

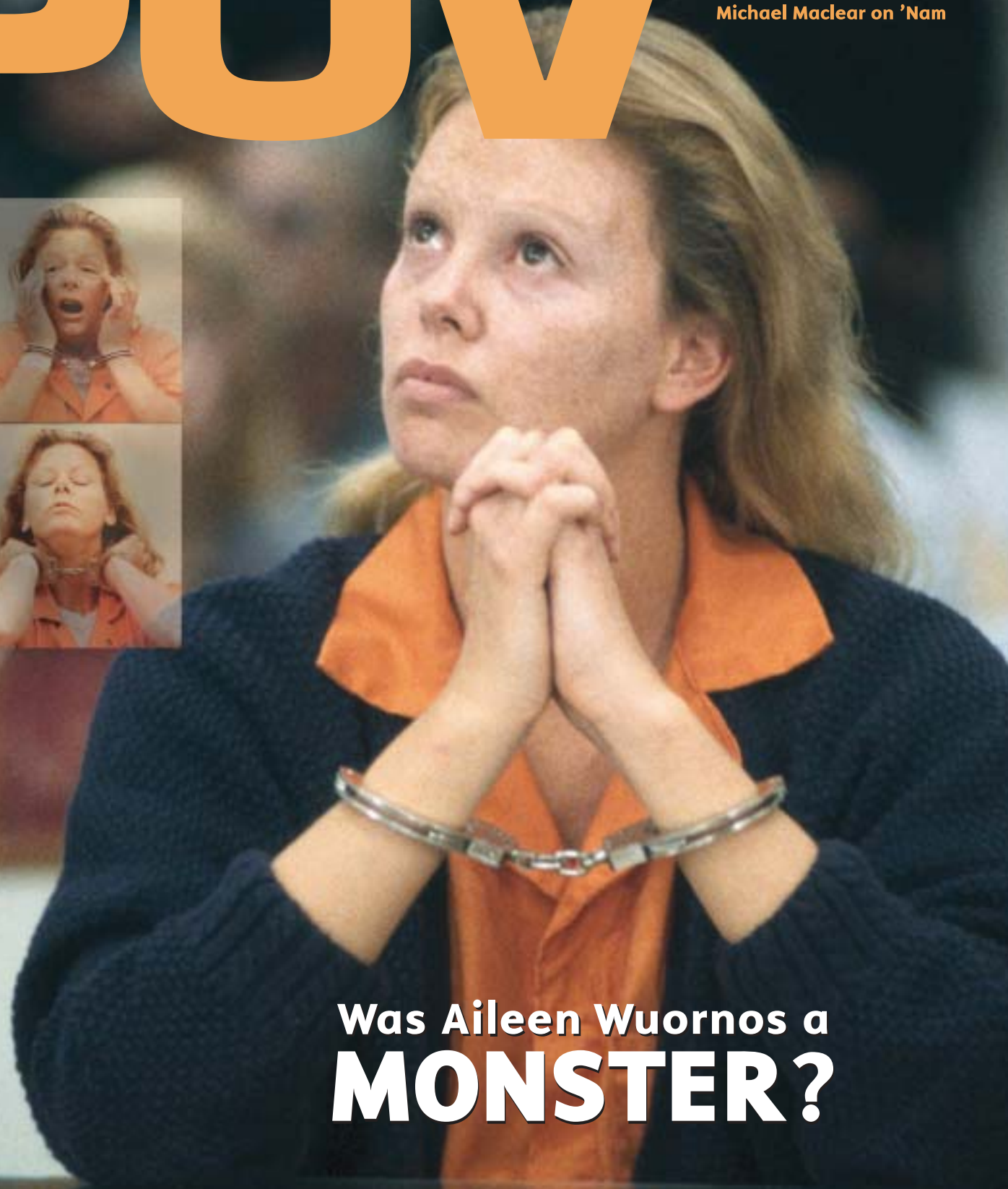
THE ART AND BUSINESS OF INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO

POINT OF VIEW

POV

ISSUE 53 SPRING 2004

Hot Docs 2004: Special Reports
F/x guru Ray Harryhausen at 80
Alan Zweig: Hip Curmudgeon
Michael Maclear on 'Nam



Was Aileen Wuornos a
MONSTER?



04

CANADA \$5

By Janis Cole

Murder ceaselessly fascinates, rousing interest to peer into the mind of the killer. I interviewed a woman at P4W, Kingston's Prison for Women, who murdered her second husband in a drunken blur of domestic violence because he looked a lot like the first—whom she'd previously killed under similar circumstances. A young guy at Penetang Mental Health Centre killed a family of four with an axe after a day of heavy drinking. Another went on a berserk killing rampage, shooting everyone in sight, even children. The scope and senselessness of their crimes is hard to grasp but the killers agreed unanimously on a theme they shared with me: crossing the line to commit a murder is not easy, but murdering again gets easier and even easier...

Aileen Wuornos admitted killing seven times, all male tricks, each a complete stranger. Originally, she claimed to be a violated, self-defending prostitute, but later said the murders were motivated strictly by robbery. Is either version true, or is it a combination of both? What drove Wuornos to kill that first, most crucial time, and then claim six more lives, becoming hyped as 'America's first female serial killer'?

Nick Broomfield, a veteran, tabloid-style documentarian, made companion docs on this admitted murderer, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992) and *Aileen: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003, with co-director Joan Churchill). Newcomer Patty Jenkins wrote and directed *Monster* (2003), a hot American indie

pistol and shooting to kill. She convinces that there is at least some truth to this event, which evokes some empathy for the first murder.

To write *Monster*, Jenkins gathered court transcripts and archival footage; she corresponded with Wuornos, and read letters sent to Arlene Pralle (a Christian woman who legally adopted Wuornos as her daughter while she was gaining notoriety as 'America's first female serial killer'), weaving the research results into her docu-drama.

It is important to note that while documentary is the creative interpretation of facts and reality, docu-drama collapses and embellishes reality to enhance dramatic requirements. For example, 'Selby' is Wuornos' movie girlfriend, the fictional version of Tyria Moore, also known as Ty. Wuornos is 'Lee' in the fiction.

Monster portrays the rape much as Wuornos describes it in *Selling of a Serial Killer*, but pushes it even further, to assure audience empathy for the 'antihero.' Jenkins intensifies the rape, and also invents (by use of dramatic license) a situation to reveal a pivotal character trait: she sets the rape during Lee's prearranged meeting time with her new girlfriend, to impart her sense of honour.

Lee kills the rapist to save her life and also to honour her word, thus revealing a good quality even as she does something bad. It's a classic narrative technique to help align sympathy with an anti-hero. Lee fights mainly to get to Selby and make up for leaving her waiting, even though her

Was Aileen Wuornos a Monster? Blurring the lines between Documentary Truth and Dramatic Fiction

drama which starred Charlize Theron in an Academy Award winning performance as 'Lee' Wuornos, and Christina Ricci as her girlfriend 'Selby'. The opportunity to garner 'truth' about a killer, to comprehend her murders, to readily deconstruct portraits of her in two contrasting film genres and compare results, has bolstered public inquiry into Wuornos' case. And while the context of their investigation is film genres, the content for comparison is Wuornos, herself.

Crossing the line to commit the first murder was an act of self-defense, to stave off a humiliating rape by a client turned vicious, claimed Wuornos in the initial documentary. Eleven years later, in the doc sequel, she changes her story completely, saying she murdered simply to rob. What can be learned in the films about this initial, most crucial murder of Richard Mallory, whom she killed in Florida in December 1989?

Selling of a Serial Killer draws on archival footage of Wuornos giving courtroom testimony of the rape. Teary-eyed and shaken, she recalls graphic details of a humiliating violation she halted by grabbing her

body is brutalized from rape and her mind is racing with the adrenaline of murder. Jenkins establishes self-defense and honour, generating credibility and empathy for her character on two levels.

Life and Death of a Serial Killer picks up Wuornos' story after she has spent ten years in a 6' X 8' cell on death row. She's anxiously awaiting her execution, which will end a tumultuous incarceration, and finally stop people from profiting off her story. Broomfield asks her to confirm the Mallory rape, that it really was self-defense when she killed him. She surprises him by adamantly denying it, insisting instead that all victims were sidebar casualties of being in the 'stealing biz,' including Mallory. It's powerful stuff and could be taken at face value but she is not entirely convincing: her eyes flash with vulnerability while the words are spoken, as if rehearsed. She even beautifies her hair for the 'performance.'

Shortly thereafter, believing she's no longer on-camera and not realizing she's still on sound tape, Wuornos whispers a quick response when he poses the same question, "Yes, it was self-defense

but I can't say so. Mallory was, and so were some others. I can't say it because I need to end this justice system bullshit." Wuornos wanted no more appeals, but only execution, which may be her reason for changing her story at this point.

It's interesting that Broomfield listens intently to her rebuttal (we see him on screen often, and hear his narration all the way through), and yet pushes for confirmation right to the end of the film, never getting the clarity he seeks. At their parting interview, her response to his resolute chase is biting: "Believe it, or don't believe it, put a big question mark on your film, Nick." Broomfield takes no stand, leaving it at that.

If she murdered to rob that first time she gains no empathy; if she killed in self-defense she gains some; and if the circumstances warranted murder to save her life she gains the most. The first documentary cites Mallory's rape motivating Wuornos to self-defend, the drama commits more firmly to this theory, but the final documentary completely wavers.

There were only two witnesses to the first murder and Mallory was dead. Wuornos had credibility problems: she frequently flipped out, often spewed profanities, increasingly lacked self-control and eventually displayed flashes of insanity. Broomfield's films capture equally her inability to present herself well over any sustained time, and they also reveal snapshots of her sense of loyalty, desire to trust and 'street-smart'

instinctual logic. She has a moral code, as people living on the fringe must have, even if it's skewed.

Considering the vulnerability of street prostitutes, who are easy targets of male rage (the Vancouver missing women for instance), this would not likely be the first bad trick Wuornos turned in two decades of hooking, but rather, the last time she put up with it. The first documentary reveals that after her arrest it was discovered Mallory had served ten years for attempted rape. Unbelievably, this was never admissible in court, and Wuornos received the death sentence for killing him.

Wuornos is a streetwise 'survival' prostitute with a tough veneer; it's toil analyzing her words to crack through the protective shield. Rather than offering straight answers, she's more likely to 'reveal' them quite by accident. Observing her in interviews and archival clips shows she has a conviction for 'truth,' (even when withholding it). In her rape testimony she displays this conviction, whereas her later denial is false bravado, confirmed by her whispered retraction. The logical conclusion is to believe she was raped, and she murdered that first time in self-defense.

Wuornos killed six more clients on the heels of Mallory. There was a significant five-month gap before claiming victim number two in June 1990, and then she killed six men in as many months. Conclusions and feelings we draw about these additional murders are dependent on our belief



Arrest photos appearing in *Selling of a Serial Killer*



Life and Death of a Serial Killer



Selling of a Serial Killer

in, or rejection of reasons provoking her. Killing in self-defense can be forgiven, but murdering in cold-blood is reprehensible.

The two docs skip investigation of the murders; however, Wuornos sprinkles hints throughout Broomfield's footage which can be examined—the secret whisper, “Mallory was self-defense, and some others”. And during her final interview, “You’re executing a raped woman,” and “I’d shoot the guy if I ran into physical trouble.” These comments make it apparent she defended herself more than just the first time.

Life and Death of a Serial Killer puts names and faces to her victims: Richard Mallory, David Spears, Charles Carskaddon, Peter Siems, Troy Burress, Dick Humphreys and Walter Antonio. *Monster* takes it further by recreating probable encounters with their killer. On her list of victims, along with the convicted rapist, were a former Police Chief and a member of the Reserve Police.

A scene in *Monster* shows Lee being forced to do a cop for free; it’s a truthful event, that the drama takes ‘license’ with regarding timing, to heighten the drama. Lee realizes she won’t be finding a straight job, and she’s in despair after doing the free blow-job. She tosses the newspaper want-ads in the trash and the paper lands on a story about her first murder victim. In economic, narrative ingenuity, this moment shows her finding her motive for further crimes. Society won’t hire her kind, but she can always steal; men violate her, but she can always use her gun for protection. She justifies robbing and killing in a society that hurts her, right on the heels of a humiliating job search and sexual violation. Lee crosses the line the moment she justifies becoming her own vigilante protector and outlaw economic survivor. If anyone messes with her again, it won’t take much for her to pull the trigger.

Ty does not participate in either documentary, but she knew about Mallory’s murder, and used vehicles and wads of money that Wuornos suddenly had on occasion. Wuornos remained tight-lipped about her girlfriend’s involvement even though Ty betrayed her, helped police get a confession, testified against her in court and walked free. Jenkins rightfully embellishes *Monster* in favor of Wuornos as underdog, depicting Selby coaxing Lee to support her by being a roadside hooker, and demanding vehicles as needed. Having a girlfriend was rife with pressure for this nuclear provider.

Wuornos most likely robbed Mallory after she killed, as an afterthought. If only she had walked away from the rape and murder... But once he was dead, she robbed him because of her instincts as a street person, only to see that having money and a car pleased her girlfriend. Thereafter, when she needed to please her, she had a familiar way—which likely kept getting easier.

Structure reveals a filmmaker’s conviction in the ‘story.’ The selected order of shots, scenes, set-up and resolution convey ideas that entice audience

engagement and emotional reaction, consciously and subconsciously manipulating desired responses. Every film has a structural order (intentional or not), and it’s here we find the story.

Absolute facts framing the Aileen Wuornos story are few; in January 1991 she confessed to the murders, and on October 9, 2002 she was executed for those crimes. Details about her formative years, relationship with Ty and provocation of the crimes are laced with bits of verifiable information and larger degrees of ‘probable fact,’ opening a wide gateway for partiality in the interpretation.

Selling of a Serial Killer opens with a driving shot and Broomfield’s narration, “She was a drifter at 16, worked the roads as a prostitute, had 1,000 men over the years. Between 1989 and 1990 she killed seven; the FBI labelled her America’s first female serial killer.” Then there’s news footage about murders with a ‘feminine’ touch, a hunt for the ‘Angel of Death’; two mug shots of Wuornos flash by and in one she looks crazy. This is all done in titillating, tabloid-headline fashion.

Broomfield then sets out to buy an interview with Wuornos, and he works the phenomenal \$25,000 fee down to \$10,000US. Along the way he meets a shady would-be-rocker turned deadbeat-agent/lawyer (who gets far too much screen time), a strange adoptive Christian mother (whom he repeatedly discredits but doesn’t edit out), an odd tabloid, pre-arrest boyfriend, an inconsequential ‘human bomb’ performer...you get the gist. Entangled in this odd assortment of characters, Wuornos pops out for a police confession, courtroom testimony, statement to the media and documentary interview.

Wuornos’ appearances are always engaging, but the structure is ordered around the journalistic quest to get an interview, rather than around her story. The difference is subtle: it aligns viewers with the journalist’s story because there isn’t one about the ‘serial killer,’ only interesting moments.

Life and Death of a Serial Killer opens similarly. Then Broomfield sets out to document the life that will shortly meet death. He films more of Wuornos this time, which should make the sequel more fascinating, but the filmmaker’s self-absorption supercedes any assessment of his subject. The order of this film is as oblique as the first, and Broomfield plays two roles this time, the travelogue journalist, and a spokesperson ‘character’ in Wuornos’ life.

In an early sequence, he is a witness at her appeal hearing and towards the end, he is the solo spokesperson who reports to the entire media on her state of mind. The Wuornos I see in the film and Broomfield’s assessment of her to the media are two totally different characters. He claims they are executing a crazy person, yet she shows more lucidity than insanity (ten years in a death row cell has made her loopy, but not totally crazy). He



Aileen Profile appearing in Selling of a Serial Killer

interviews Wuornos three times, and provokes her to anger each time. Angry rants and 'sonic transmitters in her brain cells' do not supercede logical thoughts, prevalent in most of what she says.

When Broomfield angers her during their last interview she summarizes the failing of the documentary with complete clarity. Abruptly halting her final chance ever to express herself in this lifetime, she rises to leave. He calls out, "I'm sorry, Aileen." She yells back, "Fuck you, Nick," as she gives him the finger. Later she sends a message through her friend Dawn (Botkins) that her outburst was meant for all media (likely true, since all media trivialized her). Wuornos critiqued *Life and Death of a Serial Killer* in a final act of self-defensive anger, then she died for seven previous, more deadly, but similar acts.

Monster opens with Lee's voice and a visual motif of her in pictures, as a girl and teen, setting her up as 'any girl'. The dramatist could have opened on the arrest of a 'serial killer' then gone back to find how she got there, or with the brutal rape and shown how it went out of control from there, but it wouldn't suit her convictions about the story. Lee's monologue draws us into the character's dream of a good life, girlhood aspirations to be 'somebody'; she ends with the question, "Who will discover me?"

Wuornos next appears as a thirty-year old, at the side of a highway, under an overpass to shelter herself from the rain, gun in hand, suicidal. But she needs to spend her last \$5 before dying, otherwise she'll have 'blown' her last trick for free. So she goes to a bar, buys a beer, and 'is discovered' by Selby, the woman fated to become her love fixation, in a relationship that will change the course of her life, forever.

What role did love play in her downfall?

Wuornos' mother abandoned her at birth. She was repeatedly assaulted, both physically and sexually as a girl, got pregnant at fourteen, had her baby taken away, was kicked out of the house at fifteen, lived outdoors through a cold Michigan winter, then hitched to Florida at sixteen looking for warmth and a means to support herself. Wuornos had always wanted to love and be loved, and in Ty she found a responsive partner.

Neither doc explores their love story, and Ty doesn't participate in the films. She appears in an archival courtroom clip, testifying against Wuornos. We hear tapes of police recorded phone calls, of Ty manipulating Wuornos to confess due to her fears about cops circling in. Witnessing Ty's manipulative effect on Wuornos is astounding. Wuornos wastes no time offering police a full confession to everything, just as she'd promised Ty. She doesn't try to save her butt in any way, only Ty's. It must have been a surprise to have Ty testify against her, avoid looking at her, and show no remorse. Ty turned her lover in so she could go free, then walked away, forever. Learning of these things and witnessing Ty's brutal cold-heartedness is helpful in seeing the drama.

Monster, while relying on the love story, portrays something very different than love. Selby gently strokes Lee's weathered face and tells her she's pretty, they have a passionate kiss inside a roller rink and a hot necking session outside, and there is a tender lovemaking montage set to 'Crimson and Clover.' Other than these fleeting loving moments, the drama shows a platonic friendship with Lee playing the butch provider to Selby's restless 'wife'. For the most part their relationship lacks sex, touch, warmth and love. It is dependent instead on a compulsion to cling to the ideals of love.



Monster, Odeon Releasing

We're presented with a 'Bonnie & Bonnie' saga, where there are two outlaws, not one. Their bond consists of Lee's desire to please, and Selby's ability to manipulate the pleasures, right through to her coaxing a police confession out of Lee, also to please her. While Lee is guilty of whipping out her gun, Selby is implicit in helping pull the trigger. By not stopping Wuornos, or going to the police, she is part of the equation that allowed lives to be taken. But unlike Bonnie & Clyde, the lovers don't go down together. One walks away and the other goes down alone.

What message do we get from the titles? A favorite movie title of mine is *Jaws*. One word says everything about the fish circling the waters, terrorizing a community, while also implying the 'jaws' of political corruption, so intent to keep tourist dollars up it would sacrifice a few bodies. *Monster* is even more effective.

Is Wuornos the monster? Even with the demons of her childhood, violations of rape, and acts of betrayal, killing repeatedly is a monstrous crime. But the most abhorrent monsters live outside Wuornos, not inside her.

Ty knowingly used stolen money and cars. She knew about murder victims, but conveniently turned her back to crimes that were supporting her. She betrayed her lover, turned fink, and perhaps even profited from Wuornos' confession. Ty never went to the police to save a life that Wuornos might claim, she only complied with cops when the life to save was her own.

Society doesn't protect children from abuse, or help them when they lash out at themselves or others. I'm all too familiar with the disenfranchised who service society or get dragged into a judicial system that doesn't treat them fairly. The media sucks blood from real people in tragic circumstances and is often a culprit, profiting off human plight. Monsters who should be held accountable have always been free, and remain free. There is no end to society's monsters that create the individual monsters, and then willingly take them down.

Selling of a Serial Killer and *Life and Death of a Serial Killer* are catchy, but in truth, they mislead. Wuornos killed randomly, in self-defense or for robbery, which fits the description of a multiple murderer, not a serial killer, who by definition derives ritualistic pleasure from the kill. The traumas that happened to Wuornos in life, and the nature of her crimes, were partially tied up in her being female, so perhaps replacing 'Serial Killer' with 'Female Killer' makes a more accurate title choice.

Conclusions about the film genres.

Documentary styles have evolved over the years. The classic cinema verité approach with filmmaker firmly planted behind the camera, trying to achieve the 'fly-on-the-wall', has given way to setting up interviews, adding the 'guiding'

narrator's voice and reenacting key sequences. Increasingly popular is a journalistic reportage approach, where the filmmaker steps in front of the lens, taking viewers through a documentary-travelogue, resulting in a 'visitation' to the doc subject. I have not witnessed great results in this genre, although Michael Moore has achieved Oscar-winning success, while Nick Broomfield achieves popularity, based on the intrigue involved in accessing his high-profile subjects.

Dramas have evolved as well. Once relatively pure, fiction now encompasses stories 'based on reality' and most frequently includes true-life situations grabbed straight from the headlines. It's not uncommon to catch a movie of the week while the subject is still playing out on the nightly news. Alongside the authenticating of narrative truth, screenwriters increasingly seek to portray factual and representational truths, and the best at their craft take these additional considerations seriously.

Deconstructing the three films reveals an 'ethical truth' by the dramatist Jenkins, based on her assessment of probabilities, while the two documentaries include inaccuracies, questionable characters and poorly reflect Wuornos and her situation. If one relied on the documentaries for 'truth', Wuornos was a serial killer, who killed seven men strictly for the sake of the 'robbin' biz' and was nuttier than a fruitcake on death row. When one looks for honesty it's believed it will be found in the documentary genre, but in the case of Wuornos, and these three films, the more honest path was achieved in the drama. **POV**



Monster, Odeon Releasing

Janis Cole is a Writing Professor at the Ontario College of Art & Design. Her documentary films include *P4W: Prison for Women* and *Hookers on Davie*. She wrote the acclaimed CBC movie *Dangerous Offender*, based on a true-life story, and is the recipient of a Writers Guild Top Ten Award and a Toronto Arts Award in Media Art.