

A Review of Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer

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Jan 1998

Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer, 87 minutes. 1992. \$19.99. Fox Lorber Home Video, Los Angeles, CA.

Aileen Wuornos has been billed as “America’s first female serial killer.” A former prostitute now on Florida’s death row, Wuornos has been convicted of murdering seven “clients.” Wuornos claims that she murdered the men in an effort to defend herself against their violent abuses. Nick Broomfield’s documentary presents her story in a starkly realistic manner. The result is a “truth is stranger than fiction” story that leaves viewers with many questions regarding the murder investigation and trials of Ms. Wuornos. The documentary introduces the viewer to the compellingly strange characters that became a part of Ms. Wuornos’ life following her arrest for murder. The characters speak for themselves, often exposing themselves as uncaring, crass, and opportunistic.

Wuornos received her first death sentence following a conviction for the murder of Richard Mallory. The film includes taped testimony offered in the trial. Wuornos tells of a brutal rape that ended only when she shot Mallory. The prosecution was aided by the testimony of Tyria Moore, Wuornos’ former lover. In a series of taped phone conversations that border on entrapment, Wuornos tells Moore that “if I have to confess to everything just to keep you out of trouble I will.” Her lover’s response was “do it now, get it over with.” The prosecution was further aided by the fact that evidence regarding Mallory’s record, which included a 10-year institutionalization for sexual violence (NBC *Dateline*), was not raised in the trial.

Much of the film focuses on lengthy and erratic negotiations regarding payment for an interview with Wuornos. One of the film’s main characters is Wuornos’ newly adopted mother, Arlene Pralle. She, along with self-promoting attorney Steven Glazer, who would clearly prefer to be a rock star, appear to control access to Wuornos. Pralle tells Broomfield that she has “a neat story, but I can’t tell you.” Likewise, Glazer tells Broomfield that Wuornos can provide a “fascinating story,” yet will not speak unless she is paid. Broomfield attempts to play the game by their rules, yet the rules seem to keep changing. To a certain extent Broomfield is duped into believing that he cannot get to Wuornos without going through Glazer and Pralle.

Glazer began his representation of Wuornos after her first conviction. The film exposes him as more interested in negotiating access and film deals than in addressing his client’s criminal charges. Wuornos received her second, third, and fourth death sentences after entering a “no contest” plea to three first-degree murders. Glazer and Pralle encouraged her to enter this plea. Their belief in Jesus Christ led them to argue that this plea, and the subsequent sentence, would speed Wuornos toward forgiveness. After sentencing, Wuornos angrily thanked the judge and told him that she would “be in heaven while you all are rotting in hell.” Wuornos cusses out the judge. Glazer sings a song about the electric chair. Pralle talks about Wuornos’ open door to heaven.

After an uncomfortable and distrustful exchange of money, Broomfield is granted access to Wuornos. Glazer, singing personal renditions of Pink Floyd tunes, in which he performs the vocals and all instruments, takes Broomfield on what the attorney calls a “seven-joint” ride to the prison. There are interesting moments as Broomfield’s “bull in a china closet” method of film making gets him in trouble with prison management. In the eventual interview, we learn that Wuornos is beginning to suspect that Pralle and Glazer are more interested in money than in her well being. By now this is no revelation to Broomfield and the viewers.

The film provides a picture of a woman who has been victimized by the system as well as those who have aligned themselves with her. The film raises important questions about the role of the American legal system and about the interaction of justice and the mass media. Many Hollywood production companies reportedly negotiated with police and others about rights to the Wuornos story. In some cases, the police may have initiated the negotiations before they even made an arrest. Police officers reportedly discussed movie deals with Tyria Moore, Wuornos’ lover, before they arrested Wuornos. The film suggests that evidence was ignored because it would reduce the value of the story. Hollywood was interested in a story about “America’s first female serial killer.” Therefore, the police intended to deliver this type of story.

A weakness of the film is related to the effort to document the role of specific players in the decision process through which Wuornos was arrested and prosecuted. In Broomfield's defense, not many of these people were interested in talking with him. He makes this point in a series of recorded phone calls that run with the film's final credits. Viewers are left to wonder just how far police and others went to provide a product of interest to Hollywood. Once students realize that this story is true, they become quite creative in their efforts to fill in the blanks.

Wuornos, although not necessarily a sympathetic character, has been exploited by nearly everyone associated with her case, and in fact, her entire life. The documentary describes her early life, which included her abandonment at three months of age. Her father, in prison for sexually abusing a young girl, committed suicide when Wuornos was seven. She was raised by an alcoholic grandfather who sadistically beat her. Wuornos began life on the streets at 15 and was raped at least five times before she was 18 years old. Her life of drinking, drugs, and abuse eventually led to prostitution. Exploitation was a dominant factor in her life and continued throughout her time in the justice system.

This film should interest students in a variety of criminology courses. It is a great film to include in a discussion of the role of the media. The film is also an interesting addition to introductory sociology or social problem courses where students are encouraged to discuss the players and mechanisms of our justice system. Students often do not believe that this video tells a true story. Instructors may find it helpful to bring news reports to distribute following the film. In most cases, the media presents Wuornos' story with very little sympathy. By focusing on varying depictions of the same story, we are able to illustrate the often subjective nature of the media and our system of justice.

The following questions and materials may be helpful in directing and focusing discussion of the documentary and the issues it raises. One of my goals is to encourage students to become critical consumers of information. These questions are directed toward that effort.

(1) What is it about serial killers that draws us to their stories? This discussion can focus on media fascination with serial killers as evidenced in news-based media as well as in films such as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Seven*, and *Copycat*. It is interesting to compare Hollywood depictions to real-life serial killers. Hollywood serial killers are more diabolic, and often much more intelligent, than Aileen Wuornos or others.

(2) If you were aware of Aileen Wuornos before the film, has this video altered your opinion of her? Similarly, do you now read newspaper reports (which can be provided for discussion) regarding Ms. Wuornos with a certain degree of skepticism?

(3) Is it possible that police officers, prosecutors, or others may seek personal gain through their association with certain cases? What can these individuals do to increase their chances of reward? Is the successful prosecution of this type of case a political stepping stone?

(4) Would a judge, jury, or the public quickly assume that Wuornos, a lesbian prostitute who does not possess what many define as natural beauty, is a murderer? Did her appearance, lifestyle, and personality make it easy to define her as "America's first female serial killer?"

(5) Was Wuornos a natural born killer, or did external factors lead her to death row? Would there have been a point in her life that her downward spiral could have been averted? Are there points in every life in which decisions or events can change the course of the future?

(6) Is it acceptable to sentence someone to death when adequate legal representation is not provided? What about Wuornos' post-conviction rights regarding appeals and *habeas corpus*? (For a discussion of these issues, see *Hill v. Butterworth* and *McFarland v. Scott*.)

(7) Did Wuornos' "clients" assume the risk of bodily harm by seeking the services of a prostitute? If so, does their consent mitigate her responsibility? (See *United States v. Beckford et al.* and *Wuornos v. State*, for a discussion of these issues.)

References

- Dateline*. 1992. NBC News (November 10).
Hill v. Butterworth, 941 F.Supp. 1129.

McFarland v. Scott, 512 US 849.

United States v. Beckford et al., 962 F.Supp. 804. *Wornos v. State*, 676 So.2d 972 Fla. 1996.

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JSTOR & *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 89-90.
American Sociological Association

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