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Gender Transgression in Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho and Patty Jenkins's Monster

Gender Transgression in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Patty Jenkins's *Monster*

While Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (1960) and Patty Jenkins's Monster (2003) are of very different genres, both films depict protagonists with certain commonalities. Psycho's Norman Bates and Monster's Aileen Wuornos turn into murderers for similar reasons. They are, on the one hand, influenced by their childhood experiences of having been emotionally and/or physically neglected and abused by the opposite sex respectively. These traumatic experiences of powerlessness and helplessness lead to their eventual adoption of the role of the other gender as a way to gain the same power and control that formerly oppressed them. While Norman fully identifies with his mother at the end of the movie, Aileen adopts a typically male role by providing for her lesbian lover Selby and by murdering men who are normally more powerful than she is. Moreover, they do not fit into classic, heteronormative categories considering their own sexuality, which makes it impossible for them to take part in society which accepts them, linking their sexuality to their pathological, criminal behavior. This is as yet clearly indicated in the titles, mirroring the social perception of the protagonists. My analysis follows their journey through life, concentrating on how their depictions in their respective films underline the thesis of Norman and Aileen taking over behavioral patterns of the opposite gender in order to escape their own helplessness and dependence.

Key words: gender roles, stereotypes, repression, film analysis, queerness

INTRODUCTION

“Psycho” and “Monster” are denominations labeling those who do not fit into expected roles and norms because of their anti-social, mostly criminal, seldom understandable, and often shocking behavior. This is the exact case with Alfred Hitchcock’s protagonist Norman Bates from the 1960 horror movie *Psycho* and Patty Jenkins’s Aileen Wuornos, the main character in the biopic/crime drama *Monster* from 2003. Bates, by now a world-famous movie character based on Robert Bloch’s identically named fictional character from his 1959 novel *Psycho*, was raised by an “[o]verbearing, controlling, oppressive” (San Juan and McDevitt 2013: 143) mother who first established a very intimate relationship with her son, yet then deprived him of her love when she found a new lover. Jenkins’s first screen appearance tells the story of the real-life serial killer Aileen Wuornos, who had to endure sexual assaults by men throughout childhood and adolescence. Thus, both characters, Norman and Aileen, were determined by repressive power structures by the opposite sex respectively while growing up.

¹ Both of them felt power- and helpless, not being able to overcome these feelings even as adults. They try to escape from the power structures they have come to know – by starting a lesbian love affair with young Selby Wall in Aileen’s case and by murdering his mother and her lover in Norman’s – but cannot manage to do so, realizing their impotence and inability.

What is more, the two of them do not conform to the socially expected, heteronormative gender roles associated with their biological sex, as Norman, a “sensitive male” (Jancovich 1996: 223), dresses in his mother’s clothes and pretends to be her, while Aileen establishes an intimate relationship with another woman. Besides, Norman is, as Alexander Doty rightly claims, “not clearly identified as homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual” (2000: 157). He simply stands beyond classifiable notions. Aileen, too, cannot be absolutely classified regarding her sexuality. She reacts very aggressively to Selby’s first touch, naming her a “dumb dyke” (*Monster*: 0:04:50-0:04:56), thereby indicating that she herself is heterosexual. Yet, later she falls in love with Selby, but nevertheless continues to sleep with men because of her

¹ To talk of “opposite” sexes, proclaiming thereby that sex and gender work as binary systems, is more than debatable. Yet, such a simplified notion is sufficient at this point as Norman as a male is oppressed by his mother and Aileen as a female is oppressed by men. The two of them do experience a binary construct here.

job as a prostitute. Both characters are, due to their queerness, prevented from taking part in society in an acceptable manner. What seems to be problematic is the depiction of their sexuality as a trauma-based choice, linked to their criminal behavior.

Norman and Aileen both cross classic binary structures and are part of an interstice which might most aptly be classified as “queer,” defying conventional classifications. The two of them take over behavioral patterns of the opposite gender in order to imitate the power and control those people held over them. Norman’s transgression of gender eventually goes so far that he fully dismisses his male gender identity, seeing himself only in the role of the mother at the end of the film. Aileen sticks to her adopted stereotypically male behavioral patterns, for example as the protector in the relationship, confessing to her murders on the phone in order to shelter Selby from punishment. Aileen and Norman thus fail in their attempts to truly break out of suppressive gender structures, reducing their own gender roles to mimicking stereotypes of the opposite one respectively.

My analysis therefore focuses on a distribution of power grounded in gender, forcing victimized Aileen Wuornos and Norman Bates into their offenders’ roles in order to escape helplessness and dependence. This means that they try to gain control over their own lives by perpetuating behavioral patterns established by oppressing others.

ESTABLISHMENT OF REPRESSIVE POWER STRUCTURES DURING CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Patty Jenkins’s *Monster* hints at Aileen Wuornos’s childhood experiences with the help of flashbacks at the beginning of the film as well as Aileen’s own recollections. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* provides information about Norman Bates’s childhood at different points during the film. Both characters suffered a difficult childhood, co-founding their gender transgression. Norman, whose mother was, as already indicated, “[o]verbearing, controlling, [and] oppressive” (San Juan and McDevitt 2013: 143), was not able to detach himself from her influence, even as an adult.

It is the conversation between Norman and Marion especially which is portrayed in a very interesting and revelatory fashion, symbolizing “Mother’s” authority over Norman. The birds, seen all over Norman’s parlor, are directly linked to Mrs. Bates through the comparison Norman draws between his mother and the stuffed birds. Such a comparison can already be found in classical mythology, as Barbara Creed explains: “The association of the mother with birds of prey who attack children is not unique to *Psycho*. In classical mythology, the

striges were women with the bodies of birds and the clawed feet of vultures; they flew out at night to suck the blood of children and eat their flesh” (1993: 143-4). When Marion and Norman start talking about his mother, the camera focuses on Norman in a low angle shot, an owl positioned above and behind him in the background. This predator, captured in a moment of preying and surveying the situation from a superior position, stands for the mother’s side of Norman’s psyche. Although the mother is already dead at this time (which a first-time viewer will only get to know later on), she is still in control of her son, soon to take possession of him, which will make him kill young Marion.

Norman’s childhood is only vaguely alluded to. The absence of a male attachment figure – Norman’s father died when he was only five years old² – made Norman grow up in a matriarchal family structure. Hereby, the extremely close relationship to his mother, termed “an idyllic sphere of almost umbilical oneness” (2013: 37) by José Villar, must have brought problems with it, being of an ambivalent character. Norman does indeed emphasize that “my mother and I were more than happy” (*Psycho*: 1:38:22-1:38:24). Imitating her way of talking to him, however, he always acts in a suppressive, disrespectful and provocative manner in his role as “Norman-as-mother” towards “Norman-as-himself.”³ This leads to arguments, one of which Marion witnesses shortly before her dinner with Norman. Here, Norman is repeatedly called “boy” (*Psycho*: 0:32:50-0:33:07) by his mother, which illustrates her superiority as well as his immature personality. Relating to the probable fact that Norman constructs these conversations from true memories,⁴ it is clear that his mother prevented him from obtaining the status of an adult man by using such words. Taking into consideration Alfred Adler’s theory of the inferiority complex, which is inherent to all of us and which we have to overcome during childhood (cf.

² While commonly the talk of ‘deprivation’ in psychology is linked to the mother and proven to “have important influences on children’s psychological development” (Meadows 2018: 223), the loss of a father is also to be seen as a form of deprivation, influencing Norman’s development.

³ These terms have been taken from Deborah Thomas who used the titles of “Norman-as-mother” and “Norman-as-himself” for the two parts of Bates’s self in her analysis “On Being Norman” (2009: 373).

⁴ Wendy Lawrenson explains, regarding child development: “The messages of others will in part become the messages repeated by the child to the child about themselves.” (2017: 295) With the mother being the first and often most important attachment figure for a child, it is highly likely that Norman has memorized her messages towards him in particular.

Lawrenson 2017: 271), Norman got stuck inside this inferiority, always subordinating himself under the superiority of his mother.

At the same time, however, Norman tries to explain and justify his mother's actions: "I don't hate her. I hate what she's become. I hate the illness." (*Psycho* 0:40:37-0:40:45) His choice of words becomes even more interesting retrospectively, after the viewer has learned that Norman is the one suffering from a split personality. Thus, he is actually talking about himself in this comment. He might, to a certain degree, even be aware of this fact, although this cannot be judged definitively; discussing it further would stray too far away from the issue developed in this analysis.

Moreover, the psychiatrist sheds light upon Norman's childhood. He sees Bates as "dangerously disturbed [...] ever since his father died" (*Psycho* 1:43:42-1:43:46) and his mother as "a clinging, demanding woman" (*Psycho* 1:43:47-1:43:52). Norman's split personality and hence his transgression of gender are shown as a consequence of motherly control and power exertion while he was still a child. What resulted thereof was not only undermined self-confidence, but a loss of his whole self. Norman sees no other way to end this situation but to take over his mother's power structures, which eventually leads to his adoption of her personality into his body and mind.

Aileen's case is very similar insofar as she, too, takes over suppressive behavioral patterns of the opposite gender in order to free herself from dependency. *Monster* offers an explanation for her deeds by granting an insight into the protagonist's childhood experiences. Here, *Monster* is less obscure than *Psycho* since Jenkins uses flashbacks and hence chooses a visual representation. The film begins with a series of short sequences in smaller format, indicating the "temporal distance in relation to the main diegetic action" (Loreck 2016: 107). A few of them leave the impression of private home videos usually filmed by parents as a keepsake. This relation bears a disturbing effect, since the videos show multiple scenes of encroachment upon Aileen by men. A close-up of Aileen's face, her eyes being shut at first and the corners of her mouth unhappily pulled downward, clearly shows her indisposition and even anguish. After she has opened her eyes, a reverse shot on a male face follows. It completely fills the screen and therewith radiates an uncomfortable closeness and feeling of threat. The next reverse shot focuses back on Aileen taking a deep breath and closing her eyes again, which hints at a negative experience from which she tries to escape by shutting her eyes (cf. *Monster* 0:01:01-0:01:07). Thus, sexual abuse is not visible within the flashbacks, yet the semblance of private home videos clearly alludes to the topic of child pornography. The last two

scenes, finally, show Aileen carrying out sexual acts. These voluntary⁵ acts probably function as her first step towards prostitution.

Juli L. Parker, who generally voices a negative opinion about *Monster*, wrongly observes that “[t]he film misrepresents these aspects of her story [the experiences of true Aileen Wuornos] to construct her purely as a monster” (2010: 176; my annotation). With regard to the flashbacks dealing with exactly these aspects, however, the created picture of Aileen is one that marks her as a victim of her own circumstances and that relates her later crimes to the topic of “socioeconomic despair and gendered violence” (McCann 2014: 6). Thus, she is not only exactly the “Monster”, but instead her “adult behavior is explained through childhood experiences, especially traumatic ones” (Loreck 2016: 108). Aileen’s hopelessness related to the structures which have been shaping her since childhood is emphasized by the voice-over spoken by Aileen herself. She starts to speak in a dreamy tone, but her voice becomes more and more hopeless and desperate. The calm sounds of the music reinforce the impression of a childish fantasy out of reach. Here, Aileen is outlined as a character to empathize with. The viewers “feel curious about the life represented onscreen” (Loreck 2016: 107). These introductory scenes eventually end in an abrupt manner. During the last sequence, a man makes Aileen leave his car after he has given her money for her sexual services. Obviously, she had wanted their encounter to go in another direction, not seeing herself as a prostitute, but hoping for the commencement of a genuine relationship or the possibility of social advancement. The music fades while young Aileen chases the car and grown-up Aileen talks via voice-over about fading dreams. This is followed by a cut with Aileen uttering the words “One day, it just stopped” (*Monster* 0:02:05-0:02:15). The next scene shows her sitting under a bridge while it is raining heavily, the title of the film is displayed in red letters. More cuts follow: the spectators first perceive a pistol and some money in Aileen’s hands; then, a close-up shows her face and her hair, soaking wet. Aileen’s childhood ended as abruptly as did these opening scenes. The innocence normally associated with children was taken away from her very early by her abusers. As early as at this stage, the film proclaims that such experiences are still ongoing throughout Aileen’s adult life and that she is not able to leave these structures rendering her powerless.

⁵ Here, it should be mentioned that Aileen, according to her own proclamations via voice-over, hopes to be “discovered” one day and, always believing that this could be the man helping her to a social climbing, she gets involved with them.

Both Aileen and Norman experience suppressive and traumatizing patterns during their childhood and adolescence. While in the case of Aileen, sexual abuse is an obvious trauma, the maternal deprivation Norman suffers from in a double sense – first when his mother’s new lover enters his life, secondly through her death – can also be categorized as a traumatic experience. Such traumas arrest normal development (cf. Diepold 1998: 131). Since these patterns are connected to their respective opposite genders, Aileen sees power in the hands of males, while Norman learns, by the example of his mother, that a female is in control. Both characters try to escape from these familiar structures.

THE ABORTIVE ATTEMPT TO LEAVE BINARY STRUCTURES

For formerly suicidal Aileen, meeting Selby signifies a big change. The story of the film suggests that it is the first time Aileen falls in love. She herself admits to Selby: “I don’t like anyone really – but I like you.” (*Monster* 0:19:18-0:19:24) It is very interesting to examine Aileen’s role during the kissing scene with Selby – even more so when comparing it to the following scene in which Aileen commits murder for the first time.

Skating together on the roller rink, Selby and Aileen become closer. The camera gradually zooms in on the two women, thereby creating a more and more intimate moment which culminates in over-the-shoulder shots and close-ups of the women’s faces and their kiss. First, Aileen seems to be nearly overwhelmed by the situation, which might be explained by the fact that she has as yet not experienced a positive side to sexual acts (or a homosexual one). Thus, she faces a whole new feeling. Nevertheless, she is the one initiating the kiss. The effect of the scene is emphasized musically. The song playing is Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’”⁶. The instrumental part bridging the first and the second stanza and the opening of the guitar is placed directly before the climax of the scene. Here, the guitar “opens [...] the sound and eventually plays legato, whereby – supported by a dynamic tube amplifier – the volume rises enormously” (Herbst 2014). This creates an exciting moment the

⁶ This song does not only fit musically extremely well, but also thematically: Journey sing about the great love in life and about the desire for personal fulfillment. Newly enamored, Aileen must feel that Selby is her “great love.” Later, they dream about reaching a kind of better life for themselves, which would be their own personal fulfillment.

denouement of which even has an effect of relief upon the spectator. The next shot shows Selby and Aileen in front of the building, kissing more passionately. Here, too, Aileen seems to occupy a more dominant role, pushing Selby against the wall and acting more actively (cf. *Monster* 0:17:34-0:18:20).

In a heteronormative understanding, the fact that Selby is smaller than Aileen with a more typically feminine outer appearance, assigns the male part of a relationship to Aileen. Here, Aileen clearly leaves behind heteronormative behavioral patterns attributed to her biological sex. By “eagerly assum[ing] the role of husband and breadwinner” (Picart and Greek 2009: 104), promising to earn money, she pushes Selby into the clichéd role of a passive housewife, which the latter readily takes on. The two of them, thereby, live in a relationship with very commonly distributed roles. At the same time, however, they negate exactly these stereotypical roles by the simple fact that they are two women, engaged in a lesbian love affair.

At the end of the kissing scene, Aileen’s face lights up with a broad grin for the first and the last time during the movie. It shows how lucky she feels in this moment. Here, she might also most possibly be termed as “pretty.” A lot of critics noticed that the discussion about the film *Monster* and its content drifted off into a debate about actress Charlize Theron’s transformation in the form of an “extensive costuming and make-up process to disguise her glamorous looks” (Loreck 2016: 118). So, being able to “perform Wuornos’s character convincingly” (ibid.) was inextricably linked to negating Theron’s own femininity. This, in turn, deprives Aileen of her femininity. Bryan McCann rightly claims that “[a]n emphasis on Theron’s portrayal of Wuornos subordinated readings of the film as a radical text on gendered violence” (2014: 2). Yet, what is important to stress is “*Monster*’s potential as a text that challenges hegemonic notions of gender and violence” (ibid.). Thus, Aileen’s transgressive transformation has to be viewed in the context of “gendered violence,” and slipping into a male role means, for her, an attempt to escape her present life.

While Aileen is clearly discriminated against because of her gender (and her sex, considering the childhood abuse and her life as a prostitute), the film portrays her queerness, exemplified in her lesbian relationship and her unfeminine behavior and appearance, as a socially-driven choice also rooted in childhood trauma. Aileen experiences violence in direct relation to her gender, and therefore seeks to identify with the opposite gender in order to flee from oppression.

The transformation takes place as a direct result of Aileen’s first murder. This scene deconstructs the image of Aileen with which the

viewer was presented during the encounter with Selby. Here, she appears as a violent, loud fury hardly being able to control her rage, still hitting her client and tormentor with her weapon even after having already emptied the whole magazine in his corpse. The background for her action is shown brutally, though explained beforehand which renders her action understandable, making her someone to empathize with. The man does in fact threaten to kill her so that her only possibility of survival consists of killing him and therewith reversing the distribution of power. This takes place at a visual level, with Aileen standing above the man lying on the ground after she has shot him down. During the preceding rape scene, he was the one positioned above her, indicating his power over her. Kathrin Friedrich explains that, in this scene, the “roles of perpetrator and victim become blurred” (2008: 134) and that Aileen, “putting on an overall of her client, visually slips into his role” (ibid.). Thus, she takes over control that was formerly exerted over her, and so transgresses gender roles.

While for Aileen power has always been in the hands of men, *Psycho*’s Norman Bates experiences it the other way round, his mother being the one in control over him. He, like Aileen, loses the ascription to a clear gender identity when he tries to break away from structures subordinating him under his mother’s influence. The psychiatrist is the one who explains that Norman killed his mother and her lover, probably out of jealousy. He refers to the so-called Oedipus complex which implies that the phallic phase, during which a boy feels a desire towards his mother, has not been overcome, as it happens usually. As a result, the boy is unable to detach himself from the mother and instead identifies with her gender. The fact that Norman grew up with his mother fatherless, having lost him very early, makes it indeed probable that he literally took over his father’s place instead of subordinating under a fatherly authority. Although the Oedipus complex is seen as controversial, the film truly suggests that Norman bound himself to his mother so closely that a detachment was not possible any more. Norman uttering “A boy’s best friend is his mother” (*Psycho* 0:37:13-0:37:16) during his conversation with Marion underlines this thesis. Even more interestingly, he declares shortly afterwards: “A son is a poor substitute for a lover.” (*Psycho* 0:39:59-0:40:02) Yet, it is not discernible if he hoped to be or if he felt forced to be his mother’s lover. In either case, he felt such expectations pressured upon him which he could not fulfill, thus “develop[ing] a sense of ‘shame’ [and] creating a sense of unworthiness” (Lawrenson 2017: 272).

Murdering his mother was an attempt to break free from her power and influence because even Norman's jealousy towards her new partner must have felt like an imposition upon him by her. Hoping to break his jealousy and thereby escape her power, Norman murders his mother. However, he was simply unable to live without her since he had been dependent on her his whole life. Concerning this, the psychiatrist explains further that Norman virtually tried to "erase the crime, at least in his own mind. [...] So, he began to think and speak for her, give her half his life" (*Psycho* 1:44:20-1:44:53). This made him wear her clothes and imitate her voice and way of talking. Although the psychiatrist does not want to categorize Norman as a transvestite, this definition suits him quite well, according to Julie Tharp: "A male transvestite is [...], by Freudian definition, expressing a desire to be one with his mother." (1991: 113) Norman shows this desire by cross-dressing in his mother's clothes, talking in her voice, and ultimately seeing himself as her. As it is the case with Aileen, Norman's queerness, defined as "not fitting into current understandings of normative straightness" by Alexander Doty (2000: 157), is depicted as a pick influenced by social causes and childhood trauma. Since this gender transgression is also connected to the murders Norman, and also Aileen, commit, *Psycho* as well as *Monster* present a problematic link between their protagonists' queer sexuality and their pathological, criminal behavior.

TAKING OVER CONTROL AS THE LAST STEP TOWARDS GENDER TRANSGRESSION

Both characters do not conform to the socially expected, heteronormative, gender role that is associated with their biological sex. Norman's very first appearance in *Psycho* does, in fact, reveal his queerness, closely connected to his split personality, already indicating which of the two characters within him is the stronger one. The spectators can only understand this in retrospect, recognizing that the female figure seen in the window upon Marion's arrival to the hotel is Norman himself – only dressed as his mother (cf. *Psycho* 0:27:38-0:27:41). Being her, he feels more powerful and authoritative. Norman does not link femininity, as it is in socially acceptable gender norms, with passivity and lack of agency. Instead, through the exertion of power by his mother, Norman learnt very early to perceive the feminine role as an active and powerful one, while his own male gender was being suppressed and helpless. Longing after exerting control, too, he started adopting his mother's personality. Actually, however, he merely controls himself. Diane Negra rightly claims that Norman "murders

women he finds desirable in order to punish himself” (1996: 194). This seems logical when considering Norman’s childhood once again. Fostering an incestuous desire towards his mother, which he could not, due to the absence of a father, dispose of developmentally, led to extremely ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, he yearned after his mother, but on the other, he felt very guilty exactly because of this yearning. At the same time, his mother behaved very ambivalently herself, reinforcing his wish with a high level of intimacy. Yet, she decisively rejected his attempt to explore his Oedipal desire. The words “Don’t you touch me” (*Psycho* 1:26:39-1:26:41), which she utters when Norman wants to take her down into the cellar after she or, more exactly, “Norman-as-mother” (Thomas 2009: 369), has murdered Detective Arbogast and which he ignores deliberately, remind of the resistance against sexual assaults.

More than a few critics have associated the so-called shower scene, “the most famous murder in movie history” (Smith III 2009: 80), with metaphoric rape. The knife functions as a phallic symbol, penetrating the woman’s body, and indeed, against “many claims that *Psycho*’s shower scene never shows the knife penetrating flesh [...], you can actually see the knife go in” (ibid. 73). So, Norman has performed quite a paradoxical transformation in adopting his mother’s personality. While the viewer might rather suspect that Norman acts out his desire towards Marion in his male role, this is not possible for him due to his childhood experiences. For Norman, his mother was too powerful a character – among other things, because she denied his wish – so that he, as an adult, has to slip into her role in order to exert power. Abstruse as this might seem at first, Norman is only able to pursue his longing as long as he does not act in his own role in which he cannot stand up to women. It is very interesting to note that the knife enters close to the navel, “symbol of one’s attachment to mother” (ibid.). Thus, the symbolic rape of Marion represents Norman’s incestuous desire towards his own mother dating back to his childhood.

What is more, this scene reveals an important and problematic point the film *Psycho* makes about its protagonist’s non-normative sexuality, which is, as I have already mentioned, its link to Norman’s murders. He does not simply transgress gender roles but also commits crimes in his mother’s disguise, because he is not able to deal with his own sexuality, let alone live it in a socially acceptable manner. The film’s title “Psycho,” then, clearly shows society’s perception of Norman Bates. He is wandering “at the outer limit of the wrong side, [...] the psycho path” (Rickels 2016: 28) and is classified as mentally ill, “dangerously disturbed” (*Psycho* 1:43:42-1:43:43).

The question if and to what extent Norman knows about his split personality is never answered. It is obvious that he is not fully ignorant of the actions of “Norman-as-mother” (Thomas 2009: 369) when he hesitates in choosing a room for Marion and when he is unable to utter the word “bathroom” in the hotel room where he will later murder Marion and where he has probably murdered at least two women before her. Deborah Thomas names different possible reasons for his behavior (cf. *ibid.* 373), but the assumption that “Norman’s knowledge is very precariously suppressed, and his identification with his mother and her desires invades even those moments when he is being Norman” (*ibid.* 374) seems natural. This is quite evident after his dinner with Marion. The film hints at the coming takeover of Norman’s personality by his mother’s with the help of different allusions. Thomas only mentions Norman’s hesitation “about going upstairs” (*ibid.*) after he has returned to the house. Certainly, this is a very insightful moment in the movie, revolving around the question of how much Norman knows about the split off part of his identity. As his mother’s room is upstairs, going there probably also means “transgressing.” Yet, this is already indicated minutes before. While Norman watches Marion undress through a hole in the wall, the music is intensified by violins continuing in a higher pitch, making the scene tenser. Shortly before Norman takes away the picture hiding the hole in the wall, he is presented in a medium close-up, with the owl resplendent diagonally above him in the corner. It was Norman himself who related his mother to the birds by claiming: “She’s as harmless as one of those stuffed birds.” (*Psycho* 0:41:34-0:41:39) After having put the picture back above the hole, Norman glances shortly, like being caught in the act, back across his right shoulder, probably in the direction of the house that is situated a little way up from the motel. The following close-up of his face reflects impenetrable thoughtfulness. This is repeated shortly thereafter, when Norman has left the reception area of the motel, still standing in the doorway. Again, he takes a look across his shoulder towards the house. The camera swivels from his profile to a frontal close-up of his face. Here, Norman looks very resolute. It remains to be discussed, however, what his countenance might disclose – does Norman want to face his mother without bending to her will? Is it her personality surfacing, already decisive about taming his voyeurism by murdering Marion?

Monster’s Aileen does not suffer from a split personality, like *Psycho’s* protagonist does. She does, however, take on behavioral patterns of the opposite gender in order to achieve a more powerful position. At first, she earnestly tries to participate in the patriarchal society in a proper manner by searching for a decent job. These scenes especially show

Aileen's awkward behavior in social situations and that typical femininity just does not fit her. She obviously feels uncomfortable in her blouse, skirt and ankle boots, and for the spectator, this sight is odd and nearly ironic. The effect is emphasized by Aileen's own meta-comment via voice-over, with her uttering, for instance, that she gave her baby up for adoption when she was nearly thirteen years old (cf. *Monster* 0:39:00-0:39:05), while the visual level of the film shows her waiting for a job interview. Noticeably, she is again deceived and denounced in a world dominated by men. This finally culminates in Aileen being forced to perform oral sex on a police officer who claims that "you might owe me one" (*Monster* 0:44:42-0:44:44), having spared her from imprisonment some months ago – but not without harming her physically.⁷ All these incidents make clear that it is simply impossible for Aileen to change her present living conditions for the better in a socially acceptable manner. Undoubtedly, this is supported by her transgressive gender, refusing clear attribution. For Aileen, her last resort lies in reversing power structures she has come to know and in perpetuating them in such an inverted manner.

In order to rise from victim to perpetrator, she adopts the behavior of the man who raped her and whom she killed. Uttering the words "I just like to settle first" (*Monster* 0:50:01-0:50:04), it is her who delays the sexual act with her next client. Also, her observation that they have made a good deal reminds the spectator of her last client, whereas Aileen herself seems to be unaware of this connection. The murder is depicted as a kind of displacement activity on behalf of Aileen, who remembers her last encounter with a client, when the current one asks her to satisfy him orally. Talking about traumatization, Barbara Diepold explains that a trauma which is not successfully split off recurs film-like, thereby torturing the victim anew (1998: 132). This obviously happens to Aileen. Her face is shown in a close-up and zoomed in even closer subsequently. Her eyes rapidly move to and fro, illustrating her overextension and her search for a way to leave the situation. She then shuts her eyes for a short instant, seemingly close to throwing up. In this moment, she decides to kill the man and fires at him. The comment "fucking child molester" (*Monster* 0:51:37-0:51:40) appears to be a kind of justification, a reassurance for herself that she is doing the right thing.⁸

Aileen feels safer the more men she murders and thereby appears more like the cold-blooded serial killer the public believed true Aileen Wuornos to be. During her penultimate murder, the motif of the remote

⁷ Aileen reminds him of the fact that he nearly broke her jaw.

⁸ The client asked her to call him "Daddy."

area of the forest is intensified. She leads her client several hundred feet into the woods on foot where she then shoots him. Regarding the fact that serial killers were exclusively male hitherto (cf. Egger 1984: 350, qtd. in: Hart 1994: 136), Thomas Doherty announces: “When an anonymous hooker turns the tables and kills the man, she subverts more than genre expectations.” (2004: 5) What she does subvert beyond that are gender roles. Here, too, like Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, the film *Monster* directly links Aileen’s gender transgression to her crimes. Her non-normative sexuality, therefore, is presented like Lee Edelman views queerness: as “a place [...] of abjection expressed in the stigma” (2004: 3). The title “Monster” can be read in exactly this sense and would therefore also fit Norman Bates. According to Johannes F. Lehmann, the word “Monster” describes “das Unbezeichnare”⁹ (2009: 192) which eventually hints at “the failure of linguistic distinctions and categories when it comes to certain (non-) entities” (ibid.). Both Aileen and Norman stand outside of the present social order, due to their transgressive behavior. They cannot be adequately categorized, refusing a definitive binary classification.

Aileen’s subversion of gender roles also becomes more and more apparent in her relationship with Selby whom she, for instance, carries across the threshold of their new house like a groom does with his bride. Moreover, Aileen wants to control Selby increasingly, e.g. when the latter goes out without telling Aileen. Upon closer inspection of the women’s relationship, Aileen’s role can quickly be labeled as only seemingly dominant. This is even shown on a more graphic scale during the love scene between the two characters. Selby is the first to touch Aileen by gently stroking her back. As Picart and Greek remark, Selby “lies atop Aileen’s body (and) after they have made love, as they embrace, Selby’s head is above Aileen’s as if she were cradling the larger woman” (2009: 106). But while Picart and Greek talk about a “role reversal occur[ing]” (ibid.) initially in this scene, Selby did in fact inhabit the dominant role before. It is her who pushes Aileen back into prostitution when the latter does not find another job, and it is also Selby who expresses more and more material needs without helping to fulfill them. Ultimately, it should have become clear that Aileen Wuornos, like Norman Bates, reaches a position in which she can exert power – but that she, too, is still under control and suppression.

⁹ As it is quite difficult to find a fitting English equivalent for this term, I decided to leave the German one. It means “something that has no name” or “something that cannot be termed with a name”.

REMAINING IN OPPOSITIONAL GENDER ROLES AFTER THE REVELATION OF THE MURDERS

The stories of both Norman Bates and Aileen Wuornos end tragically after their murders are uncovered. It is interesting to note that the two of them remain in the roles they have adopted during the course of their actions. While Norman's personality is fully taken up by his mother's side, Aileen cannot let go of her role as Selby's protector even after she has been arrested. This is revealed during their last phone call. Aileen has already been imprisoned and Selby is meant to make Aileen confess to the murders. The two of them are still heard talking via voice-over with the scene showing Aileen already in handcuffs standing trial. After Aileen has spoken the words "I'm never gonna see you again" (*Monster* 1:36:15-1:36:18), Selby enters the witness stand and identifies Aileen as the guilty one by pointing at her. In this scene, the camera is placed behind Selby, with Aileen being in the dock at the end of Selby's outstretched finger. It is obvious that the distance between the two women cannot be overcome anymore. While they look at each other for the last time, Aileen smiles benevolently amid tears – she forgives Selby for testifying against her and she tells her so by nodding several times. Selby's facial expression, however, remains frozen, and eventually she turns away by lowering her gaze (cf. *Monster* 1:36:58-1:37:06).

The last words Aileen utters in the courtroom – "Sending a raped woman to death" (*Monster* 1:37:41-1:37:45) – once again raise the question of how she came about committing the murders and acting like she did. *Monster* shows quite clearly that "[r]ather than being established as the demonic other that must be exorcised from mainstream society, the serial killer is explicitly identified as that society's logical and inevitable product" (Picart and Greek 2009: 109). The discussion about the origin of serial killers is therefore explicitly connected to a responsibility on the part of society. This is also how the ending of the film, which nearly seems to be a hopeful one, might be interpreted. Admittedly, Aileen dismisses all of the sayings she recites, like "Love conquers all" and "Where there is life, there is hope," with the hackneyed phrase "They gotta tell you something" (*Monster* 1:37:52-1:38:19). Her voice, however, does not sound ironical or even cynical. Instead, the spectator is invited to reflect upon Aileen's motives and reasons for her deeds, which is automatically a reflection about society's responsibility.

This makes Aileen revert to her victim role, implicating stereotypical gender roles. Doherty concludes his essay with the realization that

“[a]pparently, [...] any female [...] must in the end be the real victim” (2004: 3). Whereas he criticizes that Aileen was drawn too likeable a character in the film,¹⁰ the real meaning behind his statement should be considered. Aileen only evolves into a delinquent because she has been a victim in many ways before, especially due to her sex. It is undeniable that the majority of her murders are not to be justified. Yet, the fact that the violations she had to endure were never tried, depriving her of a sense of justice, should not be neglected.

For Norman, however, justice is not relevant anymore at the end of *Psycho*, as he as Norman does not exist anymore. After the psychiatrist has explained Norman’s case at length, the latter is brought a blanket by a police officer. During this scene, the camera stops on the corridor, while the officer enters the interrogation room so that the viewer only hears Norman’s mother’s voice saying “thank you” (*Psycho* 1:47:26-1:47:28). The next shot shows Norman, still seated in the interrogation room, with his mother beginning to speak via voice-over. While she affirms her innocence, claiming that her son was “always bad” (*Psycho* 1:47:49-1:47:51), the camera zooms in on Norman’s face from a long shot to a close-up. Tania Modleski reads this scene, in which “Mrs. Bates’ [...] speaks through her son’s body to protest her innocence” (1988: 15), as an indicator for the mother’s true innocence, meaning that the guilt is to be placed on the son alone. Admittedly, shedding full light on an ultimate truth is not possible. Yet, her cold and calculating tone of voice and the obvious fact that she tries to draw a peculiarly guiltless picture of herself make it extremely difficult for the viewer to believe the “mother.” She¹¹ decides, for instance, not to move and not to harm a fly crawling on her hand, because she is convinced and even hopes that she is being watched. It is the last shot before the next cross-fade in particular that gives the mother clearly more influence than she lets on. Norman’s face broadens with a grin, his mother-side being confident of conveying the right, passive impression, whereupon his mother’s skull is put above his face before a cut follows. This proclaims that the mother has always been the stronger personality, controlling Norman even beyond death.

In the end, Norman has to take the whole blame which reminds of Aileen who saves Selby from all consequences. Truly, Aileen was the

¹⁰ Real Aileen Wuornos was merely presented as a cold-blooded, calculating murderess by the majority of the media so that the main body of society perceived her this way. For a lot of critics, the pitiful staging of her person in *Monster* is therefore inappropriate.

¹¹ Of course, Norman is to be seen here. Since it is in the person of his mother that the remarks are made, I chose to use feminine pronouns.

one to commit the murders, as was Norman – and not his mother who was already dead. The two films implicate, however, that it happened with large influence on the behalf of the mother and Selby. Norman’s mother brought him up to be pathologically jealous and Selby urged Aileen to provide her with new cars and more money even after she had learned how these things came about.

Moreover, what the two movies have in common is what Doty remarks for Norman’s case: He functions outside of “established binaries of heterosexual-homosexual and masculine-feminine” (2000: 157). This applies to Aileen, too. Ultimately, according to Negra, who compares Norman’s gender trouble to that of Victor Frankenstein and Buffalo Bill, this constitutes a “grave threat to patriarchy” (1996: 198), since, as Negra explains further, “that most transgressive of all cultural desires [is] the wish to embody two genders simultaneously [...], as a route to non-phallic power” (ibid.). Peter Biskind’s and Barbara Creed’s argument follows accordingly, seeing *Psycho* as a conservative film centering on “patriarchal fears of women [and] a conservative moral lesson about gender roles” (Jancovich 1996: 222). So, Norman, who dresses in his mother’s clothes, speaks in her voice, and eventually adopts her personality, is clearly situated outside of acceptable social norms. His appearance as a “sensitive male” (ibid. 223) already marks him as a “disturbed figure who suffers from gender confusion” (ibid.). This is similar to Aileen who refuses a stereotypically feminine role assignment due to her unwomanly outer appearance as well as her lesbian relationship with Selby. This is aggravated by her transformation towards a more masculine demeanor.

CONCLUSION

My analysis has shown that the two protagonists of *Psycho* and *Monster*, Norman Bates and Aileen Wuornos, do display several commonalities regarding their transgression of gender roles and gender norms. Both were pushed into seeing their own sex in a very ambivalent way through the experiences they had had in their childhood. *Psycho* refers to this fact by having the psychiatrist explain Norman’s childhood and by employing different symbols, like the birds that are associated with the mother. *Monster*, on the other hand, uses flashbacks to convey a visual image of Aileen’s experiences. Subsequently, the two characters approach their respective opposite gender more and more. The two films present their protagonists’ sexuality, most aptly termed as “queer,” as trauma-based and socially-caused pathology, which opens a wide field of discussion. While queerness, homo-, or transsexuality per se cannot be seen as solemnly influenced by

childhood experiences, let alone as pathology, we are not able to fully dismiss these factors in the cases of Aileen and Norman. It is true that we might not fully answer the question if the stories of Aileen and Norman (and along with them, their sexuality) would have taken a different direction, had they been able to function outside of binary gender norms.

The films are definitely worth a closer look because the debate of inadequacy concerning binary divisions, denotations, and structures in the gender field is a very current one. Both *Monster* and *Psycho* present characters that do not fit into a socially predetermined image of sex, gender, and their roles. On the one hand, the two movies play with definitive feminine and masculine stereotypes and their protagonists are forced to choose one of the two options without being able to embody both at the same time, due to social patterns. For both cases, it is possible to talk of “gender dysphoria,” meaning “a condition in which someone is intensely uncomfortable with their biological gender and strongly identifies with, and wants to be, the opposite gender.” (Lawrenson 2017: 286) On the other hand, the films repeatedly blur the lines and give short insights into an interstice that eludes Norman and Aileen, and that today, still, is often out of reach for those who see themselves outside of normative patterns, be their sexuality gay, lesbian, trans, queer, or without any of these ascriptions.

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