies dying beneath her.

Such is the audience's introduction to Sharon Stone's character Catherine Tramell, a character who, upon *Basic Instinct*'s release, received numerous outcries from critics for sensationalizing and eroticizing the female killer. A drug addicted, bisexual author, Catherine seduces her victims and then kills them in brutal fashion with an ice pick, both for the thrill of the kill and to use as material for her line of crime novels. Catherine has often been called one of the most controversial killers in cinema not just because of the brutality of her murders, but because she is a woman.

Within U.S. culture the image of the female killer has long been a subject of both curiosity and fascination. Popularly appearing in noir tales for generations and shocking the public whenever real-life murders involving a woman occurs, the female killer is a sensationalized idol that both entertains and frightens, yet is often misunderstood. Using ideological criticism, this thesis will analyze four films that feature female killers as their

lead characters (*Thelma and Louis*, *Basic Instinct*, *Monster*, and *Death Proof*) to determine what common themes emerge among the films as well as how they reflect various worldviews that the U.S. culture has of the female killer. All four films upon their releases garnered controversy and have gained notice by critics and scholars alike for the portrayals of their female leads. Among particular interests will be how the female killer is portrayed in the movie, the relation of the female killer to her victims, and her background story or upbringing leading to the female killer's murders.

CHAPTER II.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand cinema's popular use of the female killer as a character, a background on the history of the female killer is needed.

2.1 The Female Killer in History

Over time, a "standard frame of visibility," both within the general public and popular culture, has determined what has been seen and perceived within society in regards to female killers, with those perceptions shifting over time (de Laretis, 1990, p. 12). The visibility of female killers in popular culture has not only contributed to their frequent use in cinema but to their portrayals on screen as well.

The study of female killers has long intrigued scholars and historians alike. Dating as far back as the Victorian era, acts of murder by females and the image of the female killer have both shocked and fascinated those within culture. In a period in which women were expected to be docile, submissive, and morally pure, the reality that women could not only kill but did kill represented an affront to Victorian sensibilities. People had "difficulties in imagining that women of the so-called respectable classes" were killers despite that evidence would either prove their involvement with murder or that the suspects themselves would openly confess to murdering their victims (Hartman, 1977, p. 2).

Instead, the ideology was perpetuated that these women were simply misfits or social deviants. To preserve decency and sustain fear, the public maintained that these cases were extremely rare and that these women must therefore be outcasts in a morally stable society. A Victorian “Code of Manners” not only perpetuated the belief of the passive female, but labeled those women who did not follow them as intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior (Utter & Needham, 1936). What’s more, those who disobeyed the code had their lives thrown open to the public with their actions facing harsh scrutiny.

As with the Victorian era, so too is the fascination of the female killer present today in the modern era. The mere fact that a woman has broken the law ensures that she will be regarded as someone who has failed to fulfill gender role expectations. This refusal to conform to the stereotypical roles of femininity, especially in the areas of respectability, domesticity, and motherhood, leads many women into what Carlen (1985) calls “judicial misogyny.” In short, “judicial misogyny” refers to women who fall within the “bad” category because “they are assertive, unemotional, promiscuous, divorced, or have children in care” and do not “conform with the judge’s stereotype of appropriate womanhood by presenting an image of docility” (p. 10). Much like the Victorian era, women before the law are seen as inferior and untrustworthy.

Moreover, a woman who is before the law tends to be chastised even before her case is fully examined or understood. Regardless of her role in the case, Yates (1996) argues that the female will be judged harshly and not seen as a credible source: “At both extremes, innocent or guilty, victim or perpetrator, women are often inscribed in our cultural texts as unreliable...” (Yates, 1996, p. 130). Essentially, the more exposure to the

law and media a woman has the less reliable she will appear before the eyes of the community. It is up to the courts, therefore, which are often seen as the patriarchal structure of a society, to deem what is wrong with the accused female.

When women are visible before the law and the media, they are often seen in relation to violent crime, typically as victims in need of rescue or as a person who has been pushed to their breaking point. A popular rationale in homicide cases involving women who have killed a significant other is the battered woman syndrome. The battered woman syndrome refers to a crime deemed “reasonable and necessary” because the offender “reasonably believed she was in imminent danger of serious bodily harm or death and that the force she used was necessary to avoid that danger” (Thar, 1982, p. 353). Murders labeled as the result of a battered woman perpetuate the idea of female killers defending themselves against an assailant rather than being the instigator of the violence.

While critics may call the battered woman syndrome label a simplistic explanation for murder, a percentage of crimes do suggest a close relationship between a female killer and her victim. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 30.1% of male victims by a female killer in the United States from 1976 to 2005 consisted of an “intimate” partner, meaning a boyfriend or spouse, versus male killers having 5.3% of their female victims being an “intimate” partner (U.S. Department of Justice). Though causality for the murders within these results is unknown, the relationship between the female killers and their victims within these findings infers a parallel between intimacy level and the percentage of victims by female killers.

Additionally, many female killers who were deemed to have been victims of battered woman syndrome typically have prior arrest records for violent crimes. This evidence suggests a history in which these women believed that they were either helpless or afraid of their victims (Mann, 1996, p. 170-171). When repetition of abuse in a homicide case involving a battered woman is discovered many within society often wonder why the woman does not simply walk away from the situation. The phenomenon known as “learned helplessness” is a psychological state that is frequently used to explain why women remain in abusive relationships. The term refers to a woman who “is psychologically locked into her situation due to economic dependence on the man, an aiding attachment to him, and the failure of the legal system to adequately respond to the problem” (Mann, 1996, p. 170). In essence, the woman feels as though she has nowhere else to go and though her partner may be abusive he is nonetheless a provider to her.

Busch (1999) believes that there is a danger when legal systems rely on using psychological terms to describe a female killer’s motives in a case because it trivializes and simplifies thorough understanding. Busch argues that “when presented with a portrait of a woman as psychologically damaged, a jury’s evaluation of her behavior may shift to excuse without even considering justification” (p. 39). Thus, the jury has made its mind up prior to considering all of the case’s details. The female killer’s actions are explained through the symptoms of a psychological ailment, rather than investigating her relationships, lifestyle, and possible interactions that could have led her to murder. It also precludes an analysis of patriarchal society.

However, evidence has also shown that in many cases the defense of a female killer suffering from a mental illness has often reduced the severity of a female killer’s

sentencing. Female killers claiming to suffer from Premenstrual Tension (PMT), post-natal depression, or any other forms of mental illness affecting any rationality or agency on their part, is ignored as they are deemed 'sick' and hence not responsible for their behavior. In addition, many women may even face the chance of parole or an even further reduced sentence if they agree to receive medical and/or psychiatric treatment (Benn, 1994).

Some researchers believe that an examination of several homicide cases involving women could lead to a further rationalization of the motives behind female killers. Ewing (1987) suggests that "systematic research could lead to a better understanding of these women, their life situations, and the dynamics of their homicidal acts" (p.23). But such research, he argues, would be extremely difficult and costly. Researchers would have to identify and gain access to a large sample of female killers and be able to demonstrate that the sample was generally representative of the larger population of battered women who kill their abusers.

In addition to a lack of research in the area, the large number of homicide cases involving males has created an environment in which killings by females are not only seen as rare, but as oddities. According to the United States Department of Justice, from 1976 until 2005, 88% of the homicides committed in the United States were by males (U.S. Department of Justice). It is then of no surprise that with such a high percentage of males dominating the murder rates throughout history, that homicide has been portrayed as being "man's domain with women as victims of crime" (Culliver, 1993, p. 3). Whereas many have made the argument that the ability to kill is simply within man's nature,

killings by females often remain misunderstood with researchers making an attempt to categorize motives.

Yet, Kirsta (1994) argues that to state that women are less likely to commit murder than men and that murder is simply man's terrain is to overlook the basic human condition. Kirsta believes that to deny that women are capable of experiencing the full range of human emotions and experience is to argue on the same terrain as men who have perpetuated sexist myths regarding women's weak 'nature' throughout history (p. 5-8). Historically it has been a popular belief to say that women are not only physically weaker than men, but that the patterns of a female killer do not often extend beyond the domestic frontier.

While 10 to 17 percent of all known serial murderers consist of females who kill in succession (Hickey, 1991, p. 107), many of the patterns for the killings do not do much in the way of dissuading critics who say that female killers only kill close to home and those with whom they are intimately linked to. A popular crime case that many proponents of the domestic rationale for murderesses cite is the case of Nannie Doss, also known as the "Giggling Grandma." Between 1925 and 1954 Doss was married 11 times and poisoned each of her husbands, a popular and discreet method of killing that many female killers throughout history have used. When she was finally brought to trial, Doss admitted to killing her husbands so that she could collect the insurance money upon their deaths, spawning a term that many have referred to as "serial monogamy" or the "Black Widow" method (Hickey, 1991, p. 112).

Interestingly enough, when it comes to the subject of female killers, feminism has shown a reluctance to discuss female violence, perhaps concerned that the subject will

“harm the feminist cause” (Ballinger, 1996, p. 2). When addressing the issues of violent women, rather than portraying female killers as victimized individuals reacting to a particular set of circumstances or as “weak” and “pathetic,” feminism instead explains their actions as “when the abused strike back at their abusers” (Ballinger, 1996, p. 3). However, even feminists agree that there are some women whose behavior is so drastically different from other murderers that they challenge the very foundations of dominant female ideologies and stereotypes. Thus the fascination with the female killer leads to their sensationalized and ever so popular depiction in film.

2.2 Female Killers in the Media and Film

So saturated with domesticity is the classification of female killers that the case of Aileen Wuornos completely stumped the FBI and led to a resurgence of the fascination with female killers in the media and ultimately film in the early 1990s. Even before full details were known of Wuornos’ case, book, television, and movie specials involving her were already in the works. Between 1989 and 1990, Wuornos hitchhiked down Florida’s rural Interstate 75, killing seven men in total. Posing as a prostitute, Wuornos would take the money from her victims, and in some cases use them for food and shelter, and then shoot them to death. What struck the police and FBI as shocking upon Wuornos’ capture was that she was not only a woman, but a woman of severe poverty living on the roads. “That a backwater drifter like Wuornos may have blown away ten men...seems to trouble experts deeply” (Suggs, 1992, p. 98).

Furthermore, another detail of Wuornos’ case that both troubled and disturbed experts was the brutality of her murders. Many of her victims were shot seven or more

times. Because of what many on the case deemed as masculine behavior, much of the investigation in Wuornos' case was spent looking for a man. When Wuornos was finally arrested, officials commented on how the savage nature of her killings both demonstrated a heavily "masculine" nature and was "overkill" for what many female killers of the past had displayed in their killings (Broomfield, 2001). Her frightening honesty and intent to kill as many men as she could led to her receiving the moniker of the "most dangerous woman alive" during her time on Death Row, leading to a ratings bonanza for news stations (Davies, 1997).

Lastly, what many who have studied Wuornos' murders have often deemed as the most interesting part of her case is Wuornos' reasoning for killing. While Wuornos' attorneys initially came forward stating that she was the victim of rape and was shooting these men in self-defense, Wuornos began to change her tone. She began telling the courts that she was fully aware that she had killed the men, sometimes even stating that she had pre-selected the men to die and killed them "in cold blood" as principle, for she was ridding the world of "the evils of men" (Pearson, 2007). Though female serial killers (those who killed in succession) had existed prior to Wuornos, due to the brutality of her killings and her demeanor, Wuornos was given the title of "America's first female serial killer," a label that sparked much public interest in Wuornos and led to great sales of newspapers and magazines covering her story.

In their 2004 documentary *Aileen: Life and death of a serial killer* directors Nick Bloomfield and Joan Churchill discuss how the media coverage of Wuornos was less about covering the factual details of her trial and more in the sensationalism surrounding her past and what led her into becoming a killer. Many of Wuornos' closest friends as

well as local police officers who were involved in the case are interviewed in the documentary and describe how various media outlets approached them to get any information they could on Wuornos' past or the trial itself. One police officer describes how he remembers being told by a reporter that book and movie deals of Wuornos were in the works and that any information given to the press meant "big money" for the informant (Broomfield & Churchill, 2004). One of those movies, *Monster*, chronicled Wuornos' killing spree and won actress Charlize Theron, who plays Wuornos in the film, the 2003 Oscar for Best Actress.

Cinema in particular has shown a strong interest in the genre of the female killer. In the 1940's the femme fatale was a popular character in movies and was often shown as being a devious and deadly person. Although the femme fatale was responsible for the deaths of characters in the movies, the deaths were often shown off screen or were quick and not excessively violent (Holmlund, 1994). Often, the femme fatale of the 1940's was a character who placed the male leads of the films involved in a dangerous lifestyle or who conspired against them to achieve something that they wanted.

In addition to being mistrusting and deadly E. Ann Kaplan (1983) states that femme fatales often exuded their sexuality towards the male leads on screen. The femme fatales thus become desirable to the male characters, but ultimately the men fear them for they have power over them with their sexuality and rob them of their power over the femme fatale, drawing them away from their goal within the film. For the male leads of the film, the femme fatale's "sexuality intervenes destructively in his life, marked as evil because of her open sexuality..." (p. 6). She is a woman then who is evil and must be destroyed.

During the 1970's Molly Haskell (1987) argues that films featuring femme fatales took a dramatic turn from those of the 1940's, particularly in the treatment of their female leads. Whereas femme fatales of the past were characters with objectionably corrupt attitudes and behaviors that the audience judged, films of the 1970's featuring femme fatales were routinely shown being punished for their actions on screen. Haskell states that countless films showed "women being victims of violence against them or rape...[the idea] being that women were yearning for sex or deserved to be abused because they were the weaker sex or immoral" (p. 155). By showing this punishment on screen, the filmmakers were making a statement that these characters deserved to and would be punished for their actions, rather than simply implying that they should be punished.

Over the past thirty years movies that feature female killers, in contrast, have had women who "willingly, even gleefully pick up the rocket launcher, the gun, the knife, the fork...[and cherish] the spectacle of bloody, protracted, or humiliating death" (Holmlund, 1994, p. 127). Whereas the femme fatales of the 1940's were more subtle in their behaviors and the deaths of many of their victims were either shown off screen or were not excessively violent, female killers in films today seem to relish in the violence and bloodshed before them. More now than before, the female killer is a deadlier, more ruthless character on the screen.

Schikel (1991) argues that violent male leads such as Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator* or Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo* are viewed as masculine heroes. On the other hand, females who kill on screen are often condemned for their behavior. Schikel states that "scrutiny does not happen to Schwarzenegger...where he shoots a woman in the

head...” (Schikel, 1991, p. 56) but does to women on the screen who act violently and show assertiveness. Additionally, whereas men can kill on screen for seemingly meaningless reasons, “today’s mainstream movies worry so much about why women kill that they often provide female assassins with multiple motives for murder” (Holmlund, 1994, p. 129). A woman then cannot simply kill on screen without there being a motive or reason behind her murders.

When motive is given for a female killer on screen, it oftentimes is rooted in stereotypical, patriarchal traits. While movies such as *Terminator 2* and *Aliens* have strong female leads, both lead females act violently out of a maternal instinct. In the case of *Terminator 2*, the lead character, Sarah Connor is battling against killer robots from the future who want to murder her son and destroy humanity. Connor can only kill “in the most passive of ways...to save herself, her son, and the entire world from destruction” (Holmlund, 1994, p. 129). She is seemingly not a cold blooded killer, like a Schwarzenegger or a Stallone, but rather a grand protector. Notably, she is acting as a mother figure killing for a cause.

Female leads that kill in cold blood, however, tend to display questionable behavior and are often overly sexual on screen. One of the most infamous examples is in the movie *Basic Instinct*, in which Sharon Stone’s character Catherine, a bisexual, drug addicted author, kills numerous men with an icepick during sex. The movie not only sparked outrage among feminists and those in the gay and lesbian community for its portrayal of Catherine (Van Gelder, 1992), but among critics who worried that the movie would start a trend of sensationalized female leads in movies. Film critic Lydia Sargent was famously quoted as saying, “what are you when you’re not fulfilling your God-given

roles as wives and mothers? You're either out of control or out of your clothes" (Sargent, 1988, p. 34)

Analyzing how popular films portray women killers is particularly important "because Hollywood's representation of murdering molls influence greatly how we look at and treat ourselves and each other" (de Lauretis, 1990, p. 12). In particular, what is portrayed in cultural artifacts, such as movies, is often a reflection of cultural belief systems or ideologies. By examining what common themes arise from an artifact one can gain insight into how a culture views a particular subject. For this very reason the four films to be analyzed in this thesis will be done so using ideological criticism.

2.3 Ideological Criticism

When rhetorical critics are interested in what rhetoric has to say about a culture's particular set of beliefs and/or values their focus is on an ideology. An ideology is

a pattern of beliefs that determine a group's interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world. It is a system of beliefs that reflects a group's fundamental social, economic, political or cultural interests. It represents who we are, what we stand for, what our values are... (Foss, 2004, p. 239)

It is important to note that multiple ideologies, or multiple patterns of belief or common themes, exist in any culture and have "the potential to manifest in rhetorical artifacts" (Foss, 2004, p. 242). In other words, cultural beliefs are often reflected in various forms of media.

In particular, ideological criticism "aims to understand how a cultural text specifically embodies and enacts particular ranges of values, beliefs and ideas" (White, 1992, p. 163), especially within the environment in which that text was created. Often,

these texts are created by the culture, for the culture, to perpetuate a dominant or popular belief system. It is then the duty of the ideological critic “to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact and the ideologies that are being muted in it” (Foss, 2004, p. 243).

An ideology that is dominant within a culture is described as hegemonic.

Hegemony is “a ruling class’s (or alliance’s) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common and everyday practice” (Gitlin, 2003, p. 253). When an ideology becomes hegemonic it is privileged over that of other groups, thus constituting a kind of social control, a means of symbolic domination of the more powerful groups over the ideologies of those with less power.

Hegemony has been used throughout history to justify “the domination of one gender, race, and class over others by virtue of its alleged superiority, or the natural order of things” (Kellner, 1995, p. 61). If one were to use an example pertinent to this study, a hegemonic ideology that has been, and perhaps still is, perpetuated is that of women who are said to be, by nature, passive, domestic, submissive, and so on. Their domain is “deemed to be the private sphere, the home, while the public sphere was reserved for, allegedly, more active, rational, and domineering men” (Kellner, 1995, p. 61).

Counterhegemony, in comparison, is “an alternative ethical view of society that poses a challenge to the dominant view” (Cohn, 2004, p. 131). The film *Thelma and Louise*, for example, challenged the hegemonic and patriarchal view of women as passive and docile by having its two female leads simultaneously speak out against this ideology and become fugitives on the run for killing a man and robbing a convenient store. When

an individual or group dissects a hegemonic ideology or produces an ideology that counters the dominant perspective, the counterhegemonic argument, if successful, offers a differing perspective to the ideology and challenges individuals to view an artifact of a culture in a different light. Counterhegemony empowers individuals “by giving them tools to criticize dominant cultural forms, images, narratives, and genres...to teach how to read, deconstruct, criticize, and use media culture” (Kellner, 1995, p. 60).

CHAPTER III.

ANALYSIS: COMMON THEMES

Film is a rich medium to analyze both hegemonic and counterhegemonic ideologies and common themes in that it is “unlimited not only in its choice of subject matter, but also in the scope of its approach to that material” (Boggs, 1985, p. 3). How a director decides to portray his or her characters on the screen and how the story is told will determine what ideologies are being portrayed, as well as how the audience reacts to what is being presented before them. A successful movie will make it not only clear what the character’s intentions are, but what the common or main themes of the movies are that are being portrayed.

When strong themes emerge from a movie they provide “an interpretation of some domain of the world and encourag[e] particular attitudes and action to it” (van Dijk, 1998, p.141). To further examine the subject of female killers, as well as to document what ideologies are associated with them in popular culture, this thesis will examine four popular movies (*Thelma and Louise*, *Basic Instinct*, *Monster*, and *Deathproof*) involving female killers as lead characters. All four films will be analyzed to see what common themes among them emerge, as well as what ideologies they share. How do these films portray female killers? How is the female killer portrayed in relation to her victims? And what story is provided to explain or justify the killings?

Upon analysis of the four films using ideological criticism, three common themes emerged. They are: Sidekicks, Lesbianism, Violence against Women. While each film is unique in its characters and plots, the four films share common rhetorical themes throughout their stories. The following section is an in-depth analysis of those themes.

3.1 Sidekicks

Judith Roof (2002) refers to a female character, or sidekick, who is involved on screen in the same crime or violent behavior with another woman as a secondary female. A secondary female, Roof explains, is a rhetorical device used in films to show a morality struggle using two characters. Roof labels the secondary female as the “modern-day version of the Shakespearian fool,” a character able to speak her own version of the truth, even though the film may deem them to be immoral in some way. The two female characters spar as opposites within a cinematic conflict, with one woman representing what is considered to be good and moral and the other representing indecency. The result is a cinematic debate where “the customary evaluations of normality stand out in stark contrast to a word of deviance and difference” (Roof, 2002, p. 24).

In the film *Monster* Charlize Theron plays the role of real-life serial killer Aileen Wuornos. Hitchhiking the roads of Florida’s interstates, Aileen poses as a prostitute, shooting men once she receives their money. Along her journey, she befriends a young girl named Selby (Christina Ricci) and the two quickly form a romantic relationship. Though they struggle for money and survival—living together in a cheap motel—Aileen promises Selby that she will take care of her and that any financial responsibilities will

fall on her and not Selby. Unaware of Aileen's bloody means of gaining money, Selby agrees to a life with Aileen.

After returning from a particularly brutal murder, Selby confronts Aileen and Aileen confesses to Selby that she is a killer. In a scene that displays the use of the secondary female trait, Selby, displaying the virtues of good and morality, lectures Aileen on why what she is doing is wrong, while Aileen defends her killings as being righteous. "We can be as different as we want to be," says Selby, "but you can't kill people!"

"Says who?" asks Aileen. "They've gotta tell you that 'Thou shalt not kill' shit and all that. But that's not the way the world works, Selby. People kill each other every day and for what? For politics? For religion? And they're heroes! No, no...there's a lot of shit I can't do anymore, but killing's not one of them. And letting those fucking bastards go out and rape someone else isn't either!"

It is in this scene that Aileen justifies the reason for her killings. Not only does Aileen view her murdering as a means of profit for her and Selby to live off of, but Aileen believes her murdering to be virtuous, in the sense that she is ridding the streets around her of rapists and immoral men. By justifying her killings as murder that "occurs every day," Aileen is turning, in her mind, a deviant and extraordinary lifestyle into a good and just one. Aileen is the secondary female of the film, a character displaying an immoral lifestyle, whereas Selby is the voice of reason or normality and good. It is perhaps then of no surprise that the film ends with Selby, seeing the wrong in Aileen's ways, ultimately turning Aileen over to the police.

Similarly, Yvone Tasker (1993) discusses how the use of the tomboy character in films has often been a cinematic means of showing a deviant or defiant woman in

contrast to a more righteous and moral one. The Tomboy character, argues Tasker, is used so that that she “can be read as a girl who has not accepted the responsibilities of adult womanhood,” in comparison to a woman who has (p. 15). By not accepting or displaying the traditional image or lifestyle of femininity, the tomboy character in films often faces ridicule from her counterpart or is placed into a situation where she is punished for the ways in which she chooses to live.

In the second half of the film *Deathproof* the audience is introduced to the characters Kim (Tracie Thomas), Zoe (Zoe Bell), and Abernathy (Rosario Dawson). Both thrill seekers, Kim and Zoe have recently purchased a 1970 Dodge Challenger and plan to ride it down a countryside road while Zoe performs a stunt known as the “ship’s mast,” which consists of dangling off the roof of a car via belts. Kim, a lover of action movies, and Zoe, a stuntwoman, are convinced that they can pull this off. Abernathy, a mother and friend of the two who has been brought along for the ride, immediately protests the idea. Kim and Zoe both look towards Abernathy and say that Abernathy is scared because she is a mother and therefore shouldn’t be participating with the two anyway. Perhaps angered at the two for their mockery of her, Abernathy agrees to take part in the stunt, sitting in the back while Kim drives and Zoe hangs off the roof of the car. As the three cruise down the road, Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell), who has been watching the girls, speeds up in his car behind them and begins to violently ram against the girls’ car.

Here director Quentin Tarantino uses the character of Abernathy to highlight the Tomboyish nature of Kim and Zoe. Her resistance towards Kim and Zoe’s wanting to engage in the masculine behavior of a high speed car stunt is, quite literally, a verbal protest of their lifestyle choices. She is the responsible character of this half of the movie,

a mother who displays not only a level of maturity, but the classic cinematic image of a feminine guardian or protector. While Kim and Zoe's mockery of Abernathy's motherly and feminine tendencies and Abernathy's eventual agreeing to participate in the dangerous stunt with the two may at first suggest that the film's desired lifestyle is Kim and Zoe's dangerous one, the girls are quickly punished for their decision in the form of Stuntman Mike. His violent action towards the girls comes from a disagreeing masculine world, a lashing out at them that suggests that their activity is neither womanlike nor acceptable.

What follows is a cliché, traditional Hollywood chase scene between a male killer and his female victims. Continuously ramming his car into theirs, Stuntman Mike tries everything within his power to flip the girls' car over and kill them. In an unexpected twist, the roles are reversed when the girls manage to ram Stuntman Mike off of the road and then begin to chase him. Shooting at him with a gun, using a lead pipe against him when they speed up next to him, and continuously ramming against his car, the girls cause Stuntman Mike a great deal of pain and eventually manage to flip his car over. Dragging an injured Stuntman Mike from his car, the film ends with the three girls literally beat Stuntman Mike to death, with Abernathy crushing Stuntman Mike's skull in with her boot.

Though the movie does cinematically punish its female leads for choosing a tomboyish and masculine lifestyle, *Deathproof* is unique in that the characters not only manage to escape death that is usually reserved for characters that participate in the masculine activities that they do on screen, but that they manage to lash out and take revenge against the killer chasing them and, by extension, the masculine world and its

expectations of them. Their violent actions, while perhaps glorified, symbolize a “we’re not going to take it” attitude, with Stuntman Mike’s death serving as the ultimate sign that these women are here to stay and will not change for anyone. But are these women heroes for what they have done or simply cold blooded killers?

Authors Neal King and Martha McCaughey (2001) believe that there is a genre of female characters in films known as “mean women.” “Mean women,” according to the authors, are female leads in films whose actions “because done by a woman, [fall] below standards of human decency. This is why we call them ‘mean women’” (p. 2). Facing more scrutiny than male killers on screen, King and McCaughey believe that “mean women” fall into two categories in film: women who are “malicious” and women who oftentimes “save the world from destruction or just uphold the law” (p. 2). Perhaps no two female leads in cinema history fell between these two categories as did *Thelma and Louise*.

Released in 1991 *Thelma and Louise* immediately garnered controversy for its portrayal of two women running from the law after killing a man. During a road trip to a friend’s cabin, best friends Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) decide to stop at a bar. While at the bar, Thelma, after having a couple of drinks, begins to flirt with a man named Harlan (Timothy Carhart). The two walk out to the parking lot where Harlan begins to force himself upon Thelma and then attempts to rape her. Louise, who has made her way out to the parking lot to check on Thelma, notices the two struggling and pulls a gun out of her purse and points it at Harlan. With Thelma having run to safety at her side, Louise tells Harlan that when a woman protests like Thelma was that she does not want sex. Angered, Harlan exclaims that he wished he had raped Thelma after all.

Louise shoots Harlan dead and the two flee away in Louise's car. For the remainder of the movie, the two women keep to the road, dodging the authorities that have connected them to the murder and attempting not to get caught.

While numerous critics have pointed to *Thelma and Louise* as being one of the quintessential movies for the study of female killers in film, the response to Thelma and Louise's on-screen actions have left many debating whether the killing of Harlan and the girls' fleeing of the authorities was justifiable—"upholding the law"—or simply cold blooded and foolish—"malicious"—as King and McCaughey (2001) would suggest. What becomes difficult is that the two are not authority figures, but rather two women following their own code of ethics, ideals, and morality. While Louise's killing of Harlan could be considered self defense by some, it could also be seen as homicide by others. If Louise were to simply have let Harlan go would there be a chance that Harlan would attempt to do what he did to Thelma with another woman? And if Thelma and Louise reported Harlan's actions to the authorities is there a chance that those at the bar would suggest that Thelma led Harlan on?

Thelma and Louise also blur the line between "upholding the law" and being "malicious" when, later in the movie, they rob a convenient store, lock a policeman in the trunk of his car, and blow up the truck of a man who has been making lewd gestures to the two along their trip. What once was just a questionable murder case has now escalated into two fugitives on the run who have seemingly passed the point of no return. Even when contacted by their significant others or faced with the police, the two women seem to regard the ways of the law as a world they once lived in but have now abandoned. The movie's final scene of Thelma and Louise deciding to drive their car off

a cliff and into a canyon, rather than turn themselves over to the pleading authorities that have surrounded them, signifies their acceptance of their new beliefs and lifestyle. The two have decided that they would literally die for their cause.

Displaying struggles between morals, exhibiting questionable lifestyle traits, and riding a fine line between malicious and law abiding, female sidekicks in film are a rhetorical device for directors to explore the various perspectives on femininity and what exactly it means in U.S. culture for a woman to be violent and/or kill. While some characters and situations in the films are more sensationalized than others, the use of more than one female on screen is a device used to show that the actions or beliefs of a female or females is not simply isolated to one individual but is, rather, a collective and shared phenomenon meant to be explored and debated within a patriarchal society between those on screen and the audience as well.

3.2 Lesbianism

Although the actions and behaviors of female killers on screen tend to be sensationalized and scrutinized by critics and audiences alike, so too is sexual orientation. Caroline S. Picart (2006) argues that when a female killer on screen is homosexual, that “her orientation becomes lesbian rather than feminine.” Not only are her killing ways called into question, but so are her lifestyle choices, with numerous on-screen characters being portrayed as “lumbering, clumsy...a social misfit and a dangerous rebel who flouts society’s rules” (p. 6).

In *Monster* Charlize Theron won critical praise, and ultimately an Oscar for Best Actress, for channeling the notorious serial killer Aileen Wuornos. Not only was

Theron's appearance morphed—severely sunburned, leathery skin, bleached and burned, nappy blonde hair, crooked, yellow teeth, and an overweight body—but Theron's portrayal of the killer also highlighted Wuornos' "social misfit" lifestyle as well. Wandering the roads of Florida's interstates, a homeless Wuornos takes shelter in numerous abandoned buildings and often gets money for food and her lover Selby from begrudgingly prostituting herself to men. Angered at her life's predicament, she is repeatedly shown drinking and chain smoking on screen, often losing her temper and screaming and fighting with those around her. To make matters worse, Aileen frequently loses her temper during the several job interviews the audience sees her participate in. Her lifestyle has caused her great distress, ultimately sending her into a downward spiral that only increases her rage and begins her killing ways.

Likewise, Sharon Stone's performance as Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct* highlights a hyper-bisexual woman whose "social misfit" lifestyle often causes her and those around her to suffer great consequences. Tramell, a successful and wealthy crime author who is suspected of being involved in several murders, confesses to being a thrill seeker and is often shown on screen snorting large amounts of cocaine, drinking large amounts of alcohol, recklessly driving her sports cars late at night, having sex with multiple partners, and brutally killing men with an ice pick. In contrast to Theron's portrayal of Wuornos, Stone's Tramell, much to the jealousy of her lesbian lover Roxy (Leilani Sarelle), is the desire of every man within the movie, a dangerous yet highly desirable sex goddess. Whereas the appearance of Theron's Wuornos in *Monster* alone suggests trouble and danger, the desirability of Stone's Tramell so clouds the judgment of the detectives investigating her that she is able to not only divert their attention away

from her but, especially after sleeping with lead detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas), turn the detectives on each other as well.

As parallels, Theron's Wuornos, representing a beast, and Stone's Tramell, representing a beauty, highlight a villainous portrayal of lesbian lifestyle and culture. If one lesbian killer in a film is not visibly haggard and wearing her emotions on her sleeve, then the other must be beautiful and cunning, knowing how to manipulate those around her with her sexual desirability and craftiness. Their sexual orientations then become a token of defiance and protest to patriarchal expectations of passiveness and non-aggressiveness rather than a mere trait of the character on screen.

Similarly, author Chris Holmlund (2002) states that lesbian characters in film many times come from a background that has somehow warped their sense of judgment. He states that these characters "are often bruised, in the sense of being morally flawed" and that "it is frequently difficult for them to distinguish pleasure from pain" (p. 73-74). These characters become controversial because they seemingly do not see the fault in their actions or beliefs, but rather believe that what they are doing is righteous and that the standards, laws, and expectations of society that they have left behind or have chosen to ignore are somehow flawed.

In *Monster* the audience learns through stories Aileen relates to Selby that Wuornos grew up under horrible conditions. The daughter of divorced parents, Aileen was often the target of bullying and ridicule in the neighborhood that she grew up in and took to drugs and numerous sexual encounters in her early teenage years. In her later years, Aileen took to the streets of Florida's interstates, prostituting and living the life of a homeless woman, taking shelter wherever and whenever she could find it. Aileen is

“bruised” both psychologically and physically from her tremulous upbringing. Her appearance is that of a woman who has long been on the road and has faced unimaginable difficulties and horrors.

When she is knocked unconscious and brutally raped awake from one of her clients, not only does Aileen shoot the man dead, thus beginning her killing ways, but her new philosophy of life is born: men are evil and must be punished and I will be the one to kill them off. While one can perhaps understandably argue that Aileen’s rage towards men following her rape is justified, her wanting to rid the world of men becomes a moral and practical crusade: kill the men she comes across to rid the world of rapists but also get their money so that Selby and her can live. The painful process of prostitution thus becomes one of pleasure for Aileen, simultaneously killing off those she hates while earning money for the one she loves.

While Aileen in *Monster* is presented as a woman from a broken past struggling to survive in the world, Catherine in *Basic Instinct* is the opposite, in the sense that she is successful, wealthy, and seems to be relatively happy. What is most interesting about Catherine is that her killings seem to be done not only with a total lack of sympathy towards her victims, but that she seems to get an extreme sense of sexual satisfaction out of them. In the opening scene of the film Catherine brutally stabs the man that she is having sex with repeatedly with an ice pick and bathes in his blood. As the blood sprays over her body with each plunge of the ice pick, Catherine moans louder and louder, reaching orgasm as she kills the man beneath her. With one of Catherine’s murders being so graphically displayed before the viewer, the viewer is cinematically being shown the

essence of Catherine: a woman who mixes the business of getting firsthand experience of murder for her crime novels with the pleasure of sex and the thrill of the kill.

By oftentimes presenting a lesbian killer as a person who has either come from a troubled past or as a person who cannot in their minds distinguish pain from pleasure, the justification or reasons for a lesbian killer's murders are blatantly presented before the viewer. They are viewed as society's misfits, women who have lost their way in life and have, as a result, become uncontrollable and dangerous creatures. Their flouting of the law and the expectations upon them are at one end an angry, personal lashing out at their lots in life and on the other an enraged outcry towards a culture that does not understand or accept them.

Although many lesbian killers on screen will kill for what they perceive as being a sense of justice or as a cinematic protest against a patriarchal society, author Lynda Hart (1994) points out that love or companionship is often a driving force in films with lesbian killers as their leads. Hart states that often "one or more of the main characters is not just a murderer, but a woman who kills for another woman" (p. 67). The motivations for why exactly a lesbian film character kills for or as the result of a companion, partner, or loved one are varied, but often revolve around a wanting to please or a jealousy towards that partner.

In *Monster* Aileen Wuornos forms a deep, loving relationship with Selby. Both coming from chaotic backgrounds, the two seem to bond over their life's miseries. When money becomes an issue and the two cannot afford food or shelter, Aileen returns to her prostituting ways, where she is eventually raped and begins her killings. Telling Selby that she is working several odd jobs as a waitress and in other services, Aileen lies to

Selby, not wanting to admit the bloody truth of how she acquires her money or what she does when she is away during the day. When Selby discovers the truth about Aileen and turns her over to the police at the end of the movie, Aileen discusses how she numbed herself during her killings with the knowledge that what she did was for her, Selby and, ultimately, their love.

“I loved her” says Aileen. “And the thing no one ever realized about me or believed was that I could learn. I could train myself into anything. ‘Cause they had no idea what I could discipline myself to do and I believed in something. I believed in her.”

In comparison, Roxy (Leilani Sarelle) in *Basic Instinct* unsuccessfully attempts to kill a man out of pure hatred and jealousy. During a nighttime visit to Catherine’s residence for questioning on the murders that she is suspected of, Detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) walks into Catherine’s kitchen and sees Catherine and Roxy. The two women are in bathrobes and, once they spot Nick, begin to seductively kiss and pet each other. Seemingly not amused, Nick begins to question Catherine on details about the murders. During the questioning session, Catherine smiles seductively at Nick and begins to heavily flirt with him. Occasionally, the camera cuts to Roxy’s face who is clearly angered by Nick’s presence and jealous of Catherine’s flirting with him.

When Nick is finished questioning Catherine, he gets into his car and drives away. As Nick is passing through a rather abandoned area of the downtown city that he is driving through, he becomes aware of a car that is following him and is quickly speeding up from behind. Terrified by the actions of this dangerous driver, Nick turns down a street in an attempt to avoid any danger. The driver follows Nick down the street and when Nick catches a glimpse of the driver in his rearview mirror he discovers that it is

Roxy who is following him. For several intense minutes Roxy chases Nick through the downtown roads of the city, coming close many times to either hitting Nick or sending his car crashing into a building. When Nick barely misses Roxy's oncoming car at one point, Roxy hits a dangerous skid and her car is sent flipping, crashing violently into a ditch and killing her. A stunned Nick drives away from the scene, happy to be alive but shocked at what has just transpired.

Portrayed as social misfits with loose morals who kill for their own sense of justice or as the result of another woman, lesbian killers in film are often depicted as emotionally unstable characters or as individuals who cannot distinguish between what is lawful and good versus that which is unlawful and morally wrong. While their actions are often a result of their upbringings, lifestyle choices, or surroundings, much of their displayed hostility on screen comes about as a protest or hatred towards limitations or expectations placed upon them from a man's world. Their behaviors and actions are therefore not only a refusal to accept patriarchal expectations, but to embrace a lifestyle that is both alternative and freeing.

3.3 Violence against Women

Violence against women has long been a staple in Hollywood movies. Commonly, the strongest acts of violence against female characters in film occur in conjunction with a sexual act or as the result of a woman's sexual attitude or behavior. Luque, Molitor, & Sapolsky (2003) argue that sexual acts of female characters in films where the lead female characters are abused usually occur "immediately prior to or

during scenes of violence” with many of those scenes either showing female battery or rape (p. 35).

In *Monster* Aileen’s introduction into the world of killing begins after one of her clients drives her deep into the middle of the woods, beats her unconscious in his car, and then proceeds to rape her. During the act, Aileen awakes to the horror of what is happening to her and realizes that she must act quickly or face certain death at the hands of the man. Finding the gun that she keeps with her at all times, Aileen shoots the man dead and manages to escape. When Aileen is later faced with the difficulty of finding money for her and Selby to survive on, she realizes that she has already gone down the road of a killer and seems to enjoy the thought of continuing on that path. As Aileen later explains to Selby, her killings are not only a way to get money, but a means of ridding the world of terrible men, such as the one Aileen herself faced during her rape.

Similarly, *Thelma and Louise* deals with the issue of rape among its main characters and how the aftermath of the act affects them. At the beginning of the film Louise, after having several drinks and flirting with him, agrees to join Harlan in the parking lot. Seeing that she is intoxicated and that the parking lot is dimly lit, Harlan begins to force himself upon Louise, attempting to rape her. Thelma soon discovers the two in the parking lot and approaches them to put an end to the struggle. When Louise is safely by her side, Thelma lectures Harlan on how what he was doing was wrong. When Harlan insults Thelma, she shoots him dead and the two girls flee from the scene of the crime.

As the movie progresses, Thelma and Louise’s behavior becomes more anti-authority, with the two girls engaging in robbery, fleeing the police, and destroying

vehicles. In one scene of the film, Thelma acknowledges to Louise that the attempted rape of Louise ignited something inside her and that she will never be the same again. Thelma tells Louise that the two of them have crossed the line and that they can never return to their old lives. As with Aileen in *Monster*, the act of rape has forever changed Thelma and Louise and has lead them down a path where the chaos continues to escalate.

While *Basic Instinct* does feature one of its main characters being brutally raped in one scene, what separates the movie from *Monster* and *Thelma and Louise* is that the character does not protest or struggle during the act, nor does she seek revenge or justice after the act is over with. After having a heated argument with an officer who has been an adversary of his for many years, Detective Nick Curran visits the house of his former girlfriend Beth Garner (Jeanne Tripplehorn). After being inquired by Beth as to what he is doing at her place, Nick violently shoves Beth stomach first onto a table, tears her dress and underwear, and begins to rape her from behind.

When Nick is finished, he asks Beth where her cigarettes are. Flustered, Beth tells Nick where they are and then demands that he leave. Unlike the main characters of *Monster* and *Thelma and Louise*, Beth's rape is not a trigger for her, but rather a terrible experience that shook her. Of interest, however, is that Beth continues to trust Nick throughout the remainder of the film, not only helping him with his investigation but telling him on several occasions that, despite the rape, she still loves him.

Interestingly enough, while the film *Deathproof* does not feature a scene of sexual violence or rape, several of the main female characters are killed after one of the female leads acts sexually towards one of the male lead characters. While at a bar with her friends, Arlene (Vanessa Ferlito) is dared to give a lapdance to any man who comes up to

her and hands her a drink. When Arlene is approached by Stuntman Mike with a beer, she sits him down in a chair and, much to the amusement of her friends, gives him a lapdance. Later, as the bar begins to close, Pam (Rose McGowan) is in need of a ride home. Stuntman Mike offers her a ride home and, much to Pam's displeasure, the two climb into Stuntman Mike's car, an old Hollywood stunt car, and drive off. Unbeknownst to Pam is that Stuntman Mike is following Arlene and her friends who, shortly before them, left in Arlene's car.

As Stuntman Mike cruises down the road in the evening hours, he tells Pam about how the car that they are driving in is "death proof" and that it was built for stuntman to flip cars for movies and not get killed in. Unfortunately for Pam, Stuntman Mike is on the side that is protected and she is not. Stuntman Mike then does a sharp swerve to the right and Pam hits her head on the right side of the car, cracking her skull and killing her instantly. Stuntman Mike, with car headlights off, then passes Arlene's car and turns his car around so that it is facing Arlene's. With Arlene's car fast approaching, Stuntman Mike hits the gas on his car and accelerates forward. A second before impact, Stuntman Mike turns his car headlights on just in time to capture the look of horror on the girls' faces. The cars violently crash into each other, killing all the women instantly and sending bloody body parts flying in every direction. Stuntman Mike is the lone survivor of the crash, thanks to his "death proof" stunt car. Though the act of violence from Stuntman Mike towards the women in this scene does occur as the result of a sexual act, it occurs after the act has been performed and not during. Of note too is that this is the only film of the four in which a female character initiates a sexual act and not a man.

Sexual violence against women in film symbolically shows a genesis of a female killer's new worldview and gives way to her violent behavior and killings. While many of the women who are assaulted on screen generally have other factors in their lives, such as unhappy or abusive relationships, income woes, or harmful habits, the sexual attack of the woman is a cinematic breaking point for a female character and transitions her from a citizen of society to an outsider. By becoming a killer, she is lashing out at the world that wronged her and seeking retribution for her assault, with bloodshed being her justice.

In addition to many of the violent acts against women in film revolving around sexual activity is also the portrayal of the men committing these acts. In a documentary on the portrayals of violent male characters in television and movies Jhally and Katz (2003) describe how numerous male characters in entertainment, when committing acts of violence against women, believe that what they are doing is right. If the women within the program or movie do not conform to the beliefs of the males on screen, the filmmakers argue, the male characters often believe that the female characters “deserve the beating that will come if they don’t [follow their demands]” (Jhally & Katz, 2003). Even more so, the male characters feel or express no guilt for the actions that they take upon the female characters.

In *Thelma and Louise* the attempted rape of Louise is disturbing enough for her given the fact that the parking lot she is in with Harlan is dimly lit, mostly isolated, and that Louise is completely defenseless. However, when Thelma confronts the two and breaks up the struggle, it is Harlan's attitude of the event that is most unsettling to the two women and what stays with Louise throughout the movie even more so than the attempted rape itself. With Louise safely at Thelma's side after she points a gun at

Harlan, Thelma tells Harlan that what he was doing was wrong and that when a woman protests, such as Louise was doing, that a man needs to know to back off. Harlan responds that he just wanted to have “fun” with Louise and when Thelma again protests Harlan says that he wishes he had raped Louise after all. Harlan’s total disregard for Louise’s feelings not only shows a disrespectful and selfish attitude, but the fact that he found the prospect of rape to be entertaining and exciting. To Harlan, the possibility of rape wasn’t a crime but a game.

Monster as well displays violent male characters that have a disregard for females. In particular, Aileen’s first kill is the result of a man who has all the intentions of raping her and then leaving her for dead. After driving her out into the middle of the woods at night, Aileen’s client beats her unconscious and then begins to savagely rape her. When Aileen later awakens during the rape, she manages to grab the gun that she brought with her and shoot the man dead. More so than Harlan in *Thelma and Louise*, Aileen’s client poses a danger to her of not just rape, but of her life being in danger as well. The location of where the man takes Aileen and the savageness that he carries out on her all indicate that murder is very well likely on the man’s mind. Unlike Harlan, the man looks beyond the temporary thrill of rape and at the consequences that may follow. Aileen thus becomes disposable in the man’s eyes, evidence of the man’s crime that must be discarded.

Much like Harlan and the man who rapes Aileen, Detective Nick Curran in *Basic Instinct* is a male lead character that selfishly acts out a violent, sexual act with no regard for the female involved and seems to find no fault in what he is doing. Coming uninvited into ex-girlfriend Beth Garner’s house, Nick violently throws Beth against a table and

begins to rape her. When he is finished, Nick asks Beth casually where her cigarettes are, as though the rape either never took place or was unimportant in Nick's mind. While angry immediately afterwards and throwing Nick out of her house, Beth differs from Thelma, Louise, and Aileen in that she does not hold a grudge against Nick, nor does Nick's actions against her cause her to become violent or anti-authoritative. Rather, in an interesting twist, the rape seems to bring Beth closer to Nick, reigniting the love she once had for him and making her want to help him in the murder investigations that he is heading.

The disregard and removed behavior that many male characters display towards female characters in films where they are violent against them is a common theme that threads together stories of rape, revenge, and murder. In the cases of Thelma, Louise, and Aileen, the attitudes of such male characters are justification enough for their anger towards men and the society in which they come from, whereas for Beth in *Basic Instinct* they create a clashing of interests. Such belief systems as perpetuated by the male characters on screen are often the boiling points for the female characters and hence create the foundation for the film's core conflicts.

With the common rhetorical themes of Sidekicks, Lesbianism, and Violence against Women, the four films within this thesis share numerous similarities and contain many related elements. Though diverse in plots and characters, the women of these films are all bonded by the taking of male lives. Collectively, their stories offer a glimpse into the popularity of the female killer as a genre of film and what exactly Hollywood's take on them is. Their cinematic presence and portrayals offer a worldview of how the U.S. as a culture not only sees female killers, but how it understands them as well. Though

penetrating, the films are but a mere sliver of a greater cinematic, ideological perspective and the foundation for a greater societal understanding.

CHAPTER IV.

CONCLUSION

Exploring cultural worldviews and popular media, ideological criticism enables us to look at how popular culture messages perpetuate and, at times, challenge prevailing cultural norms and values, particularly with regard to gender. In particular, the medium of film is a powerful tool that underscores popular beliefs and gender norms and continues to reinforce dominant patriarchal tendencies. Though a means of escape and entertainment, film is a shared experience and a portrayal of specific ideals, particularly those that are popular or dominant within a culture.

To understand thematic portrayals of events on screen one must understand the cultural events that inspire them. Cinematic themes are not simply created in a vacuum, but rather come about as the result of a culture's shared experience. As demonstrated in the literature review, mediated sensationalism and social fascination with the female killer make for an extremely popular film topic and one that continues to be produced and explored by audiences and critics alike.

Despite numerous cultural shifts that have seen women ascend into powerful and important positions in U.S. society, patriarchal cinematic themes continue to persist in movies and do not reflect this reality. Author Susan Faludi (1991) argues that a reluctance in the media to portray women as powerful, liberated, and able to care for themselves, particularly in cinema, often leads to women's lives on film being portrayed

as “morality tales in which the ‘good mother’ wins and the independent woman gets punished” and that a woman’s struggles on screen are the product of personal difficulties, rather than the result of societal restrictions (Faludi, 1991, p. 113). Additionally, market research and focus groups have shown that the general public seems to enjoy and clamor for films in which lead female characters are found in these “morality tales.” However, as with any art form, the portrayal of the events are up to the artist and directors who are therefore able to “mold their fictional women” to their liking and “make them obey” their cinematic rules (Faludi, 1991, p. 113). Though faced with challenges, many of the female leads in such films still operate under patriarchal tendencies with their actions being instantly judged, rather than pondered and examined.

Likewise, the analysis in this thesis provides further evidence of Faludi’s observation that female leads that rebel, kill, or go against patriarchal norms in movies tend to be punished. While many movies featuring rebellious female leads differ in plot, setting, and characters, common webs of shared themes exist among them. The four films examined in this thesis, for example, revealed the rhetorical themes of Sidekicks, Lesbianism, and Violence against Women. Though each is diverse, the four films contain common notions that weave together a cinematic discourse and thus form shared cultural understandings of women killers on screen and in the courtroom.

The female killer has long been a prevalent image in both society and in cinema. This thesis began by looking at real-life examples of female killers before the law and then examined popular films that portray female killers as their leads. Sharing many common themes among them, the films analyzed in this thesis show how gender norms are maintained and patriarchal expectations are reinforced through movies. The shared

ideologies that emerge from the screen are thus a representation of popular culture trends and a continuation of patriarchal and dominant beliefs. Though an expression of art, film encompasses a culture's many belief systems and displays before the viewer the core of its ethos.

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