

FILM REVIEW: *Monster* (2003)

Laurel Wypkema

Let's get right down to it: I didn't like *Monster*. Director Patty Jenkin's first feature film is based on the true story of a seriously down-on-her-luck prostitute, Aileen Wuornos, and her murderous, increasingly deranged rampage on her johns from 1989 to 1990. You may or may not remember Wuornos, who is, as the press kit claims, the first American female serial killer to be put to death for her crimes, but you certainly know the movie I'm talking about – it's the one with Charlize Theron as a flabby, puffy-eyed, shifty lesbian psychopath. Unfortunately, the movie stumbles under the weight of its task. It is so caught up in being a movie that it doesn't let itself breathe its own story. The first line of the film (unfortunately and confusingly) is Theron's in-character voice-over: "I always wanted to be in the movies." Sure, it's every girl's dream – princesses, actresses, whatever – but this first line juts out at a dangerous angle and the film then fails to reference it at any later point except to suggest that perhaps Wuornos' real-life dream is finally being realized, however indirectly (no matter that it took her own death for her story to be told on the silver screen). Dangling high above the movie without a net, this opening line sets us up for an hour and a half of self-conscious, persistent and ultimately failed attempts to draw its audience into a story that could (and should) be able to tell itself.

Theron is already winning accolades and tiny statuettes for her astonishing transformation and whole-hearted performance, and the hype, I must admit, is well deserved. (Her Oscar victory, however, is further evidence that the Academy is notoriously in love with 'Beauty make-believing Beast'). Theron is startling and unrecognizable, dirty and fascinating. But it isn't simply

this regressive metamorphosis that is so gripping. It is the guttural, deep-seated performance that bubbles up from the pit of Theron, moaning and thrashing around; desperate, despicable, and beautiful in its sweaty, pleading need for you to believe its accuracy.

That Jenkins manages to distract us from the conventional beauty of an already good actress, however, and lets her loose in a role where she can scream her lungs out (and swear, smoke and pump her fists like a longshoreman) doesn't mean the director should be applauded. We shouldn't care what lengths the make-up artist went to, mussing up Theron's hair and getting that sallow, boozy complexion reeking of authenticity. Jenkins zeroes in on her shining star, catching every nuanced gesture, every flamboyant outburst with careful framing and harsh, reverent lighting. But that's because it's the only card she's holding. Theron, strutting around with a wide, unbecoming gait and a whiskey-soaked accent, is the bloody, beating heart trapped in a movie made of clay. She is the brilliant core of an inexcusably uninteresting film.

My disagreement is not with the film's aesthetic or thematic interests. Jenkins has crafted a solid piece of cinema, at least as far as surface values go. The whole film is dingy and eager to show you its true-to-life-ness. In fact, many of the film's key scenes were shot at the actual locations Wuornos committed her crimes. Her derelict apartment has to fit appropriately into the life of a social castoff. The result finds the setting accordingly waterstained and shabby. Truth be told, everything in the film looks uncouth and speaks to a downtrodden life – but it does so uncomfortably.

Despite its earnestness, the story never really inhabits the precisely-constructed world of the film. It lacks immediacy. It wants for gritty veracity. It yells and bleeds and stinks, but these are hollow attempts and they cannot match the intensity of Theron's performance. The film thus leaves its wild main character hanging in a dead world, parched of any real meaning or social commentary. Theron's sober direct address into the camera's lens, as the film begins to close, is meant to pierce our popcorn souls and resonate with us all the way to the theatre's lobby, where we surely will discuss the ticking clock of America's corrupt social hierarchy and the two tones of Wuornos' outrageous and heartbreaking story. But her tired look back at us as she is pulled towards death and the inevitable manifestation of her destiny is a last-ditch effort. It reminds us, yet again, that we are watching a very sad movie about Aileen Wuornos – the person, the monster, the woman. Why is Patty Jenkins beating us over the head with a trick that screams of desperation when she has an ace in her pocket named Charlize Theron? As viewers, we shouldn't need this.