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Good Girls Do It Too!

A Look at the Representation of Women Who Kill in Made-for-TV Movies

Tracey L. McKee

A Thesis
In
The Department
Of
Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

April, 2000

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ABSTRACT

GOOD GIRLS DO IT TOO!
A look at the representation of women who kill in Made-for-TV movies

Tracey L. McKee

The following thesis is an investigation into the representation of women who kill in made-for-TV movies. I will look at the made-for-TV movie because it is a form that speaks primarily to a female audience and is almost always about issues that relate to women. The question I will be asking is: How have made-for-TV movies formulated the terms through which feminine identity is represented? Particularly as the made-for-TV movie relates to women who have stepped outside the bounds of prescribed notions of femininity and committed a violent act? As my case studies I will analyze the movies made about Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos respectively. Using the made-for-TV movie, I will identify how the form attempts to provide images of a normative femininity while at the same time allows for a progressive position to enter the text.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

There are a few people without whom this thesis would not have been written. Firstly, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Chantal Nadeau for her advice and encouragement and therapeutic responses to my frantic e-mails during the writing process. I would also like to thank my husband, Robert, for his love, support, patience and ability to solve almost any computer glitch. In addition, I would like to extend sincerest gratitude to my sister for refusing to accept, ever, that this thesis would not get written. Finally, I would to thank my employer, CanWest Global for understanding when I needed valuable time away from work to finish this mammoth project!

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INTRODUCTION

> A feminist viewpoint on the media implies a univocal, confident, and unswerving denunciation of popular culture, both for its sexist and oppressive portrayal of women and for the devastating effects it is supposed to have on women and men.
> (Van Zoonen, 1997:1)

I guess you can call me a reformed television voyeur. It used to be so easy to denounce made-for-TV movies as nothing more than trash, pure and simple. I now have to recognize their place as one of the truly feminist forms on television. Having spent many hours watching these trauma dramas, paying close attention to their narrative structure and representation of women, I was, and still am, struck by how progressive a form this so called "low art" really is. For my research problematic, I chose to delve into this medium primarily because there has not been much material written on the subject and I could not ignore its importance to women. The problem was I needed a focus, something specific to look into and then it came to me in all its sensationalist glory on the television itself.

Who would have thought that *Court TV* could inspire a thesis? In February 1992, upon my parent's advice, I tuned in to watch the real-life trial of Betty Broderick – a rich San Diego socialite who shot and killed her ex-husband and his new bride. I wondered whether or not this would be fodder for good Sunday night viewing. Not six months after the case became public property, *CBS* came out with two successive movies about the murders, *A Woman Scorned The Betty Broderick Story* (1992) followed by *Her Final Fury Betty Broderick the Last Chapter* (1992). Just a few months later, *Overkill the Aileen Wuornos Story* (1992) was broadcast on television. I thought how interesting it was to see women who have transgressed their traditional "nurturing" role represented on

television in prime time. Made-for-TV movies made in the 1980s represented a cycle of films that portrayed women as pioneers, fighting the good fight against forces of evil. It seemed that the 1990s represented a shift to that cycle – stories were being told about women who have deviated from societal norms. Thus began the geneology of this project.

I began by examining the made-for-TV movies about Broderick and Wuornos, stopping and starting the VCR until I understood, frame by frame, the narrative structure and political make-up of these movies. I soon discovered that it was not enough just to consider the representation of women who kill in prime time, I had to come to terms with public perception about violent women.

In 1995, North Americans came to grips with the horrifying news that a married couple from St-Catherines Ontario was being tried for the kidnapping, sexual assault and murder of two young girls. At that time, little was known about the suspects except that there was a distinct possibility that the man, Paul Bernardo, was also the Scarborough rapist. But what about Homolka? Pictures emerged of this blonde young woman on her wedding day, smiling for the camera in the now infamous horse drawn carriage while sipping champagne alongside her groom. Her little pink bungalow that she had lovingly decorated also featured quite prominently. It struck me that these pictures, the very image of domestic contentedness, seemed to be used in such a way as to absolve Homolka of the crime. In other words, how could a seemingly "normal" woman be guilty of such heinous murders?

Crime reporter Patricia Pearson noted how in court Homolka's face "was as blank as a doll's, as if everything that had made her human had been airbrushed away"

(Pearson, 1995:52). From the beginning this was Homolka's modus operandi – to be the non-descript party, coerced into committing the crimes. She blamed her role in the kidnapping, rape and murder of two schoolgirls and the rape of her own sister on the fact that she was a victim of the Battered Woman Syndrome[1]. Pearson goes on to say that Homolka renounced her own claim to be an adult by laying all of the blame on Bernardo. "Paul did it". "Paul made me do it". "He kept bugging me, just do it". "She infantilized herself, relinquishing spirit, will, passion, pride, resourcefulness and rage". It was, according to Pearson "an astonishing act of self-obliteration in service to image" (Pearson, 1995:52). The image Homolka was presenting played into the hands of the media and the courts and she managed to plea bargain a twelve-year sentence while her husband was placed behind bars for life. It was only later, after the plea bargain was solidified, that the public was privy to the mistake that had been made[2]. Homolka was no victim. She was a willing participant who used her white, middle class, heterosexuality as a tool to garner a lesser sentence. The public went along for the ride. Better a battered woman that a psychopathic killer. The Woman Lore Myth must remain in tact.

This myth that women are by nature non-violent persists. As a reporter for *Global Television*, I covered (July 1999) a story on how the weather impacts crime in Quebec. My main subject for the report was a criminologist at the University of Montreal, Dr. Marc Ouimet. Always thinking about my research problematic, I asked

[1] The Canadian Judiciary started accepting the Battered Wife Syndrome in 1990. The code specifies that where a woman responds to an unprovoked assault intending to kill the assailant, she must show that she acted under reasonable apprehension of death or grievous bodily harm. Moreover, she must establish that she reasonably believed that she had no other means of preventing this harm. (Noonan,1993:248)

[2] In fact, in November 1999, Homolka requested permission to obtain passes to the Maison Therese Casgrain - a halfway house for female offenders. As news about her request spread, the public voiced serious opposition, skeptical about how much she has been rehabilitated. Her

Ouimet if he had ever taught a course on violent female offenders. He argued that there would not be enough course material. He seemed to believe, like many criminologists before him[3], that violence is largely the province of the male. While it is true that women commit violence less often than men, it is not about numbers, it is about the fact that it occurs at all and is a part of our cultural landscape. Pearson argues that academic discourse has been equally reductive of women's agency. As an example she says that the FBI's Behavioral Science Services Unit, famous for their intricate psychological profiles of male serial killers, "offer only one category for female perpetrators: "compliant victims". By this they mean that women like Homolka – strong-willed, charismatic, nonconformist – are really just bendable creatures, easily bullied into doing one man's bidding. (Pearson, 1997:180). This is so clearly not the case.

Ouimet's own criminological response to crime seems to support this idea of a biological imperative. He told me that when men commit violent crime criminologists look to his future. In other words, what does this man have to gain by committing this crime, what is his *goal*? When women commit violent crime, however, criminologists look to her past. In other words, what has happened in this woman's life to *make* her do this? How poorly has she been treated that she has had to resort to such an "unnatural" act? The very idea that criminologists still ask these archaic questions tells me that more analysis needs to be done into why women kill. The fact that someone like Karla

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request to be transferred out of prison was denied (Peritz, 1999:A1).

[3] In the 1890s, Criminologist Cesare Lombroso reduced female criminality to the biological imperative. In the 1950s and 1960s Otto Pollak distanced himself from absolute biological determinism in an attempt to be more sociological than his predecessors. Freda Adler, in the 60s, argued that criminal activity is historically a male prerogative and that the new female criminal is breaking with her sex role. It was not until the early 1980s that Carol Smart wrote her landmark work in feminist criminology in order to redress the male-oriented biases integral to criminological theory (Gavigan,1993:217-224).

Homolka could initially dupe the masses into believing that she was a compliant victim rather than a willing participant to murder, suggests that there needs to be greater representation of violent women and that public perception about female violence has to be revamped. If violence is gendered women need to be part of the equation and accounted for.

However, the image of violence reflected in popular culture is still based on what drives a woman to commit a crime. A good example of such a construction is a recent article on the front page of the *National Post*. It states that "women are just as violent to their spouses as men, and women are almost three times more likely to initiate violence in a relationship, according to a new Canadian study that deals a blow to the image of the male as the traditional aggressor" (Evenson, 1999: July 10). She's either pushed to extremes (as in domestic violence), or led astray by criminal males (as in partner crimes), or mentally unbalanced (as in the recent rash of baby killings for which one court psychologist coined the term "unwed mother syndrome"). In other words "women snap or explode with tragic results" (Stange, 1998: 10). They do not *decide* to kill.

That women *do* decide to kill is clear in the made-for-TV movies that I will be examining. They represent these women as anything but powerless. They kill for believable motives: greed, jealousy, revenge, ego gratification, and sexual thrill. Some of them are clearly psychopaths, but like their male counterparts, the majority is cold, calculating, and thoroughly sane. And much more often that not, they are "feminine" in all the conventional ways.

While I do not believe in television as the great democratizing tool, I do believe it performs a function in society. The made-for-TV movie is an important text in which the

stories of marginalized women are told from a particularly progressive, or at least "troubling" standpoint. I have chosen two made-for-TV movies that confront the issue of women and violence with a mix of both subversive and traditional readings. First I will examine *Her Final Fury: Betty Broderick, The Last Chapter* (*CBS*, November 1992). This story confronts the issue of an upper class housewife who kills her ex-husband and new wife. Second, I will look at the movie *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (CBS, Nov.16, 1992). *Overkill* is the tale of a highway prostitute who murdered seven men in the name of self-defense and is currently serving time on death row. The traditional reading is such that both movies are framed within the context of the family and the heterosexual romance. However, they each focus on women who have transgressed the accepted limits of the normative definition of female behavior.

To this day, both Broderick and Wuornos continue to engage an audience. On a website for the San Diego Travel Bureau, Betty Broderick's case is listed as the "most notable legal trial"[4]. Her story is often re-broadcast on television for those who did not get a chance to see her in action the first time. For Wuornos, many people are still active in trying to free her from jail[5]. As I write, librettist/composer Carlo Lucero is in the process of writing a queer opera about Wuornos' life. This production is set to premier in San Francisco sometime this year. Lucero has said he feels "a strong yet reluctant connection to Aileen Wuornos. Her story embodies the darkness in every victim's soul and the fleeting fantasies of every survivor" (Lucero, Oct. 22, 1999)[6].

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[4] www.sandiego-online.com/issues/september98/tape.stm
[5] See the Aileen Wuornos Defense Committee at www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/mezzanine/2991/murder/wuornos.htm
[6] www.queerculturalcenter.org/pages/wuornos/intro.html

What attracted Lucero to the Wuornos case was, among other things, the feature length documentary by British filmmaker Nick Broomfield. The result is a sympathetic portrait of the so-called first female serial killer called *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*. (1994). In it, the documentary focuses as much on the crimes Wuornos has committed as on those who have committed crimes against her. This documentary and to a large extent the made-for-TV movie are two products that represent Wuornos as a woman who tries to take control of her circumstances while at the same time acknowledging her contribution to the violence. While the importance of this may seem slight, the consequences of our refusal to concede female contributions to violence are manifold. It affects the ability to develop a literature about women that encompasses the full array of human emotion and experience. It demeans the right their victims have to be valued. And it radically impedes our ability to recognize dimensions of power that have nothing to do with formal structures of hierarchy. And perhaps, above all, as summarized by Pearson, "the denial of women's aggression profoundly undermines our attempt as a culture to understand violence, to trace its causes and to quell them" (Pearson, 1997:243). The made-for-TV movie at its best functions in such a way as to help further our understanding of women and violence.

In this thesis, I will consider how these movies attempt to deal with the subject matter within the context of the family melodrama and the heterosexual romance, while at the same time subverting these very ideas. Laurie Schulze argues that the "made-for-TV movie appears to put a challenge to dominant ideology while deploying codes that work to pull this challenge back into a socio-cultural space" (Schulze, 1986:35). For my purposes, I do not want to ignore that the very making of these movies suggests that there

are, at the very least, problems with this socio-central space. Relying on a textual analysis approach, I will examine television's attempt to contextualize these stories as social fairy tales but also as moments of radical insight into the lives of women as well as the politics of female position.

The two movies I have chosen to analyze are significant on a number of different levels, not the least of which is the charismatic persona of the two women themselves. Both Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos are women who have transgressed "traditional ideas of femininity" and it is important to analyze how these women are judged. Aileen Wuornos is a woman, a prostitute, a lesbian and a victim of violence all of her life. Betty Broderick is an upper class professional and mother of four whom has lived a life of privilege and prosperity.

Broderick is more akin to the contemporary "good" woman in popular culture. She is white, stereotypically blonde, a mother and upper middle-class. Bad women in popular culture, by contrast, are generally drawn from stereotypes of the poor and minority groups which fail to conform to the dominant culture. Wuornos is poor and a lesbian. The made-for-TV movie seems to draw no correlation between law breaking and class; that is, crime in these movies is committed by all classes and rarely is this reflected so aptly in popular culture.

I will examine how the made-for-TV movie (and by extension the media), with its limited understanding of women and violence, treat each case in a rather uniform way. By looking at the made-for-TV movie and its narrative structure, I will focus on the individual stories themselves and how, though remarkably different from the outset, both

Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos become important contemporary figures of mediated women who have killed.

CHAPTER ONE

GOOD GIRLS DO IT TOO: NORMAL WOMEN, DEVIANT SISTERS

Women kill. This is not a contemporary concept, yet more and more violent women are making headlines and being turned into best selling novels, feature length theatrical films and television movies. If you were asked to list the names of the most notorious criminal women of the past decade, it would not be a difficult task. Close to home, there are names like Karla Homolka, Dorothy Joudrie and Jane Stafford. In the United States, you will find the likes of Karla Fay Tucker, Susan Smith, Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos. Then, of course, there are those women who committed heinous crimes without turning "fatal": Tonya Harding, Amy Fisher and Lorena Bobbitt. These are the names of women whose crimes received a fair share of publicity but there have been countless others whose stories were less sensational and the cast of characters, less spectacular.

Until recently, academic discussion about women who kill has been moderate at best. Discussion about women who kill on television is almost non-existent. Perhaps because there is a predominant "uneasiness" about the issue of violent women or women who kill, either in "real life" or in representation, there is very little literature on the subject. Criminologist Candice Skrapec says that she frequently encounters amazement at the revelation that women have long been, and continue to be, multiple murderers. She goes on to say that "the notion so violates the idea of femaleness, tied to her traditional nurturing role, that a woman is denied her identity as a murderer (Skrapec, 1994: 243). Cultural critics and some feminists seem to be "troubled" by the notion of women who

commit acts of violence for a couple of reasons. When the study of female criminology came in to being in the 1970's, the media raised the blood pressure of feminist scholars with the idea that women's liberation would have the effect of producing a new class of female criminals. "It was a regurgitation of the age-old fear that emancipation will make women more like men, a myth that has historically suppressed goddess-worship and other expressions of female power" (Faith, 1993:256).

With this in mind, some feminists see the articulation of female violence as an anti-feminist backlash and a completely male construct. They seem to be unsure whether addressing women's violence supports or betrays their feminist causes (Birch, 1994: 199). Until the women's movement, it was men who felt entitled (to use Birch's term) - entitled to work, entitled to play, entitled to commit acts of courage, of kindness of outrage and of violence. According to Birch, what feminism has done is

> given women a greater sense of their own entitlement, facilitating the outward expression of emotion, and in practical terms, women's comfort zones have expanded. They are now more likely than ever to come into contact with a wider array of means to gratify their needs in general (and express their fears and rage in particular).
> (Birch, 1994: 266).

Because of this Birch argues that as women become more a part of the workings of society, *there will* (and have been) predatory kinds of serial murders perpetrated by women.[7] Despite this, feminists and cultural critics are accustomed to, and seemingly

[7] In this way it can be argued that feminism has served a catalytic role in the evolution of the female killer but there is no argument for a cause/effect relationship. Violent women are a by-product of the women's movement in the sense that there is more opportunity to commit acts of violence and more attention is being paid to them. Some women are troubled by this notion because violent women violate core values of feminism such as non-aggression.

more comfortable with, discussing women as victims of violence and not perpetrators of it.

For the past twenty years, discourse surrounding women and violence has been to relegate women to the status of submissive victim. While the representation of the incidence of women killing men threatens comfortable conventions which favor women as nurturing wives and mothers, the advent of publicity also serves to set up these "violent" women against the more general framing of women as victims of male violence. When faced with the dubious task of recounting the tale of women who kill, the media seem to fall into the trap of representing these women within the context of accepted notions of women as passive. The made-for-TV movie, *The Burning Bed*, for example, first aired on *NBC* in 1984. It tells the story of Francine Hughes, a woman so abused by her husband and neglected by the social welfare institutions, that she had no choice but to set his bed on fire and kill him. In other words, she is passive until she is *driven* to the point where she has no choice but to act otherwise. In this case, in a moment of what the media and the judicial system call "temporary insanity" she commits murder. In terms of a vocabulary of motive, the Francine Hughes case is problematic. It presses the view that battered women are psychologically deranged, not trapped by their circumstances. This verdict takes away any possibility that Hughes actually chose to end her suffering by killing her husband and the temporary insanity plea helps maintain the women as passive construct. While trying to maintain this construct, the media will attempt to compare and contrast violent women to her more "normal", thus more feminine, counterparts. It is as though the media need to maintain the hegemonic order or social norms by representing these women in terms of, and in contrast to, what is essentially considered

femaleness. It is to tell people how women are *supposed* to act by showing them exactly how they are not to. Now, with the advent of violent women entering public discourse through the media, the cultural articulation of women and violence is being forced to ask questions about women's own contribution and agency with respect to violence in the home and beyond.

While admittedly academic and journalist endeavors analyzing the phenomenon of lady-killers are few and far between, there have been a few good examples of this kind of examination in the past few years (Pearson, 1997; Hart, 1994; Faith, 1993; Birch, 1993). Most likely the reason is because the issue of violent women has been circulating in newspapers, magazines, television programs, and feature films more prominently. The media have come to develop a kind of fascination with respect to this "new" phenomenon of the violent female. They love the subject because of its controversial nature ("if it bleeds, it leads!") but they also hate it because of their limited understanding of violence as it relates to women. This lack of knowledge or discourse with which to address the violent female inevitably leads to an inability to accurately reflect the phenomenon of women who kill. The media's response to the incident of violent women is to frame them as either crazy or deviant.[8] In other words, the media patrol the borders of femininity by marking off the normal woman from her deviant "sisters". Patricia Pearson argues that "one reason women dwell outside the discourse on aggression is because of the tendency of scholars to define aggression in a specifically masculine way" (Pearson, 1997:11).

With the media focusing on women who kill, the question many people are asking, then, is whether the traditionally passive and "gentler sex" is indeed becoming

[8] I will be speaking in greater detail about this in the next two chapters that address the case of Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos.

more violent. Last year (1998), Dell publishing released an innocuous little paperback entitled *Murder Most Rare: The Female Serial Killer.* The book was written by Michael D.Kelleher, a man with no apparent credentials other than that he is a human rights advocate and has written extensively on the subject of violence. On the back cover of this book, the author promises to show "the shocking facts about seven known categories of female serial killers – from the sexual predator to the chilling black widow". It continues "naming names and daring to reveal the often grisly details, it takes us into the dark world of the most ruthless, merciless, and perverse killer of all – the *female* serial killer" (emphasis mine). In the opening pages, Kelleher talks about the myths perpetuated by the press and popular media that serial murders are invariably and exclusively committed by men. He disputes this by saying that "the genuine history of this crime is replete with dozens of female serial killers who were far more lethal – and often, far more successful in their determination to kill –than their male counterparts" (Kelleher, 1998:xi). This book is not worth considering except to say that it demonstrates the way in which violent women, some *more* violent than men, are becoming part of the discourse on crime in general, violent crime in particular.

There have been other, more noteworthy, examinations of criminal women, the majority of which look at the incidence of women who kill from a critical perspective. Most recently Patricia Pearson, an award winning crime reporter, set out to demolish the myth of female innocence in her book *When She Was Bad Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence* (1997). She argues that our culture is in denial of woman's innate capacity for aggression, "because we have developed a male-centered measure of aggression, we have blinded ourselves to the ways in which girls develop and utilize power" (Pearson,

1997:19). Because cultural critics favor the female space as non-violent, there is no accepted discourse with which to address women who kill. In 1995, Pearson wrote a chilling article for *Saturday Night* magazine. In it, she talks extensively about the Paul Bernardo/Karla Homolka trial and argues that "dismissing women as too passive to be aggressors has a long tradition in the judicial system, particularly if the woman is middle-class, heterosexual, or stereotypically feminine" (Pearson, 1995:52). Each of these characteristics is a perfect fit for Homolka.[9] Pearson looks to criminologist Candice Skrapec to develop an understanding of why a woman kills, "[it] may be the recognition that by killing, she experiences herself as someone who matters, as the agent of some substantial happening and, by inference, as powerful. Almost incidentally, she can come to enjoy killing and develop a "taste" for it" (Pearson: 1995:62).

It is rare that you hear writers speak of women criminals in terms of power and citing pleasure as a motive. Helen Birch says that because so few women enter the criminal justice system, they have been described as "incongruous" "out of place" "invisible" ... "hence explanations for women's criminality are sought within the discourse of the pathological and the irrational: menstruation, mental illness, poor socialization, broken home and so on" (Birch: 1994, 205.) But she goes on to say that men are not so out of place so their offending is explained within the discourse of normality and rationality. Men's crimes are more likely to be viewed as the product of such factors as boredom, greed, peer-group pressure or simple wickedness. Clearly, it is these characteristics that apply to Homolka – a woman who killed because of how it

[9] June 19, 1995 Karla Homolka was in a Toronto Courtroom providing chilling testimony about her own role in the murder of two teenage girls -Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French. Homolka also took part in the sexual assault and death of her fifteen-year-old sister, Tammy.

would improve her lot in life by making her more loved and respected by her criminal husband.

Homolka's trial is an interesting case study into the way in which female criminality is understood by the media. Quite literally, Homolka was able to plea bargain and receive a much shorter sentence than her partner Paul Bernardo, although both were equally involved in the kidnapping, torture, and murder of two young girls. In preparation for Bernardo's trial, attorneys for both crown and defense hired a number of forensic psychiatrists to examine Homolka and confirm that she had acted "as a woman", as an instrument of Bernardo's will. What they found, however, was that Karla was an "immature, moody, shallow, rigid, hostile individual preoccupied with themes of violence and victimization.... There is a moral vacuity in her which is difficult, if not impossible, to explain" (Pearson, 1997:46). As Pearson argues, had she been male, the explanation might have been that she was a psychopath or in some other way criminally indifferent to the feelings of others.

> Intricate theory abounds for male offenders. But she was female. The only available explanation in the 1990s was that she had acted against her own, inherently nonviolent inclinations, either because she was insane or because she had been coerced
> (Pearson, 1997:46).

Incidentally, none of the psychiatrists who found Homolka to have "a degree of callousness and insensitivity of major proportions" were called into court (Pearson, 1997:46). Karla Homolka was given the lesser sentence precisely because she is white, blond, blue eyed and as, Pearson suggests, stereotypically feminine. Homolka, however, is the changing face of female criminality - a face that should be reflected in popular culture.

In 1996, Coramae Richey Mann, a professor of criminal justice at Indiana University, set out to explore women who kill in her book *When Women Kill.*[10] Mann offers a profile of the female killer with the following characteristics: "a summary profile of today's typical female homicide offender reveals her to be a single, thirty-one year old, unemployed African American mother with less than a high school education who has been arrested in the past" (Mann, 1996:164). The American profile of women convicted of murder is as she describes yet the representation we see on television is, more often than not, of white female crime. Mann's profile obviously has something to do with her chosen variables, her study was limited to two hundred and ninety-six females arrested for homicide in six urban areas in the United States. Of course, this thesis sets out to suggest that the media need to develop a discourse within which to frame female violence beyond explanations of pathology and deviancy. It is not about the lack of representation of questions of race.

Mann's book harks back to the 1980 book *Women Who Kill* by Ann Jones. Jones's study of women who kill is from a historical, feminist perspective and it too warns against the limitations of concluding that some people are more dangerous "types" than others. She says "society is afraid of both the feminist and the murderer, for each of them, in her own way, test society's established boundaries" (Jones, 1980:13). Jones' book is a sweeping look at women criminals from the 1600's to the 1980's. She takes an in-depth look at such popular trials as Lizzie Borden, who, in 1892, was found not guilty

[10] Mann wrote this book in an attempt to bring us closer to an understanding of female homicide. It grew out of concern for the fact that violence is becoming so pervasive in our society. At the time she wrote the book, there was a collective fascination with the O.J. Simpson murder trial. With this book, she furthered her argument that female violence has grown out of the same cultural and structural roots as male violence – something she does quite effectively.

of the brutal murders of her father and step-mother (murders that many, to this day, believe she committed).[11] Incidentally, the case of Lizzie Borden has inspired, in addition to a made-for-TV movie, numerous books and theories, a play, an opera and most recently a 3D reconstruction of the Lizzie Borden house on the internet.[12] She has gained our public sympathy precisely because the Borden's lawyers played the "nice respectable girl card" and actually won. The trial verdict was based solely on a set of beliefs surrounding the state of "womanhood".

> Ladies aren't strong enough to swing a two-pound hatchet hard enough to break a brittle substance one six-teenth of an inch thick...Ladies are ceaselessly grateful to the men – fathers or husbands – who support them...Ladies cannot plan more than a few minutes ahead. Ladies' conversation arises from ignorance, hysteria, over enthusiasm or the inability to use language properly, and in any case, is not to be taken seriously"
> (Jones, 1980:231).

Jones then introduces us to countless other lesser known "lewd" women, women who by virtue of their acts, require that we take them seriously. Indeed it was Jones who said the story of women who kill is the story of women. (Jones, 1980:xvi).

There have been other studies that look specifically at the media representation of these criminal women. In popular culture the media has been a primary conduit both for the transmission of status quo values and for the retraction of changes in values. It is the

[11] On August 4th 1892, it is believed that Lizzie Borden hit her father in the head 10 times with a hatchet – killing him. She then battered in the skull of her stepmother until she died. During the trial, the defence lawyer and Lizzie herself offered a great deal of contradictory evidence. She couldn't remember where she was at the time the crime was being committed, for example. Although it was said during the trial that Lizzie ("an adoring daughter") would have no reason to kill her father and stepmother, she, in fact, stood to gain a quarter of a million dollars (which she did upon being found not guilty.

[12] www.halfmoon.org/borden/

tension between respect for tradition and the constancy of change that is of interest to me (particularly in the form of the made-for-TV movie). Karlene Faith in her book *Unruly Women The Politics of Confinement and Resistance* (1993) argues that "the media serve as sites of resistance, as reflected in cultural shifts and emerging counter-identities. (Faith, 1993:270). She also points out that the hegemonic system is distinctly heterosexual and gender-fixed notions of sexual identity are still prevalent in the media despite clear shifts toward sizeable counter-cultures. Susan McWhinney echoes this argument by saying "current media coverage reflects the fears of a society trying to control its women. Women's cases are moralized and sensationalized in a way that characterizes few cases involving male killers" (McWhinney, 1993:49). I will argue that some of these counter-cultures that Faith refers to can be found in your living room, on the small screen in the form of made-for-TV movies. And although McWhinney is correct in saying that their stories are moralized and sensationalized, there is also room in these stories for progressive commentary on women who commit violent acts. Faith argues that to demystify the criminal woman would be to rob the entertainment industry of one of its cherished misogynist stereotypes (Faith, 1993:271). I would add that the female criminal *on television*, specifically, as she is represented in the made-for-TV movie, is not, in fact, simply a misogynist stereotype. Rather she is a combination of timeworn stereotypes and conflicting images that challenge dominant value systems.

Made-for-TV Movies – A Woman's Rage Revealed

In this thesis, I will be looking at television as a site of struggle within popular culture, where many meanings of this idea of womanhood are determined and debated. I will adhere to Lorraine Gammon and Margaret Marshment's notion that

> it is not enough to dismiss popular culture as merely serving the complementary systems of capitalism and patriarchy, peddling "false consciousness" to the duped masses. It can also be seen as a site where meanings are contested and where dominant ideologies can be disturbed (Gamman, 1989:1).

I will be looking specifically at the made-for-TV movie as a site where these meanings are analyzed and contested. First, it is important to look at some of the prevailing ideologies that exist with respect to women and aggression.

The media representation of a violent woman is often one who kills the man she loves because of jealousy or out of a sense of betrayal. It relates to the cultural pattern of love – so central to female/feminine culture. This stereotype feeds into the cultural myth (and psychoanalytical model) of women being biologically predestined to greater emotional instability than men, in more ways than one the weaker sex. By reinforcing social control, the media contribute to the dominant idea of violence as a male prerogative and favor the comfortable convention of the female space as non-violent.

Helen Birch (1994) argues that historically women have never been held accountable for their violent actions because those actions are against their "nature". When they are held accountable, their actions are attributed to some kind of psychological disorder or pathological behavior. "Women who kill are divided into two camps - they are either mad, not like ordinary women and can be fixed. Or they are bad.

unfeminine, they become masculinized women" (Birch, 1994:199). They are either constructed as deviant (more like men than women) or lacking agency (they did not know what they were doing). And they do not have a voice. Margaret Shaw argues that:

> traditional stereotypes of women as nurturing, gentle, passive and submissive deny any possibility of aggression or violent behavior as a natural female response. Women who are violent tend to be seen, therefore, as inadequate, unnaturally masculine, sick or even mad, if they transgress expected ways of behaving .
> (Shaw, 1995: 14).

Forcing women to consider "natural" those acts which have been socially imposed, the media continually offer images of a normative femininity. Violent women are guilty not only of the act itself but, more importantly, for having broken the mould of femininity - for stepping outside the bounds of traditional roles buoyed by a culture of caring, nurturing and love.

Lynda Hart (1994) furthers this notion of violent women as deviant by suggesting the ways in which lesbian identity has been the site where women's aggressiveness has been displaced. By this she means that sexuality itself is a site of "trouble". She does this with respect to the cultural construction of the "impossible lesbian who was always already a criminal" (Hart, 1994:11). She brings the question of sexuality within a gendered construction of the violent subject. Victoria A. Brownworth goes further by saying that "lesbianism has become a prosecutorial tool in proving a woman's criminality when she is brought to trial" (Brownworth, 1992:24). The fact that lesbians choose to be with other women means categorically that they must hate men. The association between

lesbianism and man hating is presented as veritable facts at a trial. In the case of Aileen Wuornos, for example, some observers actually confused Wuornos' lesbianism with the deviant nature of her alleged crimes. In a *Vanity Fair* article (1991) entitled "Kiss and Kill" it reads:

> Out of more than 170 serial killers estimated in the United States since 1977, there have been fewer than a dozen women. Many of those worked in home care or health care. Often they acted with a partner, many used poison, they usually knew their victims, and sex was rarely an aspect of the crime. But Wuornos allegedly performed like her male counterparts. She is believed to have acted alone. She didn't know the men she killed. She may have had sex with some and tortured at least one. She shot them, and robbed them. And after each killing, she returned to Tyria Moore, the woman she called "wife".
> (Macnamara, 1991:91).

Karlene Faith takes both a historical and contemporary look at women and crime and delves more deeply into the ways in which "violent women" are portrayed (medically, legally, religiously and in the media) as traitors to gendered power relations and so a threat to the male dominant status quo. She raises complex issues of class and race and argues that women most often "in conflict with the law" are those who could not (or cannot) conform to notions of femininity perpetrated by the media (Faith, 1993:38).

Recent examples of women who have transgressed gender lines are Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos, my case studies.[13] The media framed these women with their limited understanding of gender, power and violence. The portrait of Betty Broderick is of the "good woman turned bad". Betty is characterized as "a woman scorned" – someone whose life as a wife and mother was threatened by a newer model.

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[13] Elizabeth Broderick, a wealthy socialite living in La Jolla, California, was convicted in 1991 of gunning down her ex-husband, Dan, and his new wife, Linda. Prosecutors say she did it out of a jealous rage. Broderick claimed her husband abandoned her and drove her to the crime. Aileen Wuornos was a highway prostitute who killed ten men between November 30th 1989 and November 18th, 1990 – all of them, she argued, in self-defence.

Dan's new bride Linda Kolkena. There is some debate surrounding this case as to whether she is a feminist heroine or a crackpot (Lehman. 1995:120). In an article in *Mirabella* Magazine. Broderick said that she has an idea why women might regard her as a hero. "Maybe people see me as the beginning of a new generation of women who aren't going to destroy themselves when the man in their life says 'you are garbage. I'm through" (Lehman. 1995:124).

The media coined Wuornos "America's First Female Serial Killer" in order to identify her immediately as a deviant. In an article in the *Globe and Mail*. January 11th 1992 Wuornos is so described: "the muscular 35-year-old former truck stop prostitute. a rare if not unprecedented female version of the drifter serial killer. confessed to killing seven times along central Florida highways between December 1989 and November 1990 (Reynolds. 1992: A6). A headline in the *Miami Herald* said SLAYING CASE DEFIES THEORIES ON GENDER (Van Gelder. 1992:80). A prostitute. a lesbian and a woman who kills men. Wuornos transgresses all of the rules of what is considered the culture of femininity. By quickly labeling her "America's First Female Serial Killer". it is as though enough has been said. We do not need to explore the reasons she has committed violent acts. she is simply and purely an "exceptional" case and so there is no means for comparison and no need to think that this can in any way be attributed to femaleness. As Skrapec outlines in her article "The Female Serial Killer":

> Violent criminality has been marked out as an essentially male province by the criminal justice system. criminological researchers and the media. Homicide. in particular. is viewed as a predominantly male crime, female offenders tending to be relegated to an exceptional case status that rests upon some exceptional or untoward, compelling circumstance: the battered wife who kills her abusive husband; the postpartum psychotic mother who kills her newborn infant.
> (Skrapec, 1994:242)

Skrapec goes on to say that this notion of the female killer violates the idea of "femaleness" tied to her traditional nurturing role. By labeling women killers, the media demarcate these women as the "other" in society. Their "unnatural" acts somehow turn them into masculinized women. As Lynda Hart states in her book *Fatal Women*: "legitimately of illegitimately crime is constantly a verification of masculinity" (Hart, 1994:27). If not proven to be masculinized, female criminals are regarded as simply insane. It is the argument of biology over culturally constructed notions of femaleness. While the media may challenge other elements of the accepted social order, they are not yet able to challenge socially defined gender stereotypes. The image of the violent woman in the media "has become symbolic of the threat of femininity unleashed from its traditional bonds of goodness, tenderness and nurturance. It strikes at the heart of our fears about unruly women, about criminality, and about the way gender is constructed" (Birch, 1994:32). The female criminal has unleashed the fears that have been lurking below the surface of what women are really capable of and the media have realized that these fears can be tapped and used as a tool to set boundaries on society's understanding of women and violence.

Of course what we are really talking about here is stereotypes and woman's experience. Richard Dyer has said, "the word stereotype is today almost always a term of abuse" (Dyer, 1993:11). I will argue, as he does throughout his article, that stereotypes do not necessarily have to have pejorative connotations. In fact, stereotypes are the quickest way to have access to the other – the "unknown" in addition to being a necessary tool to maintain social order. "The most important function of the stereotype is to maintain sharp boundary definitions" (Dyer, 1993:16). While this may be true there is

also the problem of seeing stereotypes as absolutes. In keeping with my analysis of Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuronos and their television representation, I will suggest, as Dyer does, that the "role of the stereotype is to make visible the invisible." He continues "so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares: and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm that the dominant value system cares to admit" (Dyer, 1993:16). This notion of making visible the experience of a different group is also in keeping with Joan W. Scott's notion of experience. This notion of experience is particularly important to women because it renders historical what has been hidden from history.[14] Through the telling of women's experience, the made-for-TV movie breaks a sanctioned public silence about certain issues. As Scott says, "making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as constituted rationally" (Scott, 1992:25). What we do know, however, is that by allowing it to exist (women's stories on public television) the text offers a critique of normative practices.

Women, The Tube and The Movies That Are Made For It

Television is one of the most important public spheres within which social meanings and myths are constructed and circulated. It is also one of the most important

[14] Scott argues that by seeing your own experience you gain power (in this case, by seeing aspects of your life represented on television). By making something visible, it breaks the silence about it, challenges prevailing notions and opens new possibilities.

ways in which women get a sense of their own experience. According to Andrea L. Press:

> As we enter what some nefariously call the period of postfeminism, it becomes more and more pressing to ask how women in our time use the images and ideas our culture makes available to them as they construct their own identities in the world and as they form their own ideas about what is normal and real outside of themselves
> (Press, 1991:3).

In her book entitled *Women Watching Television* (1991), Press argues that women are in an ideological crossroads and as such they turn to mediums such as the television apparatus in order to gain insight into gender identity. I come to study the television apparatus (more specifically the made-for-TV movie) with a certain degree of ambivalence toward the genre. At the outset, I feel it necessary to specify that I am speaking particularly of the traditional and powerful networks such as *NBC*, *CBS* and *ABC*, knowing full well that there exists alternative programming (albeit very little) with a very different and more progressive agenda than these American networks. I am critical of television discourse because the television industry is a conservative institution and most of its programs are steeped in traditional values and formulated with a predominately male outlook. On the other hand, certain television formats do allow for a more progressive rhetoric, especially those that cater to a female audience. It is the struggle between the "evil TV discourse" (discourse that frames all issues within a traditional - thus heterosexual/patriarchal - construct) and the more progressive TV discourse (allowing for divergent readings) that is of interest to me. Following Feuer's notion of television, I will look at how "television incorporates feminist dissent and turns it into consensual and non-threatening notions of women's liberation" (Feuer,1997:10)

For these reasons, I look to the made-for-TV movie and the way in which it attempts to define the concept of "woman" and negotiate woman's position in society.

Like the telephone, the television has long been considered a particularly female apparatus. Press argues that the main reason for this distinction is that the television takes up a prominent place in the home – an integral part of the domestic space and domestic technology - a space associated with women. Whether it is to watch soap operas in the afternoon or dramatic features in the evening, the television has had an impact on women – it has always served as a connection to the outside world. As Press says "television helps us bridge the gap between the public and private realms of our lives and to maintain, in our increasingly fragmented lives, a feeling of connection – however precarious – with the social world, even if this connection is emotive rather than substantive" (Press, 1991:17). Since its arrival in the late 1940s, television has particularly tried to attract female viewers who, the industry assumes, are the primary consumers for their households. "The audience most attractive to most television advertisers are women between the ages of 18 and 54, since they make the balance of consumer decisions, purchasing goods not only for themselves but for all members of the household (Schulze, 1990: 369). Television, a domestic medium, presumes a family audience and since women spend on average more time in the home than men - it presumes a feminine one (Press, 1991:18). In broadcast television practice, the made-for-TV movie emerged as a privileged site for women's control.

Made-For-TV Movies: A Brief History

The history of the made-for-TV movie is largely the history of a television form that has been increasingly profitable for networks and that has taken on a significant role in competitive programming strategy (Schulze, 1990, 355). The idea of movies made for television began in the 1950's when Hollywood's major motion picture companies released their pre-1948 feature films to local television stations for broadcast. The networks became more and more convinced that Hollywood movies on network prime time might generate an impressive share of the audience. In the 1960's, television successfully negotiated for recent feature films and by the early 1970s the three networks were broadcasting ten prime time "movie nights" each week. This programming practice of saturating prime time with Hollywood films, rapidly led to a shortage of available and appropriate features. According to Schulze, "television broadcast them faster than Hollywood could produce them "(Schulze, 1990:356). When *The Bridge on the River Kwai* went to *ABC* for $2 million in 1966, the television industry began to realize that there might be no limit to what studios could demand for their product. As a result, the networks began to commission the production of films exclusively for television.

The term "movie of the week" was coined in 1968 with the *ABC* Movie of the Week, the first series to consist entirely of made-for-TV movies (Cuff, 1992:C3). The average cost of making a TV movie is between $2.5 million and $3.5 million and they can be made quickly and efficiently. The fact that these movies are produced to be shown on television only once (or later in re-runs) the producers are willing to struggle with more debatable subject matter than other television formats. The "watch it now or

miss it" principle, inscribes the made-for-TV movie with a sense of urgency - a call to the viewers that they are watching a special event unfold. There is also a sense of making an event out of the case. When *The Burning Bed* came to the Lifetime network in 1991, it was showcased as part of an evening's flow of programming around and about domestic violence. During commercial breaks, numbers for local domestic violence hotlines were flashed on the screen. In a promo for the eleven o'clock news, the female anchorperson is seen watching the film with a group of battered wives and the audience is promised "their reaction at eleven." (Feuer, 1994:143).

Made-for-TV movies are often followed by a discussion, a newsmagazine or other news program that debate the issues presented in the movie. More often than not the subject matter of the made-for-TV movies generates other media responses. Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuronos were both featured on Court TV.[15] Broderick's antics were also shown on the high rated *Oprah Winfrey* Show, with her family interviewed the following day (October, 1992). Aileen Wuronos was worthy of a *Dateline* Interview (November 10th, 1992)) and as the subject of a feature length documentary by the British documentarian Nick Broomfield entitled *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of A Serial Killer* (1994). So the made-for-TV movie's value, as part of a cultural studies perspective, is heightened because they are part of a larger web of information giving on contemporary social events.

Arthur Weinthal, vice-president of program development and production at *CTV* says TV movies draw well because Sunday and Monday are "stay-at-home nights" and they attract women, the most desirable demographic for advertisers. He says that there is

[15] California Vs. Broderick – Betty Broderick on Trial: Victim or Criminal? (Feb. 1992). Florida v. Wuornos Female Serial Predator: What made her Kill? (July 1998)

a study that claims women "tend to control 70 per cent of the family's disposable income" and that women also strongly influence a family's viewing choices " (Cuff, 1992:C3). The result, he perceives, is that TV movies usually reflect contemporary life, are fact-based and often revolve around a women in jeopardy, who is involved in a male/female conflict. Made-for-TV movies, because they are made quickly, most often tell the story of someone or something that is at that time circulating in the news. They are a primary source of information on matters of public concern, particularly to women.

According to Nick Browne in the 1982-1983 season, in contrast to the equal male/female viewing for theatrical films, the audience for made-for-TV movies was distinctly female. He concludes, "women comprise, statistically and perhaps culturally the most important part of the audience for these movie forms designed specifically for television" (Browne: 1987: 594). The made-for-TV movie attracts audiences with its heart-wrenching dramatizations that speak to women's experience, often relying on the titillating tabloid style to ensure box-office success.

Made-for-TV movies have long been ignored by most critics who dismiss the form as "low art" and consider them to be little more than hokey social fairy tales. They are never held in the same high regard as cinema for example. Yet, most made-for-TV movies tackle hot issues like date rape, gay bashing, hate crimes, sexual harassment and more often than not there is a woman character who champions the cause. Rapping argues "taking movies so seriously, while discounting other forms in which women and feminism have had greater impact, we are buying into one of the more subtly insidious – because so rarely noted – ways in which sexism become internalized in our culture"

(Rapping, 1994:12). Despite what the critics might say, their success, particularly among the female population, cannot be ignored.

My interest in the made-for-TV movie, then, arises from the fact that they are peopled by women and - as often as not - produced by women for a predominantly female audience. From a feminist standpoint, it is important to consider why such movies, labeled "trash" by critics, and often implicating women in a web of traditional values and social mores, appeal to so many women. According to Liesbet van Zoonen "the uneasy connection between the pleasures of popular culture and the political aims of feminism is by now more or less a classic issue in feminist media theory, emerging from the particular conjunction between cultural and feminist studies" (Van Zoonen, 1994:7). What Van Zoonen is saying is that as we acknowledge the pleasure women derive from watching made-for-TV movies it becomes increasingly difficult to find moral justifications for criticizing their contribution to the construction of gender identities.

What I am hoping to prove is the very fact that these movies *do* speak to women's experience. That the political value of made-for-TV movies is in their desire to give women a voice in a world that defines them as voiceless. Washington Post TV critic Tom Shales claims that "such programs would not be on the air if they *didn't* appeal to women". In other words, his blatant attack on the form is also an attack on the female audience embedded with all of the cliches of want women want to watch - the so called issue oriented "chick flick". According to Laurie Schulze (1990), because the form is regarded as diminutive, this implicates the female audience in either feeblemindedness, reactionary anti-feminism or a kind of masochistic aesthetic, all of which Shales appears to imply.

> Made-for-TV movie "trash" is something "they" (presumably uneducated. ideologically defective or self-destructive women) want to watch. "We" (the implied reader of Shale's essay) would like to see what Shales approvingly labels "serious. intelligent. unsmutty TV movies which won't be made because the (female) audience wants trash.
> (Schulze. 1990:354).

The female audience does want this kind of "trash" because. I am convinced. the made-for-TV movie tells their story and although that story is told from a particularly conservative (traditional/patriarchal) standpoint. they nonetheless address the many concerns of women.

Jane Feuer in *Seeing Through the Eighties Television and Reaganism* (1995) argues that the made-for-TV movie "with its tradition of social realism combines the ideology of the cop show with the reality claims of the news" (Feuer. 1995:20). In fact. many of these so called "trauma dramas" take the form of the docudrama. by definition a narrative representation of "real people" and "real events". So much of the impact of the made-for-TV movie "consists in this badge of authenticity – this really happened to people just like you" (Feuer, 1995:20). Feuer is critical. however. of the genre in its desire to pull issues back to the center. She argues that 1980s made-for-TV movies "resolved the traumas of the American family in a rejuvenation of public institutions by the people. the same promise that got Reagan elected" (Feuer. 1995: 13). But she disagrees that just because they do pull issues back to the center. that they are not radical forces (Feuer. 1995: 38).

Elayne Rapping, in her book. *The Movie of the Week Private Stories - Public Events* (1992), examines the made-for-TV movies' importance as well as their strengths and weaknesses. She demonstrates "their power to facilitate change and their tendencies - because they are a part of an essentially stabilizing, conservative institution charged

with keeping order and preserving the status quo - to restrict change" (Rapping, 1992:xii). In light of this, I am interested in the manner in which the made-for-TV movie defines femininity and female desire while at once both a regressive and progressive tool and how it comments on my own project on women and violence.

It has already been asserted that television assumes a female gaze and that, as a result, the made-for-TV movie provides more upbeat dramatic treatment of women's issues. Added to this is the fact that the made-for-TV movie may indeed lean towards a feminine narrative form.

> "With its reliance on the family melodrama and the romance, its tendency to take up domestic issues and its penchant for female protagonists and female stars", the made-for-TV movie, more than any other form, speaks principally to women on their terms, in their homes.
> (Schulze, 1990:355).

At least one half of the made-for-TV movies are about women's issues. They all rely on well-known stars to ensure success in the ratings (Note Jean Smart in the role of Aileen Wuronos and Meredith Baxter-Birney in the role of Betty Broderick). Interestingly, these Hollywood leads are, more often than not, cast against type. "In classical Hollywood narratives, beautiful stars become objects of the gaze, in made-for-TV social problem movies, these same stars consciously uglify themselves" (Feuer, 1995:22).[16] Feuer argues that this is done so as not to provide visual pleasure, but to focus on the issue represented in the movie.

The made-for-TV movie is both entertainment and discursive site, more often than not, tackling socially vexing and controversial subjects. Interestingly, the show *Cagney and Lacey* was originally meant to be a feature film but not one motion picture

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[16] Farrah Fawcett in the Burning Bed (1994), Raquel Welch in Right to Die (1987) and of course

studio wanted to put the script into production because the characters were seen as not feminine, soft or sexy enough. In 1980 the writers, Barbara Avedon and Barbara Dorday, decided to sell the script to the television networks and it was eventually made into a made-for-TV movie (*CBS* 1981). The response from women viewers was so overwhelming that it was eventually made in to an award winning television series. The appeal of the TV movie was that it focused on women's work in an uncommon job (they were police officers), their mutual friendship and their independence. As Van Zoonen says:

> The development of the idea indicates the different factors which contributed to the final proposal: on a social level the emphasis on role reversal can be deduced to the impact of liberal feminism: both writers were personally involved in the women's movement and anxious to incorporate their experience in their work. Moreover, they drew from their personal friendship for character development. Apart from his support for the women's movement, Rosenzweig saw an opportunity to produce a professionally innovative movie, since female buddies had never before been seen.
> (Van Zoonen,1994: 44).

This is an example of the way in which the networks will work with subject matter that tends to undermine traditional notions of femininity – these women were career-minded, tough urban cops and the audience loved it! The made-for-TV movie narrative often crosses the line between fiction and fact. While this made-for-TV movie was fictional (though based somewhat on the writer's experience) most often they are based on a true story and more particularly, a "true crime".

Because many of these movies are speaking to women about women's experience, the made-for-TV movie demands personal and individual solutions, even to social problems. Whereas in Hollywood films issues like rape and women battering are just

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my examples.

part of the action to push the plot forward, in made-for-TV movies, they are treated as political or social events. In other words, the whole *raison d'être* for the made-for-TV movie is to explore a particular issue (rape, wife battering, murder) while in Hollywood films these same issues are simply incidental occurrences that propel the main plot structure.

Laurie Schultz (1986) in her essay "Getting Physical: Text/Context/Reading and the Made-for-TV movie" argues that "the general ideological function of the made-for-TV movie is to take up a figure or event that poses a problem to normative values and pull it back toward the normative center (Schulze, 1986:38). The entire ideological and value structure of made-for-TV movies is indeed "normative" as Schulze would agree. They are simplistic, almost ritualistic, in the playing out of social mores and values, with the traditional family hailed as the ideal. Television movies are undeniably a mass-produced text. They have developed identifiable similarities that have solidified into "codes" that distinguish them from, for instance, the theatrical feature.

Schulze uses the example of the screen release *The Good Mother* (1988). This film, starring Diane Keaton and Liam Neeson, is about a divorced woman who risks losing custody of her daughter when her ex-husband charges that their six-year-old's exposure to the relationship between Keaton and her lover is damaging the child. Schulze argues that this "looks like a standard issue-of-the-week TV movie that somehow wandered onto the big screen" (Schultz, 1990,360). The same was said of *Losing Isaiah* (1995), about a crack addicted mother, played by Halle Berry, who tries to get off drugs and reclaim her child that has been adopted by a wealthy, white family. The question in this movie would be worthy of made-for-TV subject matter: Who decides what makes a

mother? Elayne Rapping has said that this formulaic text is the lowest common denominator narratives. They are melodramatic, yes, but they tell a personal story and they are extremely topical.

One of the most important principles is that they all begin and end with the family, "all other matters are subsumed into that never-questioned ideal institution" (Rapping,1992:33). Made-for-TV movies also serve to domesticate matters. That is, they domesticate social issues in order to personalize them and to push a view of problem resolution that is pro-family in the most reactionary way.

> ...and while the messages of TV movies move inexorably toward the obligatory "happy ending, nice and tidy", to use some words from Brecht, they manage, along the way, to distort a lot of social and political realities, they are, in their own quiet, contradictory ways, more than somewhat subversive of existing attitudes about sex, marriage and the family.
> (Rapping, 1992:69)

In these movies, then, women are always, ultimately defined in terms of traditional role. These definitions, however, always seem to acknowledge the difficulties of these roles and treat them with seriousness and respect. There is always a subtext that challenges the dominant text and allows for divergent readings.

In the past, issues such as child abuse, wife battering and AIDS have been given a greater currency thanks to such made-for-TV movies as *Something about Amelia*, 1984 (incest); *The Burning Bed*, 1984 (wife battering); and *An Early Frost*, 1985 (AIDS). Where once it could surprise and even shock the essentially conservative mass TV audience, the made-for-TV movie now has to compete with the titillation available on talk and tabloid TV. Viewers watching any of the reality-based shows from the tabloid to the top network newsmagazine, have, most likely, already met the cast of characters that

would be deemed worthy of the made-for-TV movie treatment. As such the producers of such programs are always on the lookout for the story that will shock and surprise. Lynn Spigel (1992) argues that insofar as television attempts to attract women shoppers with buying power. its definition of femininity works to exclude women in the population. Spigel argues that:

> Historically. women of color and lesbians have not fit the mold of television's ideal feminine type. and thus have been omitted from or marginalized in its representational system. And even when. in the late 1960's. television discovered that it needed to revamp its model of femininity from its zany housewives and loving mothers to new. more independent working women. the most it cast for femininity and the appeals it made to female desire still worked to limit the range of female identities
> (Spigel. 1992:xii)

The made-for-TV movie digresses from other television formats in that its search for ratings *through the controversial* ensures that the TV movie brings the socially marginalized - women. people of color. gays and lesbians. the working class. the homeless and unemployed. the victims - onto popular terrain (Schulze. 1990:371). The made-for-TV movie is a particularly relevant representational system for women in that such matters of public debate are subsumed to the private space of the home. Made-for-TV movies take the everyday life of the not so average women and make it accessible. The singularly important aspect of the made-for-TV movie is that they present their narratives from a female subject position and they (almost) all negotiate the meaning of "woman" in complex ways. Tackling such issues as women who kill. the made-for-TV movie bring the socially marginalized to the living rooms of women. While the telling of the tale may be infused with a traditionally patriarchal/heterosexual construct. their import is to suggest to women that there may be something wrong with the social order.

No matter how you look at it information is being presented to women about other women's real life experience.

CHAPTER TWO

BETTY BRODERICK,
A WOMAN SCORNED

Looking to the made-for-TV movies in the 1990's, it would seem women's real life experience is one of excess. Movies made for television in the first half of the decade were largely about women committing acts of violence as self-defense or as revenge. In Canada, *Salter Street Films Ltd.* jumped on the bandwagon of sensational accounts of women killing men by making the chilling made-for-TV movie, *Life with Billy* (1994). This movie tells the story of Jane Stafford, a woman from Nova Scotia who kills her violent husband after enduring years of horrifying abuse. Canada's *National Film Board* also entered the debate with a one hour documentary called *When Women Kill* (1994) which tells some hard-hitting tales about abused wives who are pushed too far. The mention of these movies is just to suggest that television has played a significant role in exploring the issue of the violent female. It would seem then that in the 1990s it is on television where matters relating to women who kill are both debated and explored.

It is an interesting challenge to confront the made-for-TV movie as a tool that supports rather than betrays feminist causes. The genre, commonly known as the "sociological film" or "public service drama" borrows from the docu-drama by using narrative representation of real events. Rapping says that "made-for-TV movies are philosophically interesting and categorically problematic" (Rapping,1987:142). Philosophically interesting because they are based on fact and problematic because the form demands "at least some marginal tinkering with truth". Some are pure fiction, some

essentially "based on fact", some a mixture of both. It is never true documentary. That is, it does not use actual footage of historic events and interviews with real people to tell its story. It uses actors, staged settings and dramatically written scripts in which dialogue is invented and events are themselves at times "omitted, embellished or conflated". Yet, Rapping goes on to say that, taken as a whole, made-for-TV movies about women and social issues are among the best things on TV, artistically and socially. "The blending of fact and fiction, didacticism and art, which the TV movie form requires, works very well at engaging women viewers and speaking seriously to their problems" (Rapping, 1987:153).

I have chosen the "based on fact" made-for-TV movie about Betty Broderick because her violent act confronts the notion of "femaleness". In *Her Final Fury: Betty Broderick The Last Chapter* Broderick is certainly someone who takes matters into her own hands but unlike many of the made-for-TV movies of the 1980's, she is not battling institutions for the greater good of society[17]. In the 80's, women are typically featured in made-for-TV movies as the moral and organizational force in both the family and in society. The 90's seem to represent a shift where women's role is no longer to protect the greater good . Instead it is the ambiguity of women's role that is questioned and explored. Broderick, for example, is a woman who has committed murder. This evidence forces us to confront her actions within the limitations of what is considered traditional female culture and to consider the context within which this crime occurred.

[17] Like *Lois Gibbs and the Love Canal* (1982, USA) about a working class housewife's struggle to organize her neighbors to fight the corporation responsible for polluting the water their children drink.

I first came to know Betty Broderick while visiting my parents, then in their mid-sixties, at their home in Little Britain, Ontario. While eating supper and watching *Court TV* (a daily ritual in my family) Betty Broderick's lament over the fact that she had shot and killed her ex-husband and his new bride featured prominently. I swallowed pork roast to my mother's proud proclamation: "They deserved it!". I thought then that Betty Broderick would be an intriguing case for feminist analysis. I know now that I was right.

The made-for-TV movie, in its representation of events that really happened to people just like you and me, asks questions about women's role in an ever-changing society. The Betty Broderick case is a true story about a woman who chooses rather unorthodox means to deal with her problem. She will forever be encapsulated in our minds with the 1992 CBS Network premier of *Her Final Fury: Betty Broderick The Last Chapter*. In keeping with the trend at that time, *Her Final Fury* is a "sociological" film outlining the demise of this "unconventional" woman.[18]

I mentioned earlier the ambiguity of having to analyze a text that is at once repressive and progressive. Such is the dilemma with the made-for-TV movie. Jane Feuer baptized the made-for-TV movie as the "trauma drama" (1995) in which real problems of the day are deconstructed and resolved within the two hour time limit - all the while reaffirming societal values and belief systems. Despite the fact that these

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[18] Other examples include *Small Sacrifices* (1989). This popular made-for-TV movie told the tale of Diane Downs, a woman who killed her children in order to get the man she loved. This movie also starred Farah Fawcett. Sixteen year old Amy Fisher inspired three made-for-TV movies when she shot her lover's wife in the face, paralyzing her for life. They are called: *Casualties of Love: The Long Island Lolita Story* (1993); *Amy Fisher: My Story* (1992)and the *Amy Fisher Story*(1993). There is also the sensational case of the *Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom* (1993). This is the story of a Texas mother who hired a hit man to kill her daughter's cheerleading competitor's mom. It stars Holly Hunter in the title role, not seen in a made-for-TV movie since the controversial abortion debate made-for-TV movie, *Roe V. Wade* (1989).

movies glorify and sensationalize traumatic events, I believe they also perform a function within our mediated community. They tell us what is right and what is wrong, in many ways they tell us what is *normal.* A childhood memory of the black feminist critic Bell Hooks tellingly illustrates this. Hooks recalls that: "watching television in the fifties and sixties, and listening to adult conversation, was one of the primary ways many young black folks learned about race politics...The screen was not a place of escape. It was a place of confrontation and encounter" (quote in Van Zoonen, 1994:107). The made-for-TV movie is, for me, that kind of space.

To consider television a site where confrontation and encounter takes place is to look at it as representative of the prevailing ideologies at the time. Elayne Rapping, in her book *The Movie of the Week: Private Stories Public Events* argues that "sexual freedom and the importance of careers and independence for women – so pronounced (at least for television) in the seventies – virtually disappeared in the eighties" (Rapping, 1992:95). Issues relating to parenting, step-parenting and helping troubled children replaced "Doing your own thing". In the same way, the movies I have chosen to examine confront the demise of the American family in the 90's, asking questions about societal values and belief systems with respect to a woman's place. Made-for-TV movies, then, reflect the contemporary moral climate. Speaking about the made-for-TV movie of the 1980's, Feuer says "the traumas portrayed in these films span the entire New Right agenda of the terrors posed to the nuclear family of the 1980's - everything from child abduction and murder to teenage cocaine use" (Feuer, 1995:26).[19] I would argue that *Her*

[19] Some of the stories that fit in to Feuer's model are *Adam*, the story of a young boy who is kidnapped and murdered. *M.A.D.D.* is the story of Cari Lightner, the victim of vehicular manslaughter. *Victims for Victims* tells the story of a young woman stalked and stabbed by a maniac and *Toughlove* is about an eldest son who becomes a cocaine addict.

Final Fury, produced in the 1990s, fits into the cycle of made-for-TV movies that question women's independence and supposed newfound aggression as a threat to the nuclear family. I will borrow from Feuer's model in which she categorizes the narrative structure of each of her films by asking seven questions and fitting the plot structure within the parameters of these questions. I will consider *Her Final Fury* as paradigmatic by analyzing its plot structure and so, by extension, the structure of *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* that will be discussed in the next chapter. I have changed Feuer's questions because she talks about a specific set of 1980s made-for-TV populist trauma dramas that address heroic women battling institutions, while I am focusing on women who kill. Here is the basic structure as established by Feuer (1995, p.25).

1. The film starts with a tragedy
2. Woman is identified as unusual - not like ordinary women
3. Link criminality with sexuality (visually coded as deviant)
4. Link criminality with insanity
5. Reinforces the tradition of the family
   - oppose masculinized woman to more traditionally feminine counterpart.
6. Recognize that there is something wrong with this tradition
7. Normality is restored (however inaccurately)

1. The Film Starts With A Tragedy:

Her Final Fury: Betty Broderick The Last Chapter begins in the dimly lit bedroom of a sleeping Betty Broderick and her young son. It is obviously very late in the evening and Broderick is restless. She gets out of bed and casually saunters over to her bureau, replete with pictures of her and her family enjoying the good life. She opens what appears to be her underwear drawer, ruffles through the beautiful silky underwear and exposes the cold, hard object – her gun. Having picked up the gun, we next see Broderick driving her car - again very stoic and seemingly in control. She parks her car in front of a large, expansive home, she unlocks the front door, quietly creeps up the staircase and walks into a bedroom where two sleeping bodies lie - one a man the other a woman. Standing above them, watching, Broderick raises the gun and fires several shots. At this point, the image on the television screen is no longer the interior of the bedroom - it is the exterior of the home - the quiet domestic life has been shattered, destroyed by this fair-haired maiden. Throughout this entire mise-en-scene, the credits roll.

Immediately, Broderick is identified as "the mother". She is in bed with her son, but the safety of this comfortable domestic space is quickly overturned. By picking up the gun, surrounded as it is by all of the trappings of the female world - pink lacey underthings - Broderick is no longer identifiable within the realm of the "female" world, she has become part of the cold reality of crime - a much maligned male domain. It is important to note that the women viewers are watching the movie from the comfortable confines of their own living space – watching Betty leave that space immediately differentiates her from them. John Ellis comments that "television's display of the "weird

and wonderful", the "eccentric and the bizarre" functions to confirm the normality of both the viewer and the viewer's presumed domestic setting" (Ellis, 1982:167).

No longer identified with the home - the interior - female space, Betty goes outside and drives her car. The spectators watching this movie are aware that the story of Betty Broderick is one where she is held accountable for the tragic death of two people. Most likely, those watching this movie have already seen *A Woman Scorned: The Betty Broderick Story* (1992), also known as *Till Murder Do us Part.* This movie is essentially part one of the Broderick's messy upper class tale of deception and murder. While part one focuses on the lead-up to the divorce, *Her Final Fury* chronicles Broderick's decision to commit murder and its aftermath. In this movie Broderick, it appears, is responsible for disrupting the worlds of two families - that of her children in the home she has just left and that of her ex-husband and his new bride, whose home she is about to invade. This second home is full of objects signifying wealth - crystal chandeliers, a winding staircase - all things to establish a solid income and the good life.

As Laurie Schulze argues "many critics of mass culture have taken the position that television in general serves a function of hegemonic maintenance, its programming working to relay dominant values by making things mean within the limits of normative definitions" (Schulze, 1986:35). That this movie begins with the murder of two people by a woman in the supposed safe haven of their own domestic space (a wealthy domestic space at that) clearly establishes the uniqueness of this crime. It also suggests a bias against Broderick. She is, after all, neither destitute nor powerless. In the divorce settlement, Broderick laid claim to the large family home, cars (plural) and tens of thousands of dollars in monthly maintenance and yet she commits a most heinous crime.

The very first few minutes of this movie unleashes the fear that this newly violent woman is an example of where feminism is taking us.

2. Woman Is Identified As Unusual – Not Like Ordinary Women:

By the time the 1980's rolled around, prime-time network television was "ardently courting an audience of working women" (D'Acci, 1992:177). The prime-time soaps (like *Dallas*) and a series of made-for-TV movie melodramas were the first forms successful at capturing this new target audience by showing women in diverse roles – very often in roles of power. Despite this shift toward catering to all women, the networks still set out to defend the family ideal. This is in part because those in control of the media are, more often than not, "rich, white men" who have every interest in presenting the capitalist, patriarchal scheme of things as the most attractive system available (Van Zoonen, 1994:29). Pearson says of commercial films of the 1990s that "while women who can think, choose, and act are represented in film or on television more often than in previous decades, most characters still have in common an unexamined devotion to the heterosexual imperative" (Pearson, 1993:270).

In *Her Final Fury* Broderick represents the tension between these two ideas. She is both ardent protector of the family unit and someone for whom the "heterosexual" imperative has failed. She is portrayed as someone who thinks, chooses and acts precisely *because* the family ideal has turned out to be not so idyllic.

After the credits stopped rolling, we next see Broderick in a phone booth - again in the unsafe, unmotherly, exterior world - confessing to a friend: "I did it. I finally shot

the son-of-a bitch"!. Speaking about soap operas, Tania Modleski says "the spectator, it might be thought, continually tunes in to watch the villainess as she tries to gain control over her feminine passivity, thereby acting out the spectator's fantasy of power" (Modleski, 1997:42). When Betty says "I did it" she is, for the first time, taking responsibility for the crime she has committed. There is power in this act. This power is undercut, however, by a series of events that follow.

In a conversation with her obviously distraught daughter after the murders have been committed, Broderick says "I hope this didn't ruin your day too much". This glaring understatement is suggestive of Broderick's mental state, something that is highlighted throughout the two-hour movie. Later, we see Betty's brother-in-law, Larry, Dan Broderick's brother, on the phone with his niece and he says to her: " I know she's your mom but be careful". In other words, she is your mother and a killer - two words that, to the audience, are supposed to be diametrically opposed but in this case, are very much a part of one another. Allison Morris and Ania Wilcynski argue that "motherhood is presented to the cinema audience as the essence of womanhood. It is women's ultimate fulfillment and true destiny" (Birch, 1994:198). I argue that the same can be said of television and when women choose not to embrace that role they are constructed as deviant.

Feuer argues that non-elite classes have always received their "history" in the form of narrative (Feuer, 1995:21). The made-for-TV movies' tendency to treat real life events (pulled from news headlines) as narrative structures would suggest that this form would indeed appeal to the middle and working class. Michael Shudson argues that "there has always been a strong link between the educated middle class and information

and the middle and working classes and the story ideal" (Schudson, 1978:89). It is this idea of the story ideal that made-for-TV movies embody – making facts pleasurable through narrative and as Feuer points out, "that narrative is made more enlightening through a moralizing discourse (Feuer, 1995:21). Part of this moralizing discourse is to present Broderick as deviant in the eyes of the female spectator – many of whom have probably shared her experience as both a wife and mother. Still more have likely suffered the loss of a husband to divorce. In fact, Broderick received support from women who thought that her act of revenge was a regrettable but understandable expression of the pain she endured as a wife discarded like garbage by the ambitious husband who had depended on her love and support during the lean years.

It is for this reason that the made-for-TV movie needs to patrol the borders of femininity so that this recognition of shared experience between Meredith Baxter-Birney as Broderick and the audience is not without judgement. In other words, the made-for-TV movie has pathologized Broderick to the point where the audience can clearly see the difference between "us" (the audience) and "them" (women who do not conform to traditional roles). In fact, at Broderick's bail hearing, we hear the judge (a woman) say, "the public has the right to be protected from her". Not only is Broderick seen as crazy, now she presents a danger to the community *out there*. This movie serves the purpose of telling its female audience how *not* to behave and in so doing, quietly reassures those who are watching that by being shocked by the crime, their values and belief systems are in order.

Next we see Broderick, from her jail cell, talking to a female representative from a public relations firm, Betty tells the woman: "I want your firm to be the weapon I never

had". It is at this time, the first time, that we hear about the alleged years of emotional abuse that Broderick suffered at the hands of Dan Broderick. She speaks to the woman about her family being destroyed by Dan's affair with Linda while she tried, always, to be the best wife and mother she could possibly be to Dan and their kids. We then see flashes of newspaper and magazine articles with headlines such as "Broderick Victim of Emotional Terrorism". Is this, as Feuer asks, "a bold feminist gesture of taking the law into one's own hands when the nuclear family has failed as an institution?" (Feuer, 1994:141). Pearson says that although self-justification is universally human, the vocabulary of motive is different for male and female offenders. Because we won't concede aggression and anger in women, the language we use to describe what they do is much more limited.

> There exists perhaps three of four rationales for the whole, extraordinary diversity of violent acts women commit, and they all play into preexisting prejudices about female nature. The operative assumption is that the violent woman couldn't have wanted, deliberately, to cause harm. Therefore, if she says she was abused/coerced/insane, she probably was" (Pearson,1997:42).

While the law wants to label Betty a threat to society, the media want to label her a victim. Gaye Tuchman said that "not only does television tell us that women don't matter very much except as housewives and mothers, but also symbolically denigrates them by portraying them as incompetent, inferior and always subservient to men". (Tuchman,1978:5) When Betty is finally able to hire a lawyer with whom she is compatible, we see this man on the front steps of the courthouse (therefore it is visually represented that the law is on his side) confronting the media by saying: "This woman has suffered abuse of the most violent kind...". Before we fade to commercial, there is a quiet comfort in the knowledge that this man will help and that she is indeed a woman scorned.

3. Link Criminality With Sexuality: Visually Code These Women As Deviant:

"There is a long tradition in our culture of depicting aggressive or criminal women as sexually perverse" (Pearson, 1997:131). Although Broderick is never explicitly sexualized in this movie, she is, in many ways, coded as someone who has "fallen". We see her metamorphosis from a wife and mother to a prisoner, someone for whom the threat of rape is now imminent. In one of the first scenes of this movie, after the crimes have been committed and before Broderick turns herself in, she is sitting in her living room with her daughters. It is at this time that we see Broderick strip herself personally of any objects that signify femininity and her association to marriage (tied as it is to accumulation and display of artifacts). She takes off her watch, she takes off her earrings and most importantly, she takes off her wedding ring. Broderick can no longer be associated with the frivolity of heterosexual femininity, especially not that which binds her to a man and the institution of marriage. Later we see Broderick replacing the watch she had earlier taken off with an identification bracelet at the prison. Broderick has visually left one world for another. She has left the female safe haven of the home environment to the male world of violence and bars. This fits nicely in Rapping's argument:

> Most TV movies lock women into a very traditional mold. No matter what happens in the movies, their ultimate message is still that women are predominantly, we may say essentially – represented as wives and mothers. Sexually unconventional women are invariably fated to either reform or to come to a bad end
> (Rapping, 1992:97).

In keeping with this notion of Broderick stripping herself of femininity and entering a more criminalized, therefore masculinized, world, we are introduced to the kind of women we expect to see inhabit this nether world through Betty's "fellow" prison inmates. In a traditional Hollywood version of a prison scene we are introduced to Betty's cellmates as examples of the anti-woman - a group of women with whom she is now associated. "With explicit pornographic undertones, these films very expediently dichotomize women as good or evil, compliant or dangerous, Madonna or whore" (Faith, 1993:258). Faith shows that their representation is usually the same: "a pretty and mostly innocent (usually blonde) young woman is thrown into a cage or den of raving, masculinized, lesbian, predatory criminal maniacs" (Faith, 1993:258).

After we learn that the prosecuting attorney has refused to plea bargain with the defense and will go to the second trial asking for two counts of murder in the first degree, we see Betty sitting on a bench along with three other women. Betty and the woman sitting next to her get into a pushing fight leaving Betty on the ground. From her hair to her clothes to her assault on Broderick, this woman is represented as masculine. As a final assault on Broderick, she makes a gesture threatening rape. According to Faith "the effect of characterizing female prisoners as sex-crazed monsters is to invite hostility to both prisoners and lesbians at large." (Faith,1997:261). These criminal woman are represented in such a way so as to promote the image of what is a good, desirable woman. In other words, "the monsters serve as the sick/bad backdrop for the blonde's potential normalcy" (Faith, 1994: 159). In this case, the blonde is Broderick. Most importantly, this scene serves as a way to attract sympathy to Broderick (the heterosexual) versus the other inmates (the lesbian "predators").

One of the interesting aspects of the made-for-TV movie and its representation of women to women is the fact that the spectator can identify with only one character. In soap operas, however, there is no such identification. As Modleski puts it:

> the spectator is never permitted to identify with a character completing an entire action. Instead of giving us one powerful ideal ego who can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator can, soaps present us with numerous limited egos, each in conflict with one another and continually thwarted in its attempts to control events (Modleski, 1997:37).

And sometimes, the spectator can be frustrated by this sense of powerlessness (Modleski, 1997:38). Interestingly, the made-for-TV movie is one of the only genres designed for women that put the female spectator in a position of power. Laura Mulvey has argued that this is usually the case in classic male narrative. "This identification of the spectator with a main protagonist results in the spectator becoming the representative of power" (Mulvey, 1977:420). In the case of Broderick, the audience is invited to go on the journey with her and to see the events as they unfold through her eyes. As Rapping states made-for-TV movies (no matter what their other flaws) "put the viewer solidly in the heroine's shoes and show her experiences as she lives and understands them. All other characters are secondary" (Rapping, 1992:83). What is most interesting at this point of the movie is that the audience is on the side of Broderick "the good blonde" against the "monsters" who are in prison with her. It is possible to begin viewing Broderick as a victim here.

4. Link Criminality With Insanity:

To examine Broderick within the context of hapless victim, it becomes almost par for the course to look for other reasons for her violence. Writing about the judicial system Birch states:

> it reflects the attitudes of society as a whole, often punishing women who step beyond the bounds of acceptable female behavior, while demonstrating a chivalric, paternal attitude to those whose acts of violence can apparently be explained by reference to their hormones (biology) or emotions (irrationality)
> (Birch, 1993:4).

She continues her argument with the idea that when a woman's violence appears as a response to anger or her refusal to be a victim, the full weight of the law is brought to bear. But in cases where diminished responsibility (anything from pre-menstrual-syndrome to the experience of systematic abuse) can be shown to account for her actions, the issue of a woman's moral agency, her responsibility, disappears. (Birch, 1993:5). This made-for-TV movie attempts to examine the murders Broderick has committed with the same limitations that Birch describes. The producers cannot show an audience of women that Broderick simply got fed up, got angry and killed. In order for this movie to be "pro-family, pro heterosexual romance", viewers need explanations for the violence outside of her anger, rage and rationale.

Broderick is brazen, tough, and characterized as someone who suffers from "narcissistic personality disorder". She fights with the guards, she demands her free time in the sun, she orders guards to take her to pre-scheduled hair appointments and she refuses to wear her wristband. When asked by the guard why she is not wearing her identification bracelet, she replies: "Every deputy in this hell hole knows who I am. I get

more than 300 letters a week. I don't need a wristband, I need a secretary." In the second trial, the psychologist describes her condition as someone who goes off on a narcissistic rage in response to criticism and as someone who uses interpersonal exploitation and manipulation to get what she wants. Ann Jones argues that this need to label women deviant (in order to account for their actions) goes back to the early 1800s. "The emotions, she says "particularly love, govern women and even in so called normal woman might reach insane proportions" (Jones, 1980:160). She goes on to say that women are said to have a finer moral fabric than men but only to a point because women cannot lead a moral "life" - with decisions and choices – because they are deficient in reason. In other words, it seems perfectly acceptable to say that a woman committed a crime because she loved too much, "loved almost to insanity" (Jones, 1980:160).

In Broderick's case she loved herself as much as she loved Dan Broderick. This, it would seem, is a double-edged sword. At the trial, the court appointed psychologist concludes that Betty is too narcissistic even to kill herself.[20] Pearson argues that a woman "will claim that she meant to kill herself but somehow wound up taking someone else's life instead, a claim that arises from a woman's sense that it is more socially acceptable to self-destruct that to be outwardly destructive" (Pearson, 1997:44). In the next scene, Betty is demanding that the guard take her to the beauty parlor to have her hair dyed, supporting the previous claim of narcissism. The guard refuses and Betty calls her a nazi.

What this made-for-TV movie is displaying is what can be called the pathologization of deviancy – representing women who do not conform to tradition as

[20] Broderick is on record saying that she went to the home of Dan and Linda in order to kill herself. She wanted to do it in front of Dan "just splash my brains all over his goddamned house"

mad. Madness implies a lack of responsibility and lack of responsibility implies a feeble mind and a feeble mind is in keeping with the notion of woman as passive. Birch argues that we need to label violent women as mad in order to come to terms with the violence. In other words, to make sense of the fact that a women, a person who gives life, can actually be the one to take it away.

> Faced with terrible crimes like these, and without a language to explain them, to label their perpetrator mad allows us to push the horrors, our fear of the abject, away, settling the questions which otherwise continue to nag at the public consciousness
> (Birch, 1993:55)

These questions that nag at the public consciousness relate to ideas of womanhood tied as they are to passivity, nurturance and good. This "bad girl" or "mentally deficient" cultural stereotyping is the product of class-biased, racist and heterosexual myths. According to Faith:

> Historically and to the present, her appearance, actions and attitudes have been offensive to the dominant discourses which define, regulate and set penalties for deviance. She is socially constructed as undeserving of the "protections" of the woman who is confined within the parameters of gender conformity"
> (Faith, 1997:1).

5. Reinforces The Tradition Of The Family – Opposes Masculinized Woman To More Traditional Feminine Counterpart:

The institution of the family is one institution the made-for-TV movie has determined to serve and to protect. It is for this reason that we are continually reminded of what is appropriate femaleness within the family unit by contrasting the "perfect" mother to the otherwise imperfect one. As soon as Broderick leaves the quiet space of her

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(Lehman, 1991:123).

bedroom and the body of her sleeping son, in the opening sequence of the movie, she becomes part of another, darker world than that of the nuclear family. As Schulze says of many TV movies "the heterosexual romance and the family structures are normative, smooth functioning institutions disrupted by the emergence of an oppositional element" (Schulze, 1986:42). In this case, the oppositional force is Broderick. The normative family structure is represented by the prosecuting attorney Kerry wells. Before we meet Wells, the last image we have of Broderick is of her sad, alone and behind bars. This image is juxtaposed with Wells, packing her car for a weekend outing with her husband and children in tow, against the backdrop of their family station wagon, in front of their suburban home. Throughout the movie, scenes of Wells as the good mother are compared and contrasted with Broderick as the failed.

What is interesting about this movie, however, is that the film starts with the tragedy. We see the traumatic event (the murders) long before we meet the average family that we are all to aspire to. As a result, Feuer says "the scenes of normative family life are narrated from the perspective of its' abysmal failure" (Feuer, 1995:37). In other words, the scenes of the ideal family unit are undermined by the story of a woman for whom this unit did not work.

The juxtaposition of Wells and Brodericks's respective lives is woven seamlessly throughout the movie. In one rather domestic scene, one of Wells' sons has lost his shoes and asks his mother, from inside the house, where he might find them. She yells: "They're in the top drawer". This occurrence foreshadows a similar scene later on in the movie in which Wells is asked by Dan Broderick's brother, Larry, to visit the crime scene in order to pack some clothes for Betty's boys.

What is important at this point is the fact that Wells opens the top drawer of a boy's room to find a pair of shoes - just like she had told her own son. The undercurrent throughout this scene, however, is the fact that Betty herself has withdrawn the right to have these moments with her own son because she happened to kill his father and stepmother. Rapping argues that whatever the implicit critique of family norms informing made-for-TV movies, "this ultimate idealization and resurrection of a good family, upon which each narrative turns, undercuts and negates the critique" (Rapping, 1992:66). Despite the fact that Broderick represents the contradictory side to this "good family", a platonic ideal of family harmony remains a spiritual presence informing this text.

After Wells has gone to the crime scene to pick up the boy's clothes, she meets them at a park. There is a touching scene in which the boy's ruffle through the packed bag only to smile with pleasure that Wells knew exactly what to bring them. This is a scene in which a mother's natural instinct for children is clearly displayed - an instinct that Broderick does not share. In the park, one of the boys asks: "will my mom be out in time for my soccer game?". Next we see Broderick saying to her lawyer: "Those kids mean everything to me". This last statement is undermined by the boy's previous statement. If in fact those kids did mean everything to Betty, she would not have killed her children's father.

"A mother's natural instinct" is brought to the surface in more than just Wells' ability to know which clothes to pack. Later in the movie, she decides not to put the children on the stand although the trial would be a much easier case to win if the children's testimony could be heard. When Wells tells her boss of her intentions he

replies: "It's your call and your instincts". This is a very blatant comment in the way of affirming a woman's innate ability to look out for what is best for the children - a marked contrast to Broderick's apparent indifference to her role as mother. On her way to trial, we see a defiant Betty, dressed to the nines, on a bus being transported along with the other female prisoners. She looks out the window of the bus at a group of mothers playing happily with their children. Betty looks upon the scene only momentarily then looks away and puts her sunglasses on - so she is doubly blind to this scene. Betty is obviously thinking of her own children at this point but the act of turning away and of putting on her sunglasses is a visual code to show that Betty has turned her back on her kids in the ultimate betrayal of taking away both their father and their mother. During the trial it is brought up that "it is more important to her to hurt Dan and Linda than to prevent the possibility of harm to her own children".

Reinforcing the tradition of the family, this movie also suggests that women without men are somehow incomplete. Or, more importantly, that women outside of the nuclear family structure are a failure (hence the parallel to Kerry Wells). For example, Betty is apparently driven to her act of violence because of the fact that her husband has traded her in "for a new model" (oblivious to the fact that she too is engaged in a new relationship). In the most blatant example, Betty herself utters the words: "A woman alone is like a woman without a prayer". These images of Broderick alone are contrasted with the scenes in which Wells is featured alongside her doting and supportive husband. He is there by the station wagon when we first meet Kerry Wells and he is there to help her decide whether or not to take the second trial (and helping her do the dry cleaning too!).

6. Recognize That There is Something Wrong With This Tradition:

It is this protection of the institution of the family which renders any analysis of the made-for-TV movie most challenging. While the movies set out to serve and protect this institution and to maintain its hegemonic order, the movies also suggest that there is something wrong with that order. Rapping says that "the TV movie's need for hooks, for sensation, for emotional fireworks serve many not-so-noble ends, to be sure. But sometimes they serve progressive, albeit limited and contradictory ends as well" (Rapping, 1992:68). She also argues that these dramas present surprisingly rich analyses of what is wrong with traditional family ideology and dynamics, from a feminist perspective, in ways that are certainly politically meaningful and provocative (Rapping, 1992:77).

It is important to remember that the primary audience of the made-for-TV movie is women and that the principle mandate of the made-for-TV movie is to relate in some way to all women. The connection is the fact that this movie in particular relates on some level to all women who have experienced the loss of a husband or lover, or who have seen a friend or relative experience that loss, to a younger girlfriend. This experience reminds us that the institution of the family - ideal in theory - is not ideal in practice.

In an important scene with her psychiatrist, Broderick talks to him about the time in 1979 that she and Dan paid a visit to a marriage councilor:

Betty: "Dan said that once he became a very successful person he would concentrate on being a better father and husband".

Psychiatrist: "Did it ever happen"

Betty: "oh ya. Only not with me, with her".

This moment plays to the emotions of women who have experienced this very grave disappointment - women who quit their careers to stay at home and raise their family while their husbands climbed the corporate ladder. As soon as Dan became a successful medical law practitioner he left Betty for his paralegal. Betty herself gave up her career so that she could work and put Dan through both medical school and later law school. It is this rationale that forces Betty to tell her psychiatrist: "It's almost like he forced me to do what I did".

Psychiatrist: "Do you see the implications"

Betty: "Of what?"

Psychiatrist: "Your actions"

Betty: " The kids and I suffered a lot for a very, very long time. We didn't want it. We didn't ask for it and I really don't think we deserved it, but we suffered just the same".

In court, Betty's attorney fights her case on the basis that what Betty believed in was the concept of family and of teamwork. In sixteen years of marriage, Betty had nine difficult pregnancies and four births - she worked while he went to school and then she quit her job to take care of their children. At the trial, Betty's attorney displays a large, colour photograph of Betty dressed fashionably in expensive clothing, while she was still married to Dan. While this picture is on the stand at the front of the courtroom, the attorney states emphatically that "Dan took their dreams, their money, their children, their life and turned Betty from this (shows the picture on the stand) into this" and then points to a picture of Betty's mug shot. In other words, Dan is held responsible once again for

Betty's actions. According to the attorney, it was not Betty who is responsible for destroying the family, it was Dan - he is guilty of the first, and arguably, more devastating crime.

A friend tells Betty in jail that everyone is talking, that she has "altered the female consciousness". They laugh about the fact that it's "Be nice to your ex-wife week". It is at this time that Betty tells her friend that she hasn't had a good night sleep in five years.

In one of many meetings between Betty and the media, she tells reporter Nathalie Parker: "Some people think I'm a feminist. I'm no feminist. I had my house, my sandbox and my swing set. I was the ultimate suburban housewife. I loved it. I had exactly what I wanted until the nightmare began". That nightmare, of course, is Dan's increasingly detached behavior toward his wife. That nightmare is the fact that he was away at work while she was home, alone, grieving her miscarriages. That nightmare was the fact that Betty was repeatedly told by her husband (as she neared middle age - 35) that she was old, fat, boring, ugly and stupid.

That nightmare reached the consciousness of millions of female viewers who heard Betty's plight on *Court TV*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *20/20* and countless magazines and newspaper articles. The media representation of the events turned Broderick into a feminist folk heroine for millions of women – reminding them that there are injustices imbedded within the institution of marriage.

The media, then, play a predominant role in this movie - sending the message that to drop your wife for a younger model is not acceptable. In many ways, this fits into the category of supporting and defending the institution of marriage. The difference in this case however, is that Broderick takes action against this injustice. She fights the

wrongs she feels she suffered at the hands of her husband and mistress. In jail, Broderick is bombarded with letters of support from women all over the United States. After the first trial (deemed a mistrial) a male juror is interviewed by the press saying: "I don't know what took her so long". After reading all of the articles in the print media about Broderick being a victim of the battered women's syndrome, Larry says to his attorney, "victim of this ... victim of that...she's become a goddamn feminist folk heroine". To which the attorney replies: "I can't control the media".

In a culture which defines femininity in terms of passivity, gentleness and powerlessness, it is interesting to examine why Broderick, who displays none of these characteristics became such a folk heroine. When you look closely it is easy to easy how someone like Broderick could gain public sympathy. Beyond her antics, Broderick is feminine too. She was once a superwoman (according to ideological definitions of woman), someone who prided herself on being the perfect mother and wife, who was self-sacrificing for the greater good of the family. She worked as many as five jobs at a time while her husband was in medical school, in law school, and then building his career as a medical malpractice attorney. She did all this while raising their four kids as an enthusiastic, involved mom. Her physical beauty, bleach blonde good looks and trim figure, also ensures her sexual attractiveness to men. She was proud of the lifestyle that success and wealth afforded herself and her family. "Her good taste in clothes, furnishings etc. also ensures that her sexual attractiveness takes a form associated with middle-class housewives, which is perhaps less threatening to women that that of the sex symbol (Marshment, 1989:35). Because she plays the role of the proverbial mother and wife, she is seen as a victim of the institution of which she so proudly defends.

7. Normality Is Restored (However Inaccurately):

In the wake of all of the publicity, Brodericks's daughter says: "It's everywhere. Primetime. Magazines. It just keeps growing!". She is referring to the publicity her mother is receiving throughout the trial. The final scene of the movie is the second trial in which Betty is convicted of murder in the second degree on both counts and sentenced to two consecutive prison terms - 15 years each. In this final court battle, we see the last confrontation between two women whose lives are seriously affected by the outcome of the trial. For Broderick, a guilty verdict means that she will go to jail and for Wells, a not-guilty verdict means that she has unsuccessfully defended the institution of marriage and has failed to protect the Broderick children (meaning that those womanly instincts that she so relied on have failed her).

In this final court battle, the crime scene is revisited in which the case is characterized as being about hate, revenge and murder. The jury, at one time sympathetic to "the woman alone fighting against all odds", are told of all of the times that Broderick tormented and harassed Dan and Linda - of the ways in which her hatred for them knew no bounds. Finally we are told that Betty herself said "I'll either make his life a living hell or I'm going to kill him". The "woman alone without a prayer" finally lost hers. This is the final battle between the good woman and the bad - the woman who conforms to and abides by societal rules and the woman who breaks them at every turn. Finally, it is the good woman who wins and Broderick is sentenced to life in prison. Just before the closing credits, Linda's sister looks to the camera and gives the court (and by extension the audience) an impact statement, outlining the impact that Linda's murder has had on her and her family.

> We are all very close. My father does not even have the emotional fortitude to be here, he simply could not bear to be in the same room as the murderer of his youngest child. Our families have been compelled to talk to the media because the defense strategy has been to paint Dan and Linda as villains. We are put in the position of defending them. They are the ones that were murdered and they have been put on trial. I'm baffled by it. I wanted to grow old with my sister. I wanted to be an aunt to her children. I wanted to spend more time with her. But she's dead. No sentence could ever be proportionate with what was taken away from Linda and what we have lost.

The story is a devastating one and we are left with this final impression of the negative effect of Broderick's actions. The final image is a close up on Broderick starring blankly into the camera, confused by the judge's verdict. Upon hearing the verdict Broderick turns to her lawyer and says, "what are they doing"? No remorse, no characteristically "feminine" tears, just complete and utter bewilderment - The final image of the movie.

It is clear that the ideological and value structure of the made-for-TV movie is indeed normative. In other words, the genre supports the institutions heralded as normal (meaning "right-winged") by the male dominant class who run the television industry. Laurie Schultz in her essay "Getting physical: Text/context/reading and the Made-for-TV movie" argues that the "general ideological function of the made-for-TV movie is to take up a figure or event that poses a problem to normative values and pull it back toward the normative centre (Schulze, 38). In *Her Final Fury* the playing out of this battle is evident from beginning to end. The normative values that are being represented are that of the family and of the heterosexual romance and of the institution of marriage and Betty Broderick poses a threat to all three. The women who watch this movie are challenged to confront their ideas about what it means to be a woman in today's society fraught with all of the ambiguity that this role in the 1990's entails.

CHAPTER THREE

AILEEN WUORNOS: THE "RARE" CASE OF A FEMALE SERIAL KILLER

Aileen Wuornos, a highway prostitute since the age of 14, stands in stark contrast to Betty Broderick. Wuornos is charged with being the first female serial killer in U.S. history (Faith, 1993: 262). As a serial murderer, she is thought to have acted more like a man than a woman because she killed on her own, she did not know her victims, she may have had sex with some of them and she tortured at least one. She shot them, then she robbed them" (MacNamara, 1991: 91). Hart says that "whereas male serial killers are "naturally unnatural", as a woman Wuornos has committed *unnatural unnatural acts*. The "unnaturalness" of the crimes has, of course, everything to do with the fact that she is a woman" (Hart, 1994: 142). As argued in the previous chapter, the representation of Broderick was such that she committed the crime within the context of loving too much. As a mother and as a wife, she killed to protect the very institution that the made-for-TV movies set out to preserve, the heterosexual family unit. Misguided, yes, but somehow fitting given television's sometimes limited portrayal of femininity. Wuornos, however, defies heterosexual, middle-class family values by virtue of being poor, a drifter, a lesbian and a prostitute. The context of the crime for both Wuornos and Broderick is very different yet both women are serving life sentences in prison for murder.[21] Using the same seven questions used to analyze *Her Final Fury*, I will explore the way in which the made-for-TV movie delivers, to its audience, information that is both counter productive and progressive about women who kill.

[21] Wuornos is on death row in Florida. Her lawyers are still in the process of appealing this

1. The Film Starts With A Tragedy:

Most made-for-TV movies in the 1980s begin in such a way as to establish the family as the ideal,[22] however "this normal atmosphere is not allowed to persist for more than the first segment of the trauma drama" (Feuer, 1995:26). In the Broderick story, the family moment is rather fleeting when we see Broderick leave the bed where her sleeping son lies. This family bliss is quickly disrupted when Broderick herself turns a gun on her ex-husband and his new wife. There is no such representation of family at the beginning of *Overkill* precisely because there is no family, at least as far as Wuornos is concerned.[23] The tragedy in this movie is buried until about a quarter of the way into the narrative – when the first murder occurs. While this is the most obvious example of grave adversity, it can be argued that the initial tragedy (preceding the murders) is the fact that the women represented at the start of the movie are not your "typical ladies".

Overkill begins with a sequence of shots that see Aileen Wuornos (Lee) and Tyria Moore (Ty) driving recklessly while drinking beer, smoking cigarettes and listening to that good old rock 'n roll. Interestingly, this movie was produced one year after the Hollywood version of the deadly doll film, *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991). Some critics referred to the characters in this movie as men in drag, because (like many people)

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conviction

[22] The film *Adam*, for example, begins with the family gathered around the sunlit suburban kitchen as their son Adam Walsh sings an aria. The joyousness of farm life is evident in the opening sequence of *Friendly Fire* and *MADD* shows two typical girls walking home from school before the moment of impact.

[23] This lack of a family structure is a subtext in this movie, a fact that is put forth by the networks to suggest that Wuornos' lack of positive role models is in some way responsible for the murders.

they consider violence as a priori male. *Time's* Margaret Carlson viewed Thelma and Louise in much the same way: "they behave like – well, men... they act out a male fantasy of life on the road, avoiding intimacy with loud music, Wild Turkey, fast driving – and a gun in the pants" (Carlson, 1991:57). In much the same way, Wuornos and Moore are represented as masculine and as Rapping suggests, "sexually unconventional women are invariably fated either to reform or to come to a bad end" (Rapping, 1992: 97). In this case, at this moment, they get into an accident.

Those people who have heard about the story, whether on television, radio or in print, know that this movie "dramatizes the sad, violent life of the first female serial killer in the gory history of US crime" and that it stars Jean Smart, "known to millions as *Designing Women*'s elegant but naïve Charlene." (Davis,1992:10). Elegant and naïve is everything that Wuornos is not.

The revelation in this first sequence is that the inherent tragedy here is that of a woman who behaves unlike other women. From the beginning, she is represented as wild, unfit; in other words, white trash. It is the story of a woman who, by virtue of being simply who she is, defies the norm. As Schulze argues, when a woman transgresses the accepted limits of a normative definition of female physicality, "it is difficult to position her within any accepted cultural map of the feminine" (Schulze, 1986:38). And positioning Wuornos (just like Broderick) within the accepted cultural map of the feminine is exactly, I would argue, what made-for-TV movies aim to do.

The "real" tragedy comes just before the first commercial break, when the body of Wuornos' first "victim" is seen lying in the woods, naked and full of bullet holes. Like Broderick, Wuornos is a gun wielding homicidal maniac even before we get to the first

commercial.

2.Woman Is Identified As Unusual – Not Like Ordinary Women:

Christine Holmlund argues that in the majority of critical reviews, and in a portion of popular responses to real-life women who kill, " a murmured fear of lesbianism lurks beneath the general discomfort with violent women, and hides behind their portrayal as man-hating feminists or as men, tout court" (Holmlund, 1994:148). As Lindsay Van Gelder states: "in many minds the leap from the butch to the butcher knife is but a tiny one" (Van Gelder, 1992: 82). With few exceptions, the fact that Wuornos' is a lesbian is never really made explicit in this made-for-TV movie. Perhaps this is because the Producer, Chuck McLain, has said that he looked into the case and was intrigued "not so much by the bisexual habits of the killer but her sad background" (Davis, 1992:10).

In *The Globe and Mail*, a reporter describes the case: "a lesbian prostitute who says she's a "good girl" at heart goes on trial next week for the killing of the first of seven middle aged men" (Reynolds, 1992:A12). So even though the producers of the made-for-TV movie chose not to be explicit about her sexuality, other media outlets are quite specific about her orientation identifying her immediately as "other". In tabloid television the Wuornos trial was a media spectacle and, according to Faith,

> Her lesbianism was played out as perverted, man hating rage, a determining feature of the character. Her person and her crimes stirred up fear and revulsion, and her self-proclaimed lesbianism allowed for simplistic and homophobic explanations for why she killed these strangers.
> (Faith, 1993: 262).

The homophobia is perhaps most evident in the absence of representation of Wuornos' sexuality in the made-for-TV movie preferring, instead, to offer very subtle suggestions to the nature of her relationship with Moore.[24]

While white lesbianism is represented in this made-for-TV-movie in the sense that Wuornos' story is, at the very least, being told, it is done, I would argue, with certain limitations. Lynda Hart says that the historical entry of the lesbian into discourse was her identification as the 'invert' of sexology, and so "it was a historical construct that not only pathologized and criminalized her but that also displaced the threat of women's sexual deviance onto women of colour and working class women." (Hart, 1994:4). While Broderick is categorized as "other" because of her actions, Wuornos is represented as "other" in terms of class and sexuality - poor, a prostitute and a lesbian. Speaking specifically about the Wuornos case, Brownworth says that she is "not a nice lesbian but a lesbian prostitute. Those two things are always paired when people talk about her so she's presented as being bad. Completely bad" (Brownworth, 1992:10). I would go one step further and suggest that not only is she not a nice lesbian but she is also poor "white trash" creating a greater "us" and "them" dichotomy between the middle class, (presumably heterosexual) most likely female audience and the subject of the movie, Wuornos. Because Wuornos confronts *so many boundaries* of what is considered "normal", it is safe to tell her story and still uphold Christian American values without the fear of the audience appropriating the "behavior".

[24] Wuornos and Moore do not even share the same bedroom in this movie and their relationship is always referred to as good friends. Yet, there are sexual undertones in some of their conversations for example Moore looks on adoringly at Wuornos at one point and says Lee, you look good!

In her analysis on why the media focus on Wuornos' life circumstances rather than simply her crimes, Skrapec asks: "is it that we need to see her as a prostitute and not a woman – the Madonna or whore dichotomy – in order to give meaning to what otherwise might appear as a series of murders committed by a man?" (Skrapec,1994: 267). She goes on to answer her question by saying that since we do not expect society's care-takers (women) to engage in predatory acts of violence, when they do our collective sense of order and security in the world is threatened. Since Wuornos is never represented as a caregiver (whereas Broderick clearly identifies with being a mother and wife) I would argue that we need to see her as a whore, as a sexual deviant in order to contain her. Lynda Hart furthers this argument by stating that "the historical conflation of the prostitute and the lesbian, both of whom have been signified in patriarchy under the sign of transgressive sexuality, returns to haunt a masculine commerce in the figure of Aileen Wuornos. (Hart,1994: 153).

The fact that Wuornos is poor, a lesbian and a prostitute immediately differentiates her from the women watching television, she is seen as "other" than the assumed "normal" prime-time TV audience. Yet the networks try to contextualize her violence. Interestingly, Overkill was billed as a "relationship drama". The tag line: "A friendship torn apart by murder." Apparently, her victims are secondary to her relationship to her best friend and lover, Tyria Moore. When the TV Wuornos goes out to work the streets, her friend worries about her safety:

Ty: How long will you be away?

Lee: I don't know. A couple of days I guess.

Ty: The hotel is always looking for more maids.

Lee: Ty, I can make a lot more money than that besides we're having a hard enough time getting by as it is.

Ty: I just worry about you. Hooking is dangerous. You keep pretending that it's not. I don't want anyone to hurt you.

Lee: Don't worry about me. I can watch out for myself. You wouldn't believe some of these guys. I can handle them.

Ty: What do you mean Lee?

Lee: Nothing. Some of them just get radical is all. I just got to ride it out.

Pearson suggests that

> this movie is set to the idealized tempo of female friendship. It is the tail of two waifs against the world, good-hearted in an inexplicably naïve way – considering their life experience – who try to protect each other and fail. Tyria is nothing if not tenderly concerned.
> (Pearson, 1997: 155).

Put in the context of female friendship, this made-for-TV movie speaks to the paying audience (white, heterosexual middle class women) in their terms and on their level. It is the networks' attempt to contextualize the violence by someone they just do not understand. The relationship between Wuornos and Moore is developed throughout the movie until finally Moore betrays Wuornos by turning state's evidence and forcing her to confess to the murders[25]. I would posit that Moore is portrayed as an innocent by-stander

[25] Any media text dealing with this case (including Nick Broomfield's documentary *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of A Serial Killer* (1994, UK) clearly dispute the fact that Moore was unaware of the murders. In fact, Moore was not implicated in the murders because she was able to get Wuornos to confess to acting alone and in the meantime, Moore was working on some tell-all movie deals with the arresting police officers!

to the murders because the networks wanted to identify only one, not two, "women behaving badly", preferring instead, to represent Moore as the "caring" friend. In so doing it tames the sexual deviancy of Wuornos and Moore for the benefit of this audience.

In this made-for-TV movie, the director chooses to open with a variety of scenes, each with its own individual portrait of the characters that are to inhabit the movie for the next two hours. As already mentioned, we are first introduced to Wuornos and Moore. We then meet the police officers (all men) who will spend the rest of the movie trying to unravel the mystery of America's first female serial killer. It may not seem fitting to discuss the police officers in a section, which purports to examine the representation of Aileen Wuornos as "other", however, within the ideological structure of the film, it makes perfect sense.

The pattern that emerges in this movie of the week is to compare Wuornos (the anti-feminine woman) with the police officers that have been ascribed a more feminine sensibility than the women. As Pearson says, "the cops who pursue the TV Wuornos are sympathetic and patient like Harvey Keitel's character in the movie *Thelma and Louise*" (Pearson, 1997:58). A bustling police station is the next stage in the sequence of scenes that set up the story. Two police officers stand by and watch Bruce Munster (played by the amiable Brian James) interview a "kiddy rapist". He is established as a sensitive cop with a history of dealing with cases relating to child sexual assaults. We watch as these two police officers speak in characteristically "female" terms:

1st Officer: "Did you settle in okay?"

2nd Officer: "Yah sure, everything is great. Our biggest problem is picking the right wallpaper".

1st Officer: "Well it's good to have you back here. We sure do need you more than we used to"[26]

2nd Officer: "Thanks. It's good to be home".

Here, the men are thankful to be in what is traditionally considered a "domain" belonging to women – home. Later, we learn, that home to Wuornos is the back seat of a car: "I slept in cars all the time when I was a kid. There's no place like home". Gender lines are blurred then in this movie with the male cops representing the sanctity and stability of the patriarchal family unit and its power structure. Wuornos, like Broderick, is the destructive force threatening to upset that unit by killing white, middle-class men.

Interestingly, before one of the commercial breaks, there is a promotion for the *CBS Evening News* relating how Jean Smart will be a guest to speak about how playing a serial killer intimidated her. In an interview with *TV Guide* Smart states: "here is a woman who had done something women don't do – commit violent crimes against total strangers. Women tend to turn their rage inward: they become self-destructive" (Davis, 1992: 12). A critic for TV guide noted that Smart plays the mentally and physically battered psychopathic killer with as much sympathy as she can muster. Their goal was to make Wuornos "understandable if not necessarily sympathetic" (Davis, 1992:12). Because of Smart's portrayal of Wuornos, this made-for-TV movie allowed for some ambiguity as to her motives.

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[26] The subtexts here is that they need more support staff because women are engaging in violent crime now too!

3: Link Criminality With Sexuality: Visually Code These Women as Deviant:

It is interesting that in the movie about Broderick, the overt sexuality was ascribed to her fellow prison inmates but in this movie, Wuornos' sexuality, and remember she makes a living as a sex worker, is underplayed. Wuornos dresses the part of a prostitute wearing cut-off shorts, tight tops and make-up but she is also represented as pensive, kind, needy and melancholic. "The awful rage that the real Wuornos displayed at her trial, bellowing at jurors that she hoped their daughters were raped, snapping at her victims' widows that they could rot in hell, was replaced by a TV Wuornos who handed money to homeless women at Seaworld." (Pearson, 1997: 58) At Seaworld, Moore explains to her sister why she associates with someone who makes a living as a prostitute: "it's just what she does, not who she is. Lee's a good person". The need to present Lee as a good person is a way in which to patrol the borders of acceptable femininity. But there are many layers to this representation such as abject homophobia (unable to represent her as she really is) and protecting Christian American Values (showing how women are expected to be, passive, loving, nurturing and kind).

There are other such moments in this movie – moments that paint Wuornos in a particularly sympathetic light however they are often undermined by cinematic devices. In once scene, Wuornos and Moore are walking on the beach late at night in silhouette. You can see that they are carrying a fishing pole – an object that has already been reported stolen from one of the men who has been killed. This nice, quiet, interpersonal moment is shattered by the reality of Wuornos' most recent murder. Taken at face value, seeing the two walking on the beach seems like a sentimental moment but knowing the

extent of the crime Wuornos has committed, however, the scene instantly becomes horrific.

Although never explicitly sexualized in this movie, Wuornos is still visually coded as deviant. In the scene following the car accident, Wuornos is seen taking a shower. The camera zooms in on the cuts on her elbow (from her most recent car accident) but then proceeds to give the audience a closer look at the bullet wound on her stomach - a wound signifying the world (or underworld) which Wuornos has inhabited for quite some time. This brings us to the question of class and network TV. Rapping argues that although made-for-TV movies are to be commended for telling stories that might otherwise not be told, there is still a subtext that emerges and, she says, it is most apparent in the contrast between ads and drama. Referring to *The Burning Bed*, Rapping says that Fran Hughes (Farrah Fawcett)

> wears Kmart schlock, the women selling household cleaners in the ads that work in counterpoint to her story wear expensive, perfectly tailored outfits, even when they are cleaning. Fran's hair is a mess; theirs is professionally coifed and in perfect order, even as they supposedly mop the floor.
> (Rapping, 1992:76)

Rapping argues that the implication here is subtle but problematic: "people who live in shabby tract houses, who have no style, who lack education or professional work, are likely candidates for the most sordid of crimes" (Rapping, 1992:76). She goes on to argue that we see the violence "in all its brutal nastiness" in a way that middle-class dramas of family pathology "dare not portray". Comparing the TV Wuornos to the TV Broderick there is more than a hint to suggest (as Rapping does with *The Burning Bed*) that middle-class professionals, educated and wealthy are somehow inherently less bestial, more worthy of forgiveness and redemption. "The view of class difference is

pervasive on TV and is informed, unquestionably, by a need to play to the paying audience." (Rapping, 1992:76).

In keeping with this idea of class and network TV, Wuornos is often represented as someone in search of herself, someone who is less than content with the "who she is" right now. (Remember it is the TV Moore who says emphatically to her sister "it's just what she does (referring to the fact that she is a prostitute). It's not *who she is*".) As someone apparently in search of herself, the convention of looking into a mirror is threaded throughout this made-for-TV movie. Often, Wuornos is pictured looking at herself in the mirror: as she is getting out of the truck she has stolen from her first victim, she stops to take a look at herself in the side mirror and before she is arrested, there is a scene in which Wuornos, drunk, is dancing alone in a bar and staring at herself in the mirror. But perhaps the most obvious and overstated use of this convention is when the TV Wuornos has flashbacks to herself as a young pretty blond girl. In the flashback she is about nine or ten years old, dressed in pink, wearing pearls and dancing before a mirror.

Pearson suggests that this representation is symptomatic of Wuornos "trying to be a lady, as if that were all she still wanted for herself – as if the brutality of her life had not transformed her into someone monstrously hardened and destructive" (Pearson, 1997: 58). It also fits into the cultural construction of females as passive. The representation of Wuornos in this made-for-TV movie suggests that all she ever wanted was the chance "to be a lady", to have a family, to be "normal". Despite the fact that the TV Wuornos has offended against the ideals of femininity, there is the suggestion that had she not been

repeatedly abused as a child[27], the little girl in front of the mirror would have grown up into a veritable "lady", just like "you and me".

4. Link Criminality With Insanity:

Historically and to the present, women who commit criminal acts of violence are considered an anomaly. According to Faith,

> the recurrent debate is whether violent women are compelled by hormonal and psychological irregularities which distance them as sick and anomalous to "normal" women, or whether these women are indicators of a latent, normal female capacity for violence which is held in check by an hierarchical gendered social order
> (Faith, 1993:100.)

The fact that this made-for-TV movie tries to link Wuornos' criminality with a mental problem is the Network's quick fix for justifying her rage. In 1994, there was another trial in which "questions about the recognition and legitimization of women's rage became a strong subtext" (Pershing, 1996:21). The person on trial was Loreena Bobbitt[28]. While the news media and Bobbitt's defense attorneys described her deed as if it were a unique occurrence brought on by temporary insanity, information emerging from diverse sources suggested otherwise.

Literary scholars Mary Valentis and Anne Devance interviewed a range of women in the United States and found that many felt enormous rage at the gender-related

[27] Wuornos does have a horrendous past involving abuse and possibly incest – a mother who abandoned her, a father who committed suicide in prison while serving time for kidnapping and sodomizing a child. She abused drugs and alcohol, dropped out of school, was jailed and gave up for adoption a baby, possibly the result of rape.

[28] In January 1994, Lorena Bobbitt was charged with "malicious wounding of her husband. The case received extensive media coverage. She was in the limelight not because she broke the law,

limitations and expectations imposed on them, "anger so intense that women feared what they might do if they let it explode" (Persing, 1996:22). The authors cite Bobbitt as an exemplary case of female rage. Like Bobbitt, Wuornos suffered abuse at the hands of many men in her life, so why is it so hard to believe that these women would act autonomously and in their own self-interest by striking back? It is not that it is difficult to believe but rather that it is undesirable. So the media, like this made-for-TV movie, try to find ways to preserve the notion of femininity as passivity, dependence and nurturance of others. As McWhinney notes:

> In one sense, the woman who kills is taking a step away from victimization through the act of eliminating her abuser or remedying her financial situation. Unfortunately she is all too often pulled back into the role of victim as soon as a judicial system designed for men and a media machine geared towards sensationalism get hold of her" (McWhinney, 1993:51).

It is my contention that the media machine in this case, the made-for-TV movie, victimizes Wuornos by representing her as already a criminal in the sense that she lacks any agency, she is pathologized to the point where we are to think that she was "born to be bad".

About a quarter of the way into the film, Wuornos enters her motel room to find Moore and her sister laughing and looking at old family photos. Wuornos, drinking beer and reading the paper, gets angry and verbally assaults the other women for speaking too loudly. When Moore's sister tries to make conversation with Wuornos, she responds: "let me tell you something Amy, I'm crazy so you better just be lucky that you're Ty's sister". As Faith says "both academic and journalistic accounts of women who kill generally focus on women who can be readily demonized" (Faith, 1993:95). She goes on

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but because she violated a cultural taboo; she cut off her husband's penis.

to say that this sends out the message that only a complete psychopath or sociopath could commit these heinous crimes. Hart furthers this idea by suggesting that "passion and or pathology have been the key historical constructs for explaining and containing women's aggression" (Hart, 1994: 152). A woman like Wuornos is not supposed to exist and because she does, this made-for-TV movie will show you how "unnatural" she is.

The very title of this movie *Overkill* is suggestive of the sexuality and excess that Wuornos represents. In our first introduction to the police officers, they are speaking of the magnitude of this particular case – with special emphasis on the fact that the first dead body they found had six bullet holes. Later we see the police officers discussing the case outside Munster's home (again it is the police officers aligned with the home and the domestic space). There are four dead bodies, all white, all male, each of them shot many times with a twenty-two. In one case, there were nine bullet holes in the victim's body to which a cop replies: "nine times? – talk about overkill".

This "overkill" theme is reintroduced when Bruce Munster is overseeing an autopsy. He points out to the pathologist that he missed a few bullet holes – whereas the doctor thought there were four, Munster points out that, in fact, there are seven. The camera cuts to a close up of his face as he says "Overkill!". This reiteration of the term "overkill" feeds into the cultural myth of the lesbian predator. In conversation, the police officers spell out how these acts of violence are so out of the ordinary for a woman: "when women kill they kill people they know. They murder their husbands. They murder their lovers. They murder their husband's lovers – but you never ever hear of women killing strangers. That's what serial killers do. It's stranger on stranger." As Van Gelder argues, "rather than rework their sugar and spice theories, some observers point instead to

Wuornos' sexuality, implying that, since she isn't a real woman anyway, it shouldn't seem strange that she's doing a man's job" (Van Gelder, 1992:80). By believing this to be true, the sanctity of womanhood is still safe in this patriarchal world order.

5. Reinforces The Tradition of The Family – Opposes Masculinized Woman to Her More Traditional Feminine Counterpart:

While the previous section looked at the ways in which Wuornos is pathologized in the made-for-TV movie, this section will examine the way in which the family is held up and defended as a most venerable institution. Wuornos' bleak family life is constantly examined in opposition to the supportive family lives of those around her. Rapping argues that made-for-TV movies have a kind of "platonic ideal of family harmony as a kind of spiritual presence informing the sometimes contradictory events of the text" (Rapping, 1992: 34). Feuer argues that these movies have to establish a kind of "all American normality" despite the existence of tragic events (Feuer, 1995:24). The purpose of this juxtaposition between the good family and the lack of familiar support for Wuornos is, as Feuer suggests, to establish a lingering afterimage of the normal life Wuornos might have had had she not been born into her circumstances.

There is a point in the movie when the TV Wuornos becomes incensed when she finds Moore and her sister laughing and talking about the good old days. Wuornos chastises the sister by saying: "you stay here much longer I want you to get a job. This isn't some damn resort sugar. This is our home". When Moore confronts her, Wuornos

replies: "I guess I just get jealous sometimes of all the people you got to care about you. I am happy that you have a family and I'm sorry I don't know how to be sometimes".

Rapping criticizes the fact that made-for-TV movies need to place every issue in the context of an idealized model of the nuclear family and this is a prime example. It is as if to suggest that Wuornos would "know how to be" if she had had family support like Moore. Moore is represented as having a close relationship with her sister, she calls her mother in times of need, she spends Thanksgiving with her family and she has a father who protects her when the police eventually come knocking. When the TV Moore discovers (supposedly for the first time) that Wuornos is a serial killer, she is watching Hollywood's classic family tale *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946) on television. This movie, epitomizing the ideal family structure, is interrupted by a news bulletin with a composite sketch of Wuornos and Moore, saying that the two women may be armed and dangerous.

But more than attempting to idealize Moore's family structure, it is the police officers in this movie who are in possession of the strongest family values. Bruce Munster, although twice divorced, is set up very early on as a solid family man with three kids to support. Interestingly, a man is held up this time as the harbinger of family values while a working mother (Kerry Wells) filled that role in the Betty Broderick story. I would argue that The Broderick story needed a Kerry Wells in order to illustrate how a mother is *supposed* to be. In *Overkill*, however, middle-class, middle-aged white men are being threatened en masse by this supposed lesbian predator, Bruce Munster and his fellow police officers are a reminder that the patriarchy – and men - is not *all* bad.

Despite the fact that it is the police officers who are in possession of family values, domestic space is still gendered. Near the end of the film, it is Christmas and Munster's little girl is playing with a puppet while he is reading the newspaper. The daughter's toy becomes tangled and she asks her father to fix it. He fixes the toy and then asks his daughter for a hug. The entire scene is shot in the warm glow of the fireplace. Throughout the scene, we see Munster's wife making cookies in the background.

Later, in a rather uncharacteristic moment, Moore and Wuornos are lying on the beach at sunset. Wuornos tells her about the fact that she had a baby at thirteen but was forced to give the child up for adoption. She then tells how she was married at twenty to an abusive older man and how later in life she fell in love with someone who didn't love her back. Moore responds: "funny isn't it? It all seems so backward. First you have a baby, then you get married and then you fall in love". To which Wuornos replies: " I guess I never do anything the way you're supposed to".

This is probably the single most ironic statement in the entire film. First and foremost, the TV Wuornos speaks of her adopted child and of her unrequited love as though these are hallmark moments when in fact, all evidence seems to suggest that the child was a product of rape and by the time "she fell in love", she was already working as a prostitute. Her statement also suggests that she may be a lesbian because she was rejected by men. As Pearson says, "the real Aileen Wuornos, rangy, gritty, foul-mouthed and frighteningly volatile was nowhere in evidence on television". (Pearson, 1997: 58). Wuornos' rage is replaced by a longing for the family she never had[29].

[29] In Nick Broomfield's documentary he tells of a born-again Christian woman named Arlene Pralle who is obsessed with Wuornos. Pralle read about Wuornos' arrest in the newspaper while sitting in a hospital waiting room during her father's open heart surgery and knew immediately this was her "Christian sister" (the family Wuornos never had!).

Just before Wuornos' arrest, she is at a bus station watching the comings and going of families on their Christmas holidays. The TV Wuornos cries when she sees a mother and her children hugging and wishing each other a merry Christmas. The scene flashes back to when her own baby was taken away from her[30]. Throughout this movie, the heterosexual family unit is held up as the most venerable institution and the message is clear: this is, without, a doubt what everyone should aspire to. Not having the experience of a caring, nurturing heterosexual family unit, can turn you into a man-hating monster (and lesbian) like Wuornos.

6. Recognizes That There is Something Wrong With This Tradition:

The use of family themes in *Overkill* is not just intended to be heart-warming, it is a way of critiquing family dynamics. According to Rapping "these dramas present surprisingly rich analyses of what is wrong with traditional family ideology and dynamics, from a feminist perspective, in ways that are certainly politically meaningful and provocative" (Rapping, 1992: 77). During the trip to Waterworld, Moore explains her relationship to Wuornos to her sister, Amy: "I'm the only family she's got. There isn't anybody else. At least not worth knowing. She needs me." It is the fact that there is no one worth knowing that is most telling.

Both the made-for-TV movie and any documents relating to the case suggest that not one person throughout Wuornos's sad life has been sympathetic and this movie takes

[30] The irony here is that this child that was taken away, most documents suggest, was a product of rape. At this moment in the made-for-TV movie, this flashback to the birth of Wuornos child seems to suggest that she could have had the semblance of a normal life had the child not been

great pains to spell it out to the audience. In one scene, the TV Wuornos tells a client that her father died in prison and that her mother abandoned her when she was a baby. From Munster we learn that her father was a child molester who hung himself in prison and that she was raped by both her grandfather and her brother. In conversation with his wife, Munsters says how Wuornos has been on the streets since she was thirteen years old:

Bruce: How do you make a life out of that?

Wife: I don't know. Maybe you don't but how do you decide to take people out in the woods and kill them.

Bruce: What?

Wife: It's just ironic that's all. All of these years you've spent catching and convicting people who molest children. Now the biggest case of your life comes along and she's a victim of child abuse.

After this brief conversation, their daughter's voice is heard from inside the house. They retreat, arm and arm, to go to her.

As much as all of this detail is a ringing endorsement supporting the fact that the heterosexual family structure can save you from ultimate despair, it also suggests that there is something wrong with that patriarchal order. The subtext in made-for-TV movies, although not the predominant message, is usually as progressive as anything you will see on television.

Over and over, *Overkill* tells us about a family unit that does not work. In one of the many flashbacks, a young Wuornos is looking at a jewelry box and dancing in front of the mirror. No sooner are we, the audience, struck by this moment (that seems so out of character) that a grown man enters the frame and strikes the little girl on the face.

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taken away.

Following this, the TV Wuornos apologizes to Moore for having treated her sister poorly. The connection that we, as an audience, are supposed to make is that Wuornos has been treated badly so, in turn, she is going to treat others badly. In another scene, the TV Wuornos wakes up from a bad dream. When Moore offers her comfort by saying "nobody is ever going to hurt you again" Wuornos replies: "you're right. No one is ever going to hurt me again". Lynda Hart makes the case that the law (and by extension, I argue, the media, because they are part and parcel of the same patriarchal good boys structure) would prefer to rehash Wuornos' personal, tragic trauma "to recognizing a cultural, collective trauma of systematic, normative violence in which straight, white, middle-aged "everymen" repetitively assume their right of access to women's bodies" (Hart, 1994: 153). The subtext in this movie then is a challenge to the systematic violence of white patriarchy.

When *Dateline* decided to do an interview with Wuornos, Jane Pauley introduced the segment by saying: "This is a story of unnatural violence. The roles are reversed. Most serial killers kill prostitutes" (*Dateline NBC*, Aug. 25th 1992). Critiquing this interview, Hart says that one of the rules Wuornos does not understand is that prostitutes in a patriarchy are both necessary and utterly dispensable. The people at *Dateline* did not even seem to be aware of the irony in their statement – the fact that they are unwittingly saying that to kill prostitutes is somehow ok. Faith obviously agrees with Hart and concludes that working as a prostitute disqualifies women from the category of legitimate victim" (Faith, 1993: 77).

This is one of the most interesting and, I would argue, progressive, aspects to this text. Wuornos has always argued self-defense in the killing of the seven men. To this

day, she remains unrepentant. Yet the movie makes a point of portraying Wuornos as "not all bad". We see her get in and out of her client's cars without any problems. No arguments, no altercation, no murders! Wuornos only kills the men who get aggressive. Again the word Overkill suggests excess. But as Wuornos pointed out herself in court she has slept with hundreds, thousands, perhaps as many as a quarter of a million men, and only killed seven of them. As Hart says, "from Wuornos' point of view, these statistics are proof that she is not a predatory serial killer, according to her logic, it is not unreasonable to believe that seven out of thousands of men would become violent during a sexual encounter" (Hart, 1994: 142).

The TV Wuornos keeps a warehouse full of the objects that she has stolen from the men she has killed. As she overlooks the objects – guns, wallets, jewelry, etc. – we hear a progression of fights that have occurred before she was forced to kill. "What were you going to do with this?" she asks, as she handles one of the stolen guns. In other words, it is not necessarily a case of cold-blooded murder, it is a case of who was going to kill who first. The makers of this made-for-TV movie, then, take great pains to open the doors to the possibility that Wuornos could have been assaulted.

In one scene a man pretends to be a police officer after the two have had sexual intercourse. Wuornos gets angry and they fight. When the man is on top of her strangling her, the scene flashes back to another time when Wuornos was a much younger woman being strangled and burned by the man's cigarette. Recalling the anger she felt at that time, she regains her strength and is able to get free; not to run away but to grab his gun and shoot him four times.

When we talk about women and violence we tend to relegate her to the status of

victim. As McWhinney notes, the use of the word victim "presupposes helplessness and innocence. In relation to violent crimes, it connotes a certain form of physical powerlessness" (McWhinney, 1993:50). Wuornos, as represented here, is not a victim, she is a woman who is defending herself. McWhinney argues that it is important to understand that in the United States the majority of murders committed by women are motivated by the woman's need to survive, and that within this framework women kill in many ways and for many reasons. For some, they are provoked by extreme physical and emotional violence committed upon them by someone they are dependent on. For others, it is an attempt to survive in a culture that often socially and economically cripples women under the guise of protecting them. "While a woman killing an abuser in self-defense is eons away from the woman strategically plotting out murders for economic gain, she is, at the same time, not so distantly removed. Both murders are committed as acts of survival" (McWhinney, 1993: 51).

The most progressive aspect of this made-for-TV movie, then, is that in some respects it represents Wuornos as a woman choosing not to be victimized but instead to survive. As Melissa Benn states

> if it is understood that women kill not from inherent biological instability but in angry reaction to cruelty or neglect or abuse. Legal and public attention will then shift from the unstable workings of the ever-mysterious female body to the mysterious workings of the ever-unstable social world" (Benn, 1994: 171).

7. Normality is Restored (However Inaccurately):

Despite whatever advancements are made toward understanding the complexities of Wuornos' case, by the end of this TV movie (as with all TV movies) "the crisis is resolved and family values are reinstated as inalienable and transcendent" (Rapping, 1992:34). This is true even in movies that end tragically. It does not take long for the police officers to realize that the only way they can get to Wuornos is to use the one person that she cares about. Moore, working in conjunction with the police, manages to get a confession out of Wuornos. Wuornos' confession at the very end of the movie is a perfect example of the conservative, heterosexual and patriarchal values with which the made-for-TV movie is made. It is worth quoting at length.

> The reason I'm confessing is there is no other girl. I was the one. Ty was never involved. I just want to clear this up because she wasn't around she wasn't even a witness. I mean she knew I was tricking but she thought that I was doing it decently, honestly – and she was never around the times that I hurt these people. She was at work, she'd go to work, eat, sleep, and come home and watch TV. That's it. She's just a real sweet person who doesn't deserve to be harmed. I was always scared so I tried to get rid of everything, wipe it all down because I was frightened, you know, of what I'd done. I knew I'd killed somebody and all the time I was killing somebody I knew, man, look what you've done? I was shooting them to let them die. This whole last year people just started messing with me is what I'm trying to say. They just started coming like flies on crap. I just wish I'd never got that gun. I wish to god I'd never been a hooker. I just wish I never met these guys and done what I did.
> I realize I don't have a family and I don't understand but I know I hurt these families very badly. And, but, the reason, I thought, these men are older so after they're dead it didn't bother me because I thought their mother and father are already gone so why worry about it. And stuff. Freaky spots in my head. I didn't want to kill them in my heart. I'm very sorry.

This confession is amazing in its attempt to wrap up all of the extraneous details and to compartmentalize both Wuornos and Moore within fixed notions of femaleness. Moore, for example, is established as the "everywoman". In describing Moore, Wuornos says that all she does is go to work, eat, sleep and watch TV - just like most of the women who would be watching the movie. Wuornos, of course, is pathologized one last time, giving trite reasons for why she committed seven murders. She is represented as someone who has betrayed her gender in moments of destruction rather than procreation. She cites the fact that she does not have a family and that people just started messing with her.

She also says that she wishes she had never become a hooker and she apologizes for what she has done. Given that in real life, Wuornos' plea was self-defense, it is hard to imagine that she would feel such remorse for her actions. After all, she was just trying to protect herself from the violent men. Finally, she says that she did not want to kill these men *in her heart*. In this essentialist view, Wuornos' heart is still represented as a function of her femaleness. In her "heart", she is innately tender, gentle, nurturing. This idealization still represents women as the life force, the harbingers of respect for the sacredness of life. As Faith says "these messages of gender function are so invasively inculcated, as basic to respectable social identity, that to betray one's gender by taking on the characteristics attributed to the opposite sex is an invitation to persecution" (Faith, 1993: 95).

Wuornos is persecuted. By the end of the movie, she is sentenced to death row. Her confession focuses on her individual psychology which is a way to appease the crowds and say there is a way that we can prevent others from becoming like Wuornos. It is *treatable*. And to solidify their case, in the final moments of the movie, just as

Wuornos has repented "I am very sorry" there is a pause. Suddenly, in the upper right hand screen, the little girl in the pink dresses emerges, dancing merrily, round and round. It is as if to suggest that if that little girl had had a chance in life, this movie would never have been made. Made-for-TV movies remind us, then, that such brutality could never happen to those who comply to societal values. And the biggest test of normality is to belong to a supportive nuclear family. Viewers in the quiet comfort of their homes, can rest easy.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is not about women who kill, it is about two women who have killed and their representation in the made-for-TV movie. Specifically, it is about the way in which the narrative structure of each movie is designed to call attention to the pathology of Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos in order to understand their excessive gestures. In many ways, the made-for-TV movie is also about contextualizing their rage as a rational and angry response to cruelty, neglect or abuse which is, I would argue, a decidedly feminist intervention in the text. As stated by Melissa Benn "if it is understood that women kill not from an inherent biological instability, legal and public attention will then shift from the unstable workings of the ever-mysterious female body to the mysterious workings of the ever-unstable social world" (Benn, 1994: 171). It is in this way that the made-for-TV-movie is, from a feminist perspective, both politically meaningful and provocative.

While most television limits the range of female identities, made-for-TV movies will and do confront those that do not fit the mold of television's ideal feminine type. In order to address social materials (that can sometimes be disturbing) like women who kill, made-for-TV movies rely heavily on melodrama. Schulze, for one, refers to Peter Brook's study of melodrama in which he defines the genre in terms of "its tendency toward excess, the unmasking of things that might otherwise be repressed" (Schulze, 1990, 367). It is exactly this tendency toward excess that makes made-for-TV movies particularly entertaining to watch. And while it is all too easy to dismiss them as merely entertaining and sensational public spectacles, I think as feminists we would do better to look a bit more closely at why these movies are so incredibly popular.

The popularity of excess or what can be described as sensationalist story lines is usually framed within more traditional readings of the family melodrama and the heterosexual romance. In this vein, John Cawelti describes melodrama "as narratives whose worlds seem to be governed by some benevolent moral principal, presenting a moral fantasy ...showing forth the essential rightness of the world order, an order that bears out the audiences traditional patterns of right and wrong, good and evil" (Cawelti, 1976:45). While critics have argued that this moralizing tendency of the made-for-TV movie works to trivialize matters of serious social concern, I adhere to David Thornburn's definition of melodrama, and its re-circulation in made-for-TV movies. He argues that made-for-TV movies are important (regardless of their moralizing tendency) "because they function as a forum or arena in which forbidden or deeply disturbing materials may be addressed "(Schulze, 1990: 368). He suggests that melodrama is not an escape into blindness ...but an instrument for seeing (Schulze, 1990: 368). I would agree in that made-for-TV movies are a visible way of addressing social problems. While melodrama tends to frame issues within the context of black and white or right and wrong, the cycle of made-for-TV movies made in the 1990s addressing women who kill tend to delve into the vast gray area in between.

These movies, at their best, call in to question the structure of the heterosexual family unit and although they do point to this unit as the ideal, they recognize inherent problems within the formal structure. This is in keeping with what Feuer calls "hyperbolic excess", she argues that it is especially significant in the ideology of melodrama for its ability to open up a textual space which may be read against the seemingly hegemonic surface. (Feuer, 1984:8). While Mulvey poses that "melodrama's

excess can work to activate ideological contradictions in notions of the home and family" (in fact, the movies about Broderick and Wuornos work to highlight the ideological contradictions between various constructions of female identity) she goes on to demonstrate that it finally functions as a safety valve whose effect is hegemonic. (Fiske, 1987:192). I tend to disagree with this, emphasizing that the excess of television melodramas gives them, at least, a radical potential. This potential is what is particularly intriguing about *Her Final Fury: Betty Broderick The Last Chapter* and *Overkill: the Aileen Wuornos story*. The story around them is all about excess and madness yet they themselves are represented as rational beings. The movies do attempt to patrol the borders of femininity by visually coding them as deviant, comparing them to women who subscribe to accepted notions of femininity and by taking an essentialist view of womanhood and yet their act of violence is represented within the context of autonomy and agency. What is sensationalized is the system (the family, the courts, and the media) around them.

In the same way that the sensationalism and dramatization of real-life events is part of the made-for-TV movie's appeal, the movie *star* is also a significant aspect of the genre's popularity. TV movie acting seems to have produced, as one critic observes, "its own galaxy of stars with names that seldom appear in theatrical features but that are almost guaranteed to win high ratings for made-fors" (Schulze, 1990:261). In these made-for-TV social problem movies, actors are pulled from their usually already successful television shows (rarely are they pulled from Hollywood) and cast against type for, I would argue, political gain. As already mentioned, Broderick is played by Meredith Baxter Birney, the long-time matriarch of the Keaton family on the successful 1980s

sitcom, *Family Ties* while Wuornos is portrayed by Jean Smart, known to millions as Charlene on *Designing Woman*. The fact that Broderick and Wuornos are being represented by popular and sympathetic television actresses in roles that are not obviously sympathetic (at the outset) is politically challenging. As audiences watch Birney and Smart transform themselves into characters other than those they would normally portray, audiences are (whether consciously or not) reminded of the performability of the genre. In other words, the audience is subjected to the representation of the lives of Broderick and Wuornos as seen through the familiar eyes of already loved sitcom stars.

Another aspect to popular sitcom stars in made-for-TV movies is that this genre presents the networks with a rather unique problem of promotion. Because these movies are to be shown on television only once (or later in reruns), their audience cannot be developed by word of mouth or through critical acclaim. As such, the networks look for big name stars to draw an audience but they also look for "hot concepts" already circulating in the mainstream media. Needing to get the made-for-TV movie on the air while the case it still making headlines dictates that there is no time for sophistication in the telling of the tale. According to Schulze "if the concept proposed to the network by the independent producer cannot be condensed into this brief sensational/familiar narrative image, the project stands little chance of being developed" (Schulze, 1990:363). Thus producers of made-for-TV movies grab stories circulating in the mainstream media – the more sensational the better.

The cultural response to both Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos was such that their stories were being told simultaneously on a number of different media outlets. The

theory of intertextuality proposes that "any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it" (Fiske, 1987:108). In other words, the story circulating within the mediated community needs to be considered with respect to other representations. According to Hart, the media rushed in to stake claim to Aileen Wuornos' story, "movie deals, book contracts, made-for-TV specials were all in the works within days of her arrest" (Hart, 1994:40). In terms of the production of knowledge, Hart proves that "Aileen Wuornos has been and no doubt will continue to be represented as a femme fatale, the handiest construct available for reintegrating her into the Symbolic Order" (Hart, 1994: 141). This idea of the "femme fatale" was circulated in the newspapers and on television but was subverted in the made-for-TV movie where her rage was rationalized in the context of self-defense. In Broomfield's documentary, *The Selling of A Serial Killer*, Wuornos is represented as an unwitting pawn in a problematic legal system and a system which allows a "crazy" Christian woman to "adopt" a convicted felon. On *Dateline NBC*, Wuornos is represented as unrepentant. When the interviewer ask Wuornos, "did you ever say to yourself 'I'm out of control, I'm killing people?' Wuornos answers rather emphatically, "no. I thought to myself, 'those men are out of control, I'm sick and tired of those men out there thinking they can control us and do whatever they damn please with out bodies and think they can get away with it". As Hart points out, "one of the rules that Wuornos does not understand is that prostitutes in a patriarchy are both necessary and utterly dispensable" (Hart, 1994:142). Wuornos's story was more often positioned within the context of this patriarchal view.

With respect to Betty Broderick, her story was told on a regular basis on *Court TV* and it circulated in various newspapers and magazines. In addition to the made-for-TV movie, perhaps the most visible representation of Broderick was on the highly rated syndicated talk show, *Oprah*. As I have already mentioned, Oprah conducted a one-on-one interview with Broderick from her prison in San Diego. The next day, Broderick's four children appeared on the show. What is particularly fascinating when addressing this kind of representation is the fact that Oprah (as host) acts an antenna through which the audience forms an opinion about the subject. The ways these women were mediated and therefore positioned in the overall flow of publicity can help to reinforce the particular agenda of the made-for-TV movie or refute it. In the case of Broderick, her mediated image outside of the made-for-TV movie was represented within the "historical construct for explaining and containing women's aggression, her pathology." (Hart, 1993:152). Audiences will retain the version they find most palatable.

This idea of generating a cultural response to women who kill has always existed. Murder is the most infrequent violent behavior by women and yet it receives the greatest amount of attention. In 1933 in a small city in Western France, two young sisters, Christine and Lea Papin, violently murdered their employer, Mme. Lancelin, and her daughter, Genevieve. According to Christopher Lane, the sisters generated such controversy because the case "stymied accepted definitions of sanity, femininity, rebellion, and delirium (Lane, 1993:25). More importantly, the case generated a response from prominent intellectuals who wrote with endless fascination about the murders. Jacques Lacan was one such intellectual. He engaged with the murders on a level that tried to re-write the crime, arguing that violence fails to carry any "rational"

meaning. He did so in a way that "disturbed and frequently reversed, public opinion and psychiatric orthodoxy" (Lane, 1993: 34). This is inherently what intertextuality is all about, a public commentary on current events to create a response to the system. At the time of the Papin affair, this response was by prominent intellectuals, today the response is within the mediated community. According to Hart, at the time of the Papin murders, "the nature of female sexuality was at the center of debates within intellectual circles" (Hart, 1993:147). I would argue that today, given feminism's interface with the media, the very notion of what it means to be a woman is being debated at the level of media exposure.

What could be a challenging project is to analyze the production of knowledge around these case studies as they are communicated on various newspapers, magazines, talk shows, television and film and increasingly on the web. It would be interesting to shop these cases around analyzing the various representations of female identity. What would this project change if we were considering their representation on talk shows or television magazines, what ideas of femininity would be expressed and where would the concept of agency be? Another component for further research would be to examine the way in which the women tell their own stories. In other words, when Broderick sits next to Oprah Winfrey and tells why she killed her ex-husband, is it the murder that is problematic or the way in which she talks about it? The made-for-TV movie is just one way to explore how feminine identity is represented but the possibilities are endless.

In the genre of movies that address violent women, the movies representing the lives of Betty Broderick and Aileen Wuornos prove that TV movies remain an intriguing communicative arena within which meanings and values that affect us are struggled over

and defined (Rapping, 1992:52). In an age where public discourse takes place primarily on commercial television, this thesis will add to the broader appreciation of the made-for-TV movie genre. Recently, the public was asked to be both judge and jury when the unsolved murder of JonBenet Ramsey went on trial in the made-for-TV movie *Getting Away with Murder: The JonBenet Ramsey Story*[31]. In this one hour special which offers a reenactment of the young girl's murder, the slain beauty queen's mother, Patsy Ramsey, is highly suspect. According to attorney and JonBenet case analyst, Darnay Hoffman, the movie is Patsy's worst nightmare (Campbell, 2000:A1).

Much of the movie points to the mom's involvement from the suspicious ransom note, which some experts says bears a strong resemblance to her own handwriting, to Patsy's version of events the night JonBenet died. In this movie, much like the Betty Broderick story, a white, upper middle class, "story-book" mom is represented as someone who transgresses her traditional role. Whereas Broderick had already been found guilty before the movie was made, *Getting Away with Murder* will do much to solidify Patsy Ramsey's guilt in the court of public opinion. Even more fascinating is the fact that it is not the only network television special to do so.

Proof that the genre in indeed the arena in which issues of public concern are debated and analyzed is the fact that there are competing stories circulating on television about the case. Just eleven days after *Getting Away with Murder*, television audiences were given the opportunity to see if they prefer the version of events in the two-part, four-hour miniseries, *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town*[32]. This thirteen million-dollar made-for-TV movie is the culmination of the grand jury's probe into the death of the little girl

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[31] This movie aired February 16th on Fox TV.
[32] This movie aired February 27 and March 1st on CBS.

based on the Lawrence Schiller book by the same name. It too draws the conclusion that the mother is guilty. This time, however, based on the belief of some investigators, the movie suggests that Patsy could have been in an altered state during the night of the murder. The *Enquirer* made this notion public in the article *Family Secret Uncovered – Mental Disorder Made Mom Kill JonBenet* (Gentile, 1999:A1). In this article the reporter quotes a top forensic psychologist who says that Patsy suffers from a disorder called Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED). It is billed as the "only explanation for the extreme brutality of the crime, the only explanation for why a mother could have snapped". Interestingly, this movie and not the other had the Ramsey family's approval.

According to Rapping if there is any place on television where controversy and oppositional voices will continue to be heard, it is TV movies. With all their social and artistic limitations and sins, they still manage to engage a mass audience of millions in issues presented by the news media from an abstract, bloodless perspective (Rapping, 1992:65). Perhaps because its story world begins and ends in two hours and because its narrative situations and characters do not come into the home week in and week out, made-for-TV movies appear to be capable of pushing the limits of the controversial without losing its audience. These movies are able to engage their audience with subject matter that would not otherwise be represented on such a mainstream outlet. It is hoped that my research has offered thematic reversals to common cultural patterns, which regularly frame women as passive victims of male violence. These exceptions to the rule can provide important insight into broader public discourse around women's position in society. Most importantly, I would like to situate my research within recent academic endeavors that show how mass media's gender representations have been increasingly

complicated by feminist interventions. I would also like to locate it within academics who are attempting to raise the form of the made-for-TV movie from the mire to a valuable and complex cultural and feminist tool.

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