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## INVESTMENTS IN CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE FEMALE SERIAL KILLER:

### RE-CONCEPTUALISING SPECTATORIAL 'IDENTIFICATION'

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**Abstract:** Arguing that the psychodynamic complexities of the film-viewing encounter remain inadequately theorised, this paper seeks to critique and to challenge existing *Screen* theory and cultural studies accounts of spectatorial 'identification' by reconceptualising the process as one of psychosocial investment (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Extracts are used here from interview data gathered using a series of in-depth free-association narrative [FANI]/biographical interpretive [BNIM] interviews (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, Wengraf 2001; 2013), which were carried out as a part of the author's doctoral research. Focusing specifically upon three key film texts, this empirically based and psychoanalytically-oriented psychosocial audience study explored the ways in which individuals are psychologically and biographically motivated to invest differently – both consciously and unconsciously – in cinematic constructions of the female serial killer. In this paper, it is suggested that cinematic investments of this kind can usefully be understood in terms of *self-primacy*, since viewers seem to read the films (differently) through their own selves. This phenomenon is theorised using the concept of narcissism – which is argued here to be both psychologically and socio-culturally significant – and in relation to the psychoanalytic notions of projection (Grant and Crawley 2002: 18) and phantasy (Glover 2009: 47-8). In this way, a contribution is made to the field of media audience studies, offering a more nuanced understanding of how and why individuals' own biographical experiences – and the narratives of self that they construct over their life course – bear so significantly upon their psychosocial engagements with, and investments in, a given film text.

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### The Female Serial Killer

The figure of the serial killer is considered to be simultaneously fascinating and terrifying, both sub- and super-human, 'strikingly deviant', and is said to 'powerfully evoke not only our deepest fears and taboos, but also our most repressed fantasies and desires' (Picart and Greek 2003: 39). A substantial body of media and cultural studies work has examined the various ways in which serial killers are represented within Western popular culture (e.g. Tithcott 1997, Jenkins 1994, Simpson 2000), whilst feminist research on the topic has

emphasised the questions of power, gender and sexuality evoked by such representations (Caputi 1987, Cameron and Frazer 1987, Deleyto 1997).

Whilst much of this work is concerned primarily with the male serial killer, however, relatively little consideration has been given to the representation of female serial killers in the media. Moreover, literature dealing with women who commit serial murder is produced most notably from a feminist perspective (e.g. Schilt 2000, Myers 2005, Schurman-Kauflin 2000). This body of work is dominated by a number of key arguments, suggesting that women who kill are routinely 'denied' agency and/or blame for their actions within media representations (e.g. Naffine 1987, Smart 1989), are constructed as either 'victims' or 'vamps' (Benedict 1992), mad or deviant (Jewkes 2004, Wilczynski 1997), and are often masculinised (Allen 1988, Chesney-Lind and Eliason 2006) and/or monsterised (Birch 1993, Chesney-Lind 1999, Berrington and Honkatukia 2002). The research outlined here also relies heavily on textual analysis, such that – despite the canonisation of the horror film text within contemporary audience studies (e.g. Cherry 2001, Hills 2005b, Chibnall and Petley 2001) – the role of actual viewers in (specific) relation to representations of the female serial killer has remained relatively unresearched. This matter became the specific focus of my doctoral thesis, which not only conceptualised film/viewer engagements as being psychosocially and biographically motivated, but involved speaking to actual viewers about their experiences.

The project took a case-study approach to this topic by focusing specifically on three key film texts: *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003), *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of A Serial Killer* (Broomfield, 1993), and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (Broomfield, 2003) – a mainstream Hollywood movie and two documentaries, respectively – all of which are based on the 'true' story of Aileen Wuornos. Labelled America's first female serial killer, Wuornos was charged with the murders of seven men, and executed on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2002 after spending twelve years on death row. As a Florida prostitute, her murder case provoked particular controversy because she insisted throughout her trial that she was raped and/or abused (or, crucially, was *threatened* with rape/abuse) by all seven of her victims, that she killed them in self-defence and, moreover, that she had a right to do so, regardless of her gender and/or occupation (Morrissey 2003: 38). Both the case itself and its widely publicised media representation have been extensively discussed within contemporary feminist research (e.g. Horeck 2007, Hart 1994), and it has been argued that Wuornos' consistent refusal to express remorse for the murders that she committed was interpreted by prosecutors as indicative of a cold-blooded and malevolent disposition (Keitner 2002). Her lesbian sexuality is considered

to have been used as further evidence of such a disposition, mirroring existing tendencies within contemporary media culture to criminalise homosexuality (Basilio 1996) and to portray lesbian women as aggressive (often predatory) criminals (Streib 1994). According to feminist, Lynda Hart, women like Aileen Wuornos are, quite simply, ‘not supposed to exist’ (1994: 152), making this story perhaps especially fascinating and worthy of further study.

### **Cinematic ‘Identification’**

Although audience studies work in both the film theory and cultural studies traditions has focused heavily upon the processes by which audiences identify with texts (or with certain *elements* of a text), the very concept of audience ‘identification’ is nevertheless considered by some theorists to be reductive and over simplistic (Barker 2000). It is also felt to be neglectful of important questions of social and cultural ‘difference’ (e.g. Barker *et al* 2001: 113), and reluctant to engage with or explore the (sometimes troubling) unconscious processes experienced by individual subjects within a media audience (e.g. Campbell 2005: 173), or the less immediately observable – or communicable – dimensions of audiencehood (Hills 2005a, 2007a). These are precisely those elements of the viewing experience that are more closely examined in this paper, which attests to the relevance of psychoanalytic understandings of ‘self’ in an audience studies context (e.g. Hills 1999).

Contemporary audience studies have also begun to theorise the spectatorial experience in psychosocial terms, exploring the ways in which viewers are positioned (and position themselves) in relation to the shared (social) and individual (psychical) elements of their identities (Kavaler-Adler 2009). Of particular relevance to my own research are studies that incorporate relational psychoanalytic frameworks into their explorations of the film/viewer relationship (e.g. Clarke 1994, Kuhn 2010, Bainbridge and Yates 2005; 2010). Such studies tend to draw most extensively upon Winnicottian frameworks (see also Silverstone 1994) as a means of ‘explor[ing] creative engagement with the media as an object of fantasy that constitutes a transitional bridge between inner and outer worlds’ (Yates 2010: 4), thereby conceptualising the film viewing experience as one in which ‘real’ viewers relate to, consume and use cultural resources and texts. This paper builds upon some of these ideas, but takes a slightly different epistemological approach. Observing that the application of Kleinian ideas within the field of media/cultural studies remains limited (Yates 2010: 3), my work draws extensively upon Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson’s (2000, 2008) notion of

‘defended’ – as opposed to unitary, rational – subjectivity. From this theoretical (and methodological) perspective, informed by Kleinian psychoanalysis, it is presupposed that anxiety is inherent in the human condition, and that defences against this anxiety are mobilised largely at an unconscious level (Hollway and Jefferson 2001: 107). It is therefore argued that our unconscious defences, which function to protect us from feeling vulnerable and anxious (Gadd and Jefferson 2007: 84), motivate our actions and behaviours, are implicated in our discursive ‘choices’, and thus bear significantly not only upon the film-viewing process itself, but also upon the accounts that viewers provide of their own spectatorial experiences. As this paper will demonstrate, the approach described here – oriented as it is towards Kleinian, rather than Winnicottian ideas – facilitates a better understanding of the sheer diversity of readings made by different viewers in relation to the same three film texts, especially in terms of how these readings are motivated by specific (biographically significant) unconscious anxieties, conflicts and phantasies.

With these concerns in mind, it is argued that the notion of audience ‘identification’ can helpfully be re-conceptualised as one of ‘investment’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 15). Following Hollway and Jefferson, the methodological framework devised for the project assumes that ‘neither selves nor accounts are transparent’ (2000:3), that interviewees cannot *necessarily* ‘tell it like it is’ (2000:10) and, importantly, that the process of ‘investment’ is inextricably linked to individuals’ life experiences (their biographies).<sup>1</sup>

A small sample of participants (fourteen in total)<sup>2</sup> was used for the project, as a means of constructing a series of in-depth individual case studies.<sup>3</sup> In the discussion that follows, I offer my analysis and interpretation of data gathered from interviews with two of my fourteen participants, and use extracts from the interview data to illustrate this. Challenging, and seeking to build upon and further develop, existing film theory and cultural studies conceptualisations of cinematic ‘identification’, this discussion demonstrates that participants’ investments in the three films cannot be theorised solely in terms of hegemonic resistance and/or compliance (Krunen *et al* 2011, McRobbie 2009, Waters 2011), that they are not primarily organised around an erotic cinematic gaze (e.g. Mulvey 1975) and, further, are not exclusively motivated by unconscious desire or ‘lack’ (e.g. Modleski 1988, Doane 1982, Kaplan 1983). I also challenge the idea of single or stable readings of film texts advanced within some cultural studies’ accounts (e.g. Hall 1980, Morley 1980), by showing that participants’ readings are in fact often unstable, conflicted and shifting. I observe here that participants seem to read the films – and Aileen Wuornos – through their own selves: a

phenomenon that I describe as one of *self-primacy*. This, I theorise using the concept of narcissism, which I conceptualise as a process (and not merely a state) (Klein 1975) that is both interpersonally and intrapsychically meaningful (Britton 1998, Parker 1997a, Giddens 1991) and is inextricably linked to the socio-cultural environment in which we live (Lasch 1979, Tyler 2007).

### **Narcissism**

For the purposes of this paper, narcissism is acknowledged as a crucial part of childhood development<sup>4</sup> (Freud 1914, Klein 1975), as being inherent in all object relations (Britton 1998, Merck 1987: 6), and as having a significant impact upon our capacity for meaning-making through processes of identification with others (Parker 1997b, Frosh 2010). From this perspective, narcissism is fundamental to our subjectivities at both intrapsychic and interpersonal levels, and forms part of ‘the reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens 1991: 9).

Drawing upon both psychoanalytic and sociological theorisations, narcissism is understood here not only as a state, but also as a process (Kohut 1971) which exists on a continuum between pathology and normality (Lasch 1979: 50), and constitutes an ordinary aspect of the human condition (Kohut 1971, Brown 1998: 44): one which is never overcome, but continually re-channelled (Alford 1988: 27). Using Kleinian – rather than Freudian – frameworks, I conceptualise narcissism as being inherently object related (as opposed to *objectless*), and thus co-existent with relational processes which, in this context, function to defend against persecutory anxiety. Narcissistic processes of this kind may be temporary – characterised by an excessive dependence on idealised internal objects (Chessick 1985: 50-1) – or more enduring, involving powerful processes of projective identification. They are also closely linked to feelings of hatred and envy (Chessick 1985: 56). In line with the psychosocial approach of this article, it is understood that narcissistic patterns and processes are woven into the ideological structures of our contemporary social environment (Hall, Winlow et al 2008: 166-67), inextricably linked to global capitalism (Lasch 1976), and operational at both micro and macro levels of cultural relations (Alford 1988), emphasising important questions of agency (Giddens 1991: 175).

In terms of gender, meanwhile, this paper confronts the feminine-masculine binary (Hewitt 1996: 62, Houk Schocket 2005) and sexual polarity (e.g. Benjamin 1998, Mitchell 2004) that pervades Freud’s view of narcissism, as well as advancing a considerable challenge to existing *Screen* theory and cultural studies accounts of how and why gender is

meaningful in the spectatorial experience. This is so because, by understanding gender in psychosocial terms – that is, as both a cultural ideology and in developmental (psychosexual terms) – my study demonstrates that individuals' investments in particular film-viewing positions are 'gendered' for more complex psychodynamic reasons than those provided by existing theorisations of the film/viewer encounter. Further, as illustrated in the following discussion, the significance of gender in participants' readings of the films is powerfully linked to and motivated by their own biographical experiences, and also often intertwined with other powerful unconscious conflicts and anxieties. For my participants – as film viewing subjects – then, (gendered) meanings are at once personal and social, always necessarily informed by and constructed in relation to individual emotions and fantasies, and within specific cultural contexts (Chodorow 1995: 538).

Cultural studies accounts of media reception (e.g. McRobbie 2009, Ross 2012) go some way towards acknowledging these complexities in their recognition that gendered viewing practices are neither pre-determined nor fixed, and in their willingness to problematise the often contradictory processes of patriarchal signification, and to open up important questions of diversity in this context. However, where 'gendered' audience experiences are often theorised by cultural studies in (feminist) terms of resistance to dominant (patriarchal) representational and ideological norms (e.g. Durham 1999, Hobson 1982), my research indicates that although such processes are salient within the film-viewing experience, the responses of my participants are not necessarily (and certainly not exclusively) motivated by these processes, and/or organised in this way. My interview data also suggests that the viewing practices (Morley 1992: 66) in which participants engage cannot be characterised as simply 'male' or 'female' (Morley 1980) because, as I have suggested above, they involve complex unconscious processes, which also relate to other aspects of their identities. It is also important to note that, given the subject matter of the films under discussion here, questions of gender might be expected to feature significantly in participants' responses, not least since Aileen Wuornos' story is considered to have been uniquely controversial specifically because she was a *woman*, whose murderous behaviour not only constituted a transgression of heteronormative gender identities (Keitner 2002, Austin 2008), but also threatened the very structures of hetero-patriarchal society (Faith 1993). Interestingly, though, as the following analysis and interpretation of interview data demonstrates, these kinds of ideas and concerns are not especially significant for either male or female participants in their readings of the film texts.

In this paper, then, the concept of narcissism is used to analyse the complexities of the film viewing experiences described by two of my research participants where, as I will show – *contra* much feminist film theory – it constitutes far more than a textually determined scopophilic or voyeuristic ‘desire to look’ (e.g. Mulvey 1975). Within accounts of this kind, processes of narcissistic identification (with an idealised screen image) are typically argued to be textually determined by being integrated into the story/image of the film itself (Mulvey 1975): a theoretical perspective from which narcissism is inextricably linked to pleasure and desire (Modleski 1988, Penley 1988, Kaplan 1983) and always necessarily structured according to the patriarchal unconscious, that is, along the lines of sexual difference. As this paper will show, however, my participants’ readings of the films are gendered in more complex – and biographically specific – ways than those described within existing *Screen* theory and cultural studies conceptualisations of spectatorship. Moreover, for the participants discussed in this paper, Wuornos’ gender and sexuality do not constitute key identificatory aspects of their spectatorial investments, and such issues are even sometimes rendered almost invisible (Hermes 2000: 362, Ang and Hermes 1991: 322) in their accounts.

It would therefore seem that gender is not a reliable predictor of viewing behaviour (Ang 1995: 110), not least because questions of sexual difference are not inevitably operational in my participants’ narrations. This indicates, further, that no two men (or women) have exactly the same film-viewing experiences (Radway 1984) and my data demonstrates that where both male and female participants’ investments in the films may be narcissistic in nature, they are also sometimes gender neutral (Ang 1995: 124). It is also clear from my interview data that, whilst a narcissistic ‘preoccupation with self’ (Giddens 1991: 170) does constitute a meaningful element of participants’ readings of the films, this does not inevitably amount to a collapse or erosion of self/other boundaries in the viewing experience, nor does it necessarily *facilitate* the process of cinematic investment. On the contrary, self-primacy actually functions sometimes to *restrict* the extent to which such investments are possible. There are indications here, then, of a ‘struggle’ inherent in participants’ readings of Wuornos in the films: one that is partly linked to the disconcertingly unstable and ‘ineradicably paradoxical’ (Cohen 2007: 33) nature of narcissism itself.

In my analysis and interpretation of interview data, I also draw upon the psychoanalytic notion of projection (Grant and Crawley 2002: 18) as a means of exploring the ways in which participants tend to attribute certain thoughts, feelings, traits and behaviours to Wuornos that are in fact characteristic of the participants themselves. As I will

show, this often occurs when participants ‘feel uncomfortable about something they experience at an unconscious level within themselves’ (Grant and Crawley 2002: 23), that is, projection enables them to avoid awareness of possessing these characteristics or aspects of self and to defend against feelings of anxiety and conflict (2002: 18). Attention is also given to the role of phantasy (Glover 2009: 47-8), as this works to ‘inform and structure our perceptions of outer objects and creativity’. From a textual perspective, the processes outlined here can be further explored using the concept of neutrosemia (Sandvoss 2005): this is discussed more fully in the section below.

### **Neutrosemia**

The readings presented by my participants of the three films, and of Wuornos as a character, are both richly subjective and strikingly diverse, such that there is no single or definitive reading of the three film texts used for the project. Rather – far from providing a set of ‘patterned’ responses (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 33; Hills 2005a: 37) to the films – participants’ responses were characterised frequently by a tendency to find elements or ‘versions’ of themselves in Wuornos. From a textual perspective, this suggests that she can perhaps be described as ‘neutrosemic’ (Sandvoss 2005: 26) (rather than merely polysemic) in this respect; that is to say that there are so many possible divergent readings of Wuornos in the films that she seems not to have any inherent meaning at all (Sandvoss 2005: 126). The concept of neutrosemia is helpful for exploring the complex and sometimes surprising readings made by different participants in relation to these same three film texts. As this paper shows, participants create and negotiate meaning in their engagements with Wuornos: both in relation to their own inner worlds, and in accordance with their subjection as culturally and ideologically situated individuals (Scodari 2007: 52, 58), i.e. as psychosocial subjects. The theoretical concept of neutrosemia also helps to explore how the multiplicity of meanings described is experienced reflexively at the level of individual participants (Sandvoss 2005: 143) and to explain how different readings are produced by different viewers, studying how viewers themselves inscribe and shift specific boundaries around texts. Rather than simply reading the films according to a set of pre-existing ‘symbolic boundaries’ (Hills 2007b: 152), participants’ engagements with Wuornos are formed by reading her *through their own selves*. This produces shifting and often contradictory



responses, whilst also creating tensions between participants' actual, biographical experiences and the 'potential experience' (Sandvoss 2005: 142) represented in the texts.

I observe below that the two participants under discussion appear to be struggling with important issues that relate to their own identities (McKinley 1997: 2), and thereby explain how they 'read' the films 'not in terms of a pre-existing set of relations of signification... but by what those relations *mean to them*' (Walkerdine 1986: 190). Whilst film/viewer engagements may indeed be narcissistic, they are not necessarily organised around questions of gender and sexuality, and neither do they inevitably involve an erosion or collapse of self/other boundaries. Rather, in their filmic engagements, participants seem to 'struggle' continually with these boundaries. In keeping with my psychosocial approach then, attention is paid to how participants' responses are constructed in relation to their individual, 'lived' experiences (Skeggs 1997) and their sociocultural 'subjection' (Tyler 2007), recognising these responses as always also informed by their *cultural ideologies of self*, that is, the ways in which, as film viewers, their identities are (re)produced within dominant ideological structures.

In what follows, I discuss the kinds of filmic investments made by two of my interview participants (Darren and Mandy). A short biographical portrait is provided for each participant, and extracts from their interviews are used to illustrate the subsequent discussion of data analysis and interpretation.

*Darren is 38 years old, educated to CSE level and works as a Contracts Supervisor for a national car parking company. He has a good relationship with his family, is single, and still lives at home with his parents. Darren served two months in prison in 1996 for violent assault.*

For Darren, narcissism seems to operate *explicitly* in his readings of the films, such that it is manifest even at a discursive level. The structuring of his narrations in the examples below is illustrative of this: 'my sort of outlook on a normal family' (4: 1824)<sup>3</sup>; 'the way I see it' (4: 2025-2026); 'the way I look at it' (4: 2028); 'again from obviously my perspective' (4: 2033-2034).<sup>4</sup> He quite explicitly reads Wuornos through his own self, thus:

the weird little thing I always do... when they said she was killed on  
such and such a date the minute I know the dates I start thinking to myself

what was I doing back then... thinking when I was doing that all this was going on (3: 149-162).

Darren is apparently consciously aware of this as a process over which he has at least some control:

that's probably the only real thing that (.) goes through my mind... the rest of the time I just sit there and just... y'know absorb it a bit and just enjoy it for what it is (3: 164-173).

Whilst he seems to read the films by 'asking only "what this means to me"' (Giddens 1991: 170), however, the process appears to limit rather than enhance Darren's engagement with Wuornos. This is apparent not only in the narrative framing of his responses: 'from what I could gather' (4: 1848); 'from what I could... take on of it' (3: 30), but also in his more general reluctance – or inability – to engage closely with Wuornos at all, avoiding the use of her name altogether in his narrations, and merely referring to her as 'she', 'the woman' (3: 102) or 'this woman' (3: 103, 105). This discursive tendency is also significant in terms of gender, and could perhaps be linked to – and understood in relation to – the wider difficulties that Darren seems to experience in terms of relating to female others and identifying with femininity: a theme that recurred frequently throughout his life-story narrative during his interviews. Interestingly, then, in relation to the three films, whilst Darren does seem to recognise the cultural and ideological significance of desire, acknowledging it as an important axis of cinematic investment, he is nevertheless careful to avoid constructing *himself* as a desiring subject, by projecting this quality onto other viewers instead, and effectively disowning it:

I dunno whether they just used... Christina Ricci as a sort of um someone who the audience could... y'know get to like or y'know (.) or um connect with... on a ... sort of more (.) um (.) I'd say fanciable or sexier way (3: 112-115).

It is significant that Darren not only reads film texts (in general) through his own self, but also reads his own life through situations and feelings that he has already experienced and

internalised as a film viewer: a process that enables him to (re)focus certain events and experiences encountered in his actual day-to-day life. In this respect, Darren is perhaps using the films as ‘symbolic resources’ (Zittoun 2006: xiii):

there’ll be some films that I’ll watch... where... something will happen uh in my life... [I’ll be] stuck at a rut or whatever and go oh what do I go from here but then I can think back to a film I’ve watched and there was like a situation that’s happened in that film that’s given me the idea to think oh I know what to do here and then work my way out of it (4: 2275-2284).

This process appears to operate on a fairly conscious level for Darren, such that he is able to use the cinematic investments that he has previously fostered elsewhere in order to select from a wider range of subject positions that he recognises as available to him in a given situation. The process can apparently be mobilised in a particular context, or under specific conditions or circumstances:

there are things y’know out there that I’ve picked up the long the way that I may have forgotten I may just remember accidentally that help me (.) better myself (4: 2350-2352).

Nevertheless, I observe that it is not necessarily participants’ *conscious* experiences of significant personal or biographical events that provide the key motivations for their investment in the films. On the contrary, it is often their unconscious anxieties (and the complex defence mechanisms that they have developed to manage these), alongside their own well-established patterns of object-relating, that motivate their cinematic investments most powerfully. For instance, themes of humiliation, shame, and the threat of uncontrollable rage recur persistently throughout Darren’s personal narrative. It is worth noting that these affects are often associated with narcissistic identities (e.g. Morrison 1989, Rhodewalt and Sorrow 2003, Twenge and Campbell 2003) and are perhaps even an inevitable consequence of our subjection within contemporary society (Lasch 1979: 11).

The following examples illustrate how such affective issues became significant for Darren during his childhood:

[On being doused in water from a fire hose by the school bully]... I was soaked through to the skin and um I remember him stood there laughing and a lot of other people with all of my class mates laughing (.) and of course I got just really embarrassed and all upset and whatever (1.0) didn't burst into tears or anything but I was just like you know (.) humiliation and all that... it basically stayed with me a lot of stuff like that just stayed with me I just built it up and built it up (1: 396-403).

The extract below is perhaps especially relevant in this respect:

D: ... something had happened [during a games lesson] and there was the old humiliation thing again... and it just wound me right up and I just I- I just had enough I was just like (.) boiling point I was y'know he was gonna get it whatever it was... I just snapped (.) I just ran (.) as fast as I could (.) just basically got into him like in a rugby tackle and just smashed him straight into the wall bars

R: mmm

D: um and he just fell t- well he just fell to the bloody floor like a sack of shit then and just uh he started crying he was all like y'know (.) and um I just sort of like just stood up then and (.) just sort of like looked at him y'know (.) with a sort of yeah y'know sort of that's what you get for picking with m- picking on me type of thing

R: mmm

D: um course I was reprimanded by the school teachers given the dap and all that like (.) um but uh (.) from that day onwards then it was like a few of the boys kind of went (.) oh (.) he's not so s- not so soft after all whatever y'know and uh (.) and so I ki- they kind of accepted me on another level then or some of the bullies did anyway (1: 427-458).

These are issues with which Darren continues to struggle in his everyday (adult) life:

I did get picked on a bit here and there um uh and humiliated a lot with my size<sup>5</sup> um (.) and that has that has continued (.) on and off to d- certain

degree (.) to this day... y'know just one thing you'll always you know just have to deal with (1: 408-412).

During our final interview session, I therefore pursued this:

R: ... you said that um as a boy you had a habit of not telling people about things um and you say that you still bottle stuff up... that you don't release it and you don't let it out um and you described in the interview how sometimes when you get really angry thoughts you calm down because you know what'll happen if you do something... can you tell a bit more about how these feelings are for you

D: (3.0) um (2.0) I mean a- well when I get 'em um (.) I just I dunno um (2.0) they (2.0) um (2.0) I guess it- y'know I just like sort of it- it depends on what it is I mean if someone- like say guys in work are winding me up (.) um and I just feel really uh (.) y'know my initial thoughts are just y'know I just get really angry and um (.) um I dunno I guess I y'know I just I think about (1.0) um... again it all depends on the situ- I just think of (.) revenge uh how can I really hurt 'em now and what would I- oh I've looked at y'know whether it be beat 'em up or humiliate them big time... again i- it all depends on what has wound me up or y'know got me mad um and i- i- the- the feelings are just y'know rage anger y'know um um (.) and even maybe a bit of frustration for thinking that (.) maybe I could have done things to prevent getting to that point in the first place (4: 243-273).

It is interesting that the carefully 'controlled' self-image constructed here by Darren is so 'dynamically linked' (Klein 1992) to others' opinions of him. Understood in narcissistic terms, this can perhaps be read as an internalisation of structural constraints (Lasch 1979: 11), given that 'the ways in which we come to see ourselves... profoundly affect the way we view and interact with others' (Klein 1992) and vice versa. As a narcissistically motivated subject, maintaining a positive, stable and integrated self-representation (Morrison 1989: 45) is clearly felt to be important for Darren, and he seeks to achieve this through a set of strategies that he uses for the purposes of self-regulation: strategies that collectively facilitate 'self-solicitation' (Rhodewalt and Sorrow 2003: 531). His own objectives here are twofold: to

produce evidence that he is who he desires to be (2003: 531) and to manipulate others to view him as he hopes to be seen (2003: 532): the latter accomplishing the former. According to Lasch, the contemporary narcissistic subject – occasional illusions of omnipotence notwithstanding – depends on others to validate his or her self-esteem (1979: 10), and this is certainly a recurring pattern throughout Darren's narrations.

So, given the extent to which the cycle of embarrassment-humiliation-anger/rage and a need for self-control are apparently consciously significant for Darren, this might be expected to bear considerably upon his film readings. However, whilst such issues are arguably shown to be enormously relevant to Wuornos herself in both *Monster* and the documentaries, they are in fact largely absent from Darren's account of his thoughts and feelings about the films. Similarly, despite narrating at length and in exhaustive detail during Interviews 1 and 2 about having spent two months in prison for violent assault, Darren makes no mention of this 'lived' experience (Skeggs 1997) *at all* during his initial responses to the films, which would seem to challenge some existing cultural studies accounts of audience identification based on such dynamics (e.g. Jermyn 2006, Cavender *et al* 1999). It is only later in Interview 4, when Darren is asked to elaborate on his comment that Wuornos 'just seemed to think that she was not so much invincible but she could just get away with [the murders]' (3: 44-47) that he relates this to his own criminal experience. Significantly, though, at this point, Darren focuses not on his own actual criminal behaviour, but instead (and exclusively) upon what he tried to *forget or hide* at the time:

I can probably attribute that to the same sort of thing that I experienced...  
I had committed a crime but... because I wasn't known... it went for a couple of weeks or months without me being found out... initially there's the panic and the fear and oh God someone's gonna know... but then it just sort of continues then where (.) it's a- y'know literally kind of forgotten or whatever and it's just put into the back of your mind and... you feel (.) um wouldn't say invincible but... it's like a weight's been lifted off your shoulders... so I can see where she was coming from with that (4: 2094-2108).

Narcissism therefore seems to enable a defensive strategy of filmic investment for Darren, allowing him to disavow those parts of *himself* felt to be unreliable and/or threatening (Lubbe 2011: 27) by externalising them and projecting them onto Wuornos, where they can be more

adequately controlled. In doing so, he also draws a clear distinction between criminal actions and criminal agency, recognising that whilst he had himself ‘done something that was bad’ (4: 2115), he ‘didn’t feel the need to continue’ (4: 2120), in contrast to Wuornos’ more pathological ‘drive to continue’ (4: 2113, 2124).

As a neutrosemic (Sandvoss 2005: 26) character, Wuornos makes it possible for Darren to (re)create in her two available versions of his own self: one that he has disavowed – achieved by splitting off of his criminal agency – and another that he desires to be (Rhodewalt and Sorrow 2003: 531), that is, the self that ‘got away with it’. There is also an important element of omnipotent phantasy (Giddens 1991: 172) in Darren’s conviction that:

[if] someone in her position or say someone in my position was put in exactly the same circumstances the end result would (.) realistically be different... I’d be able to look at the situation from many different angles... and be able to think of several different outcomes (4: 1917-1925).

His unconscious anxieties (about his capacity for self-deception) cannot, however, be absolutely eliminated:

[Wuornos] got under the sort of false impression that she was... her genuine impression was she could get away with it (4: 2092-2093).

Theorised in terms of narcissism, then, Darren seems to make sense of Wuornos’ actions and experiences in his conscious readings of the films by re-framing them in order to reassure himself that they are ‘like’ his own, perhaps providing a sense of familiarity and security. Nevertheless, whilst he seems to (re)create or recognise in Wuornos certain aspects, images or versions of his own self, his investment in what might be described as a narcissistic viewing position actually *prevents* him from engaging closely with her. This is because he is able to engage only with those parts of himself he feels to be non-threatening: parts that, for Darren, are characterised by self-control and hidden or forgotten criminal behaviour. Meanwhile, the aspects of Darren’s identity that cause him anxiety and conflict – a potentially uncontrollable temper and the memory of his own criminal actions – are (on a conscious level) unrecognised in Wuornos altogether. Because these elements of self are

unconsciously felt to be threatening, Darren's 'dis-investment' from her functions as a defensive process of disavowal.

In what follows, I introduce a second participant – Mandy – and will discuss the ways in which the restricted or limited strategies of investment observed in relation to Darren are also relevant to her. I will show, however, that these are made manifest in her construction of a reading position that is very different to Darren's, because Mandy does not merely read Wuornos through her own self. Instead, it is apparent that, at times, her identity becomes almost 'interchangeable' with Wuornos'.

*Mandy is 42 years old and educated to CSE level: she is a housewife and works as a helper at a local primary school. She has been married (to Simon) for 22 years and they have three sons. Mandy's Mum died very suddenly when Mandy was aged 15: her Dad has since remarried, and relations with him and his new wife are still troubled. Simon was almost killed in a road accident in 1992, but has since made a full recovery.*

Like Darren, Mandy's self-primacy seems to prevent close engagement with Wuornos in her readings of the films. I observe, firstly, that during her third interview – when asked to narrate freely about her initial responses to the films – Mandy's account is virtually devoid of any 'subjective' or personal investment, and is notable for its sense of affective distance or detachment. Here, Mandy can do no more than 'sympathise with' (3: 50, 53) Wuornos' compulsion to kill in self-defence. She also takes up a 'mistrustful' viewing position in relation to her:

if [Wuornos] genuinely was raped and abused... I can see why she did the defensive went for the defensive (3: 69-70).

There is ostensibly very little in the way of any explicit self-primacy in Mandy's first readings of Wuornos, then: indeed, her own 'self' seems largely absent here. Reflecting upon this as a part of the whole data (Mandy's *gestalt*), however, it can be interpreted as indicative of a repressed narcissism, manifest in her repeated descriptions of Wuornos' experiences and actions as 'obvious' (3: 6, 13, 28, 31, 37, 41, 44, 50, 76, 79). Some examples follow (my italics added for emphasis):



*obviously* um she had a- a very (.) disturbing (.) childhood which (.)  
um *obviously* added to her mens- mental instability (3: 3-6)

it was *obvious* from the beginning that she was uh (.) uh (.) not  
counselled very well... she *obviously* needed mor- more help from genuine people (3:  
31-37).

By framing these issues as objective ‘truths’, and therefore transparent to *all* viewers, Mandy is able to disavow her own subjective capacity (and, by extension, any personal responsibility) for meaning-making in her readings of the films, effectively removing her own narcissistic “self” from the process. Interestingly, this stands in dramatic contrast to Mandy’s responses in Interview 4 when, asked to elaborate upon these initial thoughts and feelings, her narrations are framed very differently:

going by my own experiences (4: 2109)

I can sympathise... because I’ve been there myself (4: 2226-2229)

[re bad counselling] I’ve been there ((laughing)) as well with Simon  
(4: 2372).

Whilst there are clear similarities here with the discursive framing of Darren’s account, it becomes evident that Mandy is not only reading Wuornos *through* her own self, but that she has taken up a viewing position from which her subjectivity is virtually ‘interchangeable’ with that of Wuornos. (Indeed, as I show below, Mandy uses my questions throughout Interview 4 as a prompt to re-frame or re-orient her narrations back onto her own personal (biographical) experiences). This can perhaps be understood as a narcissistic pattern of object-relating, which is often characterised by a continual struggle over the tension between dependency and autonomy (Klein 1992), and which can serve to hinder intersubjective interactions (Giddens 1991: 179). It is also a process reminiscent of the ‘visiting self’ (Munt 1998: 4) which, according to Munt, leans into others’ experiences and produces a ‘sense of belonging, a sense of “we”’ (1998: 4). This latter concept is useful here in enabling a more nuanced understanding of the underlying tensions and conflicts inherent in all self/other

relations and, specifically, the struggles experienced by participants as a necessary part of their investments – or dis-investments – in the films and their characters. For Mandy, then, her story ‘interactively’ (ibid., 1998: 5) becomes that of Wuornos and vice versa, and her identity is (re)constructed in the process. Some further examples follow. Having asked Mandy to elaborate on her previous comment that Wuornos’ disturbing childhood (obviously) created family grudges:

I can sympathise... I mean like I say being fifteen I was that bit older so I had (.) a certain amount of stibi- stability um till I was fifteen (4: 2027-2031).

This pattern recurs continually:

[in relation to Wuornos’ prostitution] it’s your comfort zone isn’t it... I have my own comfort zones as well (4: 2125-2134)

[Wuornos’] whole life was a mess though wasn’t it from very early on... we’re back to me own family here my- with my brother finding my Mum dead at six (4: 2318).

Mandy’s engagement with Wuornos cannot be adequately explained, then, in terms of mirroring or self-reflection (Sandvoss 2005, McKinley 1997), or as indicative of a straightforward closing down of the space between self and other. Where Darren reads (some of) Wuornos’ experiences as similar to and/or comparable with his, Mandy effectively replaces them with her own, literally, and continually, (re)inserting herself into Wuornos’ narrative, investing her own self as if it were an other (Parker 1997b: 181), (and vice versa). For Mandy, however, this is not motivated by desire; nor is it a case of finding an (ideal) image of herself (1997b: 218) in Wuornos. Her capacity for investment in the film is therefore perhaps more a question of (re)creating ‘sameness’ than it is a recognition of it: a strategy which enables Mandy to defend herself against the perceived threat of disintegration/fragmentation (Alford 1988: 30) in her spectatorial investment by exchanging places with – instead of merely engaging with – Wuornos.

Darren, meanwhile, seems to ‘synchronise’ himself with Wuornos:

I just... go what was I doing back then and thinking oh yeah match- y'know sort of matching it up thinking while this was going on I was doing this (4: 2252-2254).

Whilst there is a sense of 'immediacy' (Sandvoss 2005: 163) apparent in Darren and Mandy's viewing experiences, it is important to emphasise that both involve a *struggle* to negotiate the extent to which Wuornos – as (criminal) Other – becomes part of their own identities and perceptions of self (Sandvoss 2005: 163, Gadd and Jefferson 2007: 2). This is indicative of the inherently ambiguous and paradoxical nature of narcissistic identification: a process described by Cohen (2007: 33) as 'a structure of enclosure conditioned by the presence of the other', which always necessarily involves a struggle (rather than an opposition) between a confined enclosure of the self, and dyadic relational processes. Such dynamics are evident particularly in Mandy's continual drawing of explicit parallels and contrasts between herself and Wuornos (McKinley 1997: 100). Her engagement with Wuornos thus constitutes not merely a challenging of boundaries between internal and external realities (Sandvoss 2005: 86, Harrington and Bielby 1995: 133), but also a continual manipulation of these: particularly given that she often constructs Wuornos as 'worse-off' than she feels herself to be. Here, then, cinematic investment works for Mandy to allow the integration of difference, preserving – and not assimilating – different subject positions (Benjamin 1995: 16) and producing a distance that she desires both to overcome *and* to maintain (Stacey 1994: 175).

It can perhaps therefore be argued that both Darren and Mandy read Wuornos in neutrosemic terms (Sandvoss 2005, Scodari 2007). It is interesting to note, however, the extent to which the narcissistic meaning-making processes that they use are also *themselves* projected onto Wuornos. For Darren, then:

obviously because of the way her life has um turned around...

[Wuornos] could only make limited choices she could only see from a certain point of view (4: 1978-1982)

[because of her experiences with violent men] 'she would only look upon men from (.) that point of view (4: 2046-2047)

the film is obviously trying to get you into her mind-set of how she perceived life (4: 2140-2141).

Certainly, neither Darren nor Mandy seem to ‘identify’ with Wuornos in the conventional or ‘commonsense’ (Stacey 1994: 130) way. Their readings are instead characterised by a *lack* of engagement with her, produced largely by a re-framing of Wuornos’ experiences in terms of (or as versions of) their own, such that she is ‘fundamentally structured through their own beliefs’ (Sandvoss 2005: 104; see also Brooker 2002). This produces a dynamic and complex system of interaction: a ‘negotiation’ of sameness and difference between reader and character, perhaps, in which Wuornos’ external object qualities do not simply ‘disappear’ (Sandvoss 2005: 100); nor is she erased, or rendered completely meaningless through the devouring and transformational process of identification (Sennett 1977: 325). In contrast to Freudian and Lacanian based models of viewer identification as a static – as opposed to a dynamic (Chabot Davis 2003: 6) –process (e.g. Mulvey 1975, Doane 1987), then, my interview data shows that participants’ spectatorial investments do not always involve an elimination of difference or otherness (Chabot Davis 2003: 8). Rather, their investments in the narcissistic film-viewing positions described here are in fact powerfully ambivalent, because they always necessarily involve – and retain – an ‘image of the other’ (Stacey 1994: 30).

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to challenge and critique existing *Screen* theory and cultural studies conceptualisations of spectatorial identification, by re-conceptualising this process as one of psychosocial ‘investment’. Through close analysis and interpretation of interview data, it is observed that viewers’ cinematic investments are made meaningful in relation to dominant cultural ideologies and ‘norms’, but are also powerfully informed by their own unconscious anxieties, conflicts and phantasies and, crucially, their own biographical experiences. The concept of narcissism has been used here to theorise the *self-primacy* observed in two participants’ readings of three key films, that is, the ways in which each seems to read the film texts through his or her own self. Consideration has been given to the psychodynamics of narcissistic identification, linking this process to the cultural and ideological subjection of

participants as well as to their own biographical experiences, and object relations work on phantasy and projection has been used to explore these issues from a psychoanalytic perspective, enabling a richer understanding of the diversity of film readings they describe.

Questions of gender politics have also been addressed and, as I have explained, the spectatorial experiences described by the participants discussed in this paper are gendered (and narcissistic) for far more complex reasons than those typically advanced within the existing literature. My findings therefore challenge Freud's claims that women are inherently more narcissistic than men, not least by demonstrating – via the notion of self-primacy incorporated here – that narcissism can be equally significant for both men and women in the spectatorial experience and, further, that it is also relevant in specifically biographical ways. My methodological approach carries political significance, then, because it challenges existing arguments about how, why and the extent to which both narcissism and gender (and the relationship between the two) informs and motivates our investments in film texts. Moreover, *contra* many feminist studies (Creed 1993, Michlin 2006: 1), my research finds that participants' responses are not primarily organised around themes of monstrous or demonic femininity: indeed, these concerns are rarely a key feature in their engagements with the films. In textual terms, meanwhile, it has been argued that Wuornos can be described as *neutrosemic* (Sandvoss 2005: 26), such that she is made meaningful in different ways by each participant.

As this paper has discussed, the psychosocial elements of audience subjectivity have largely been neglected in the universalistic and metapsychological conceptualisations of spectatorial identification offered by many *Screen* theory and cultural studies accounts. I have therefore argued that the complex psychodynamics of film/viewer engagements can best be explored by recognising them as situated, and 'lived', and via the application of a psychoanalytically-oriented psychosocial methodology, which in turn makes a valuable contribution to the field of media audience studies more widely.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The interview model/technique mobilised throughout the project draws extensively upon the BNIM (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000, Wengraf 2001, 2013): a case-study approach based on a method of biographical-narrative interviewing and analysis originally developed in Germany in the early 1990s (Rosenthal 1990, Rosenthal and Bar-On 1992: 109), which was supplemented for the purposes of my thesis with Hollway and Jefferson's FANI approach. which, when used in a media audience studies context, enables a very rich

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understanding of the ways in which individuals' biographical experiences (and the unconscious conflicts, anxieties and phantasies that are associated with them) bear significantly upon their 'investments' in the three key film texts used for the project.

<sup>2</sup> The sample was comprised of seven men and seven women, and sought to incorporate as much demographic diversity as possible in terms of age, class, sexuality, educational background and political affiliation.

<sup>3</sup> The anonymity of all participants was ensured, informed consent procedures were followed throughout (Wiles *et al* 2007), and a safe and private interview environment was provided for each individual participant. Given the qualitative – rather than quantitative – approach to the project, its findings are not intended to be generalised to all cases, nor are they to be considered representative of a particular community or population. Rather, the aim of my research was to obtain as much rich data – and to incorporate as many varied perspectives – as possible. Using Single Questions Aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUINs) and TQUINs (Topic Questions Aimed at Inducing Narrative) (Wengraf 2001, Hollway and Jefferson 2000), four separate interview sessions were carried out: two prior to a screening of the three films, and two afterwards. I began by constructing a biographical 'portrait' of each participant in the first session, then introducing the five themes deemed most relevant to my research<sup>3</sup> in the second. These first and second sessions, in accordance with the BNIM and FANI techniques, were un-structured and semi-structured, respectively. Following the film screenings, third interview sessions used a further SQUIN as a means of eliciting participants' initial responses to the films. The structure of the fourth and final interviews, meanwhile, was individually tailored to each participant: questions for these sessions were based upon my preliminary analysis and interpretation of the data collected in Interviews 1, 2 and 3. All citations of data extracts refer to the Interview session (1-4) and the line number(s) from the original interview transcripts.

<sup>4</sup> Darren's height is 6'10" and, even as a child, he was always much taller than others in his age group.

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