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REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THE MOVIES *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND  
*MONSTER*: QUESTIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY

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**ABSTRACT**REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THE MOVIES *THE COLOR PURPLE AND MONSTER*: QUESTIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY

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UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA

2008

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This study aims at analyzing, in light of gender and feminist theories, the representations of identity and sexuality of the characters Celie and Aileen, respectively from the movies *The Color Purple* (1985), directed by Steven Spielberg and *Monster* (2003), directed by Patty Jenkins. In the analysis are also considered the homoerotic relationships between the characters Celie and Shug as well as Aileen and her partner Selby. These associations are investigated, in selected scenes from the films, to show how cinematic elements (editing, lighting, setting, colors, camera movements, angles, props, etc.) are configured in order to portray biased lesbian associations. The conclusions show how the female bonding between these women seem to have an ambiguous mark in the sense that lesbian desire is explained as a causal effect of male mistreatment.

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**RESUMO**REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THE MOVIES *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND  
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Este estudo tem por objetivo analisar, sobre a perspectiva dos estudos de gênero e feministas, as representações de identidade e de sexualidade das personagens Celie e Aileen, respectivamente dos filmes *A Cor Púrpura* (1985), dirigido por Steven Spielberg, e *Monster* (2003), dirigido por Patty Jenkins. Na análise estão também incluídas as representações dos relacionamentos homoeróticos entre as personagens Celie e Shug, bem como Aileen e sua namorada Selby. Tais relações são investigadas, em cenas selecionadas destes filmes, no sentido de mostrar como os elementos cinematográficos (edição, luz, cenários, cores, movimentos de câmera, ângulos, símbolos, etc.) estão organizados a fim de retratar associações lésbicas tendenciosas. As conclusões deste estudo mostram que as ligações femininas, entre as personagens citadas, parecem possuir um marca ambígua no sentido em que o desejo lésbico é explicado como consequência de maus tratos masculinos.

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## CHAPTER I

### Notes on the Movies *The Color Purple* and *Monster*

The general problem of this study is the representation of female homoeroticism in two cinema productions, namely *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Monster* (2003), in light of film and gender studies. Although in both films lesbian relationships cannot be seen as the main topic, they play a leading part in the development of both stories. The movie *The Color Purple* portrays a lesbian relationship set in an Afro-American community in the Southern United States in 1906 seen through the contemporary eyes of the 1980s. The love story portrayed in *Monster*, on the other hand, is set in a white, North American community of the late 1980s, but seen from the perspective of a contemporary society of the year 2003.

Films have become an important source of representation to the study of gender questions. Gay and lesbians issues can be seen since the beginning of cinema. Films such as *Rebecca* (1940); *Rope* (1948), *Gentlemen Prefer the Blondes* (1953); *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Ben-Hur* (1959), just to name a few, are some examples of Hollywood classical films that, although often in disguise, represent gay/lesbian subjects. Under the conventions of the Hays Code (a group of rules which from 1934-1967 governed the production of motion pictures in the US) the film studios were, at that time, prohibited to portray, among others issues, “sexual perversion” (including homosexuality) in their movies. Even with the abandonment of the Hays Code in 1967, the theme of homosexuality in films is, until today, a delicate issue.

In films, one can have access to a variety of representations of sexual/gay identities and characters. Thus, the depiction of different countries, historical moments, and social classes are shown to the viewer through the screen. Steven Spielberg’s *The*

*Color Purple* (1985) and Patty Jenkins' *Monster* (2003) have drawn much attention from media and specialized criticism on film and gender/queer studies due to their polemic depiction of homoerotic relationships. In both movies the protagonists engage sexually with a partner of the same sex, even though the depth and the outcome of these relationships are different.

In *The Color Purple*, the main character Celie has always perceived men as a negative model. She grew up in a home with a very strict father who ended up raping her, and as result she gave birth to two children. The father justifies his psychological and sexual harassment on the grounds that his marital life is unfulfilling. This is obviously a very traumatic experience for Celie, but it is not the end. In fact, it is just the beginning of a long period of suffering in the hands of a cruel husband in a racist and male dominated environment. The turning point in Celie's life begins with the arrival of her husband's mistress Shug Avery. Contrary to her husband and father, Shug helps Celie to develop self-esteem and confidence by praising her qualities and beauty. The two women eventually begin a homoerotic relationship that triggers Celie's liberation and empowerment.

In the movie *Monster*, based on the real life story of the North American serial killer Aileen Wuornos, we are presented to a protagonist who is also sexually assaulted by someone close to her. This episode consequently destroys all possibilities of Aileen pursuing her childhood dream: to have a comfortable and glamorous life in Hollywood as an actress. The movie begins with Aileen, as a prostitute, living in precarious conditions with no money and food. The contact with a world of hostility and devaluation leads her to a life of crimes and violence that is the central theme of the story. But as the movie proceeds what draws our attention is the protagonist's opening to a homoerotic affair. While in a bar, she meets Selby, a girl who immediately sees in

Aileen a beautiful and wanting woman. At first, Aileen rejects the girl's advances, but later on gives in. What in the beginning seems to be a casual encounter results in a strong and complicated liaison, partly responsible for the protagonist's downfall. We see, therefore, that associations between women are main components of both movies. But what at first sight seems to be just an additional feature in the plot is, in fact, an important component when analyzed more carefully.

The objective of my analysis is to show how female bonding in both movies seems to have an ambiguous mark. On the one hand, female bonds promote agency for women, on the other, these associations seem to represent biased lesbian images in the sense that homoeroticism, in these films, seems to be merely a product of male mistreatment. This cause/effect relation in *The Color Purple* is mainly focused on Celie and all the men in her life. In this context, one might be led to think that the movie is trying to provide an explanation for Celie's lesbian desire for Shug Avery. Her lesbian interest is justified just because men have always mistreated her during all her lifetime. Besides, the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug is only suggested in the movie, but never explicit as it is depicted as merely a sister/friend's relationship.

In *Monster*, Aileen's lesbian desire seems equally to be explained in the sense she has been mistreated and assaulted by men, and then she tries to find in Selby, her partner, a way to overcome her harsh reality of life. However, in *Monster* the relationship between Aileen and Selby is portrayed in a negative perspective, as being something perverse, deviant. Aileen and Selby are seen as "sexual perverts" (Ginsberg 78). Aileen's sexual positioning has the same cause/effect bias than it has in Celie's. This fact has led her to a world of crimes and perversion and being a lesbian is included in this deviant scenario.

In this context, my hypothesis is to show that in both movies female bonding promotes, in both *Celie* and *Aileen*, freedom and agency to face a male dominated environment. However, lesbian images in the movies seem to be biased in the sense that lesbian desire is explained through a binary situation between men and women in which the former physically and psychologically assault the latter. Although these two cultural products have different historical/production moments, both productions can be said to share the same token.

This study is divided in four chapters. It begins by presenting theories drawing on feminist, gender and film scholars such as Adrienne Rich, Liz Yorke, Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, Alice Walker, Theresa de Lauretis, Terry Ginsberg, David Bordwell, Robert Stam, Laura Mulvey, among others, as a means to provide a theoretical basis for my assumptions. The theorists aforementioned are not specifically commented in the Review of Literature section, but some works are reviewed in the following sections of the films analysis (Chapters II and III). Moreover, Chapter II presents a deep analysis of selected scenes of the movie *The Color Purple* focusing on important issues related to lesbian representations mainly based on the characters of Celie and Shug. In these scenes, cinematic components such as lighting, color, camera movements, mise-en-scene are discussed as well as sexual/identity implications of these scenes and their effect for the movie as a whole. Chapter III analyzes selected scenes from the movie *Monster* that equally reflect issues of sexuality and identity. Finally, Chapter IV presents a comparison between the two movies, highlighting their similarities and differences as well as a recovering of important issues raised in this thesis as a way to arouse further debate on questions about sexual identity.

### **1.1. Review of Literature**

This study first presents an overview of gender studies and their importance to the constitution of sexual identities as well as their implications for the study of films. Moreover, a discussion on theories about the categories of gender, sex and sexuality is presented. This theoretical/historical panorama becomes pertinent in the sense that I investigate two movies produced in different historical moments depicting women in distinct periods of time.

Finally, I explore Adrienne Rich's theory on compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence which is the basis for the analysis of women's bonds in both movies *The Color Purple* and *Monster*. Other theorists' comments on Adrienne Rich's theory are also presented in this section.

### **1.2. An overview on gender studies and their importance in the analysis of the selected films**

Many civil rights have been acquired by women since the advent of the political, social and cultural movement called feminism that has taken part in the mid twentieth century. Women, in that time, have fought for their rights in order to diminish sexism and to guarantee sexual equality in a predominantly male society. However, these white and middle-class feminist ideas have seemed not to embrace issues concerning women from different classes and races. Black feminists such as Angela Davis and Alice Walker have claimed for a more inclusive study on the overlapping of feminism, race, class and gender. Walker founded "Womanism" a term which includes black women's experiences and ideas on feminist thought.

During the late 1980s, however, the study of gender seems to present a more inclusive mark on the investigation of feminist criticism. Feminist ideas have mainly focused on "women-centered investigations, such as women's history, gynocriticism

(from the Latin gyn- woman, a radical feminist wave which privileges women as the center of any literary criticism), and psychology of women, to the study of gender relations involving both women and men” (Showalter 2). At this historical moment, the importance of studying gender as an object of analysis in the humanities is confirmed by Elaine Showalter when she claims that “talking about gender, moreover, is a constant reminder of the other categories of difference, such as race and class, that structure our lives and texts, just as theorizing gender emphasizes the parallels between feminist criticism and other forms of minority discourse”

In language, speech seems to have an important mark in the construction of gender. Showalter commenting on Dennis Baron’s *Grammar and Gender* cites that “all speech is necessarily talk about gender, since in every language gender is a grammatical category, and the masculine is the linguistic norm” (Showalter 3). Thus, speech seems to perpetuate in society male supremacy stoutly contested by women in feminist movements. For a child who has never experienced that the masculine is the predominant grammatical form, will probably reproduce and accept this idea as being an unquestionable truth, a fact which leads to the reinforcement of male power in society. In this view of male dominance in language, Monique Wittig in “The Mark of Gender” claims that “One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal, and that women are not all reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is, continually at every moment, appropriated by men” (apud Showalter 1).

In art, the aspect of gender is grounded on the assumption of the way how representations of gender are constructed. In *Technologies of Gender*, the film theorist Teresa de Lauretis argues that “(t)he representation of gender is its construction—and in the simplest sense it can be said that all of Western Art and high culture is the engraving

of the history of that construction.”(3). For de Lauretis, gender is already being constructed and theorized in the moment it is being represented. The author’s theory is applied to films in the sense that various representations of sexual identities have been explored in cinema through the years. Thus, once we perceive the power that cinematic representations have on the construction of sexual identities we become more aware to perceive biased gendered representations in films.

Therefore, de Lauretis is concerned with questions of gendered spectatorship. The author comments Laura Mulvey’s ideas in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” which discusses the subject of the male gaze in narrative cinema. De Lauretis states that “a film may address the spectator as female, rather than portray women positively or negatively, seems very important to me in the critical endeavor to characterize women’s cinema as a cinema for, not only by, women” (135).

Much has been debated by scholars on the distinctions of the categories gender, sex and sexuality. Besides that, the study of these categories seems to be problematic in the sense that scholars have not come to an agreement on them. Among a variety of theorists Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott have brought important contributions for this investigation. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* presents an intriguing discussion on the characterization of these categories as she calls “Sex/Gender/Desire”, being the latter related to sexuality (sexual desire). Since my analysis is focused on representations of women it is pertinent to comment Butler’s debate on feminism and representations prior to the discussion on those aforementioned categories.

Butler says that feminist theory has had women as the “subject” (2) of feminism and that within feminist discourse it is essential to have a specific language that properly represents women. Besides, the author states that *politics* and *representation* although being polemic terms, have a close relation to each other. For her, the term

representation has a dualistic feature in the sense that representation, on the one hand is an *operative term* that legitimizes political visibility of women as political subjects (4), on the other, representation is a regulatory term of a language that may either reveal or distort women's reality. In this context of representation, Butler claims that power must be given to women and that they have not been properly represented or simply erased due to their biased representations in culture. Moreover, Butler argues on the relations between gender and women's identities by saying that

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler 2)

Many are the different views and criticisms on the study of gender and its associations to the categories of sex and sexuality have been widely discussed within feminist discourse. For many theorists and critics, gender has to do with the cultural, social and psychological construction of the subject upon biological sexual identity. In this context, gender seems to have a different connotation of the term sex which has been perceived by many theorists as the biological distinctions between men and women, while sexuality is related to the subject's sexual orientation<sup>1</sup>, preference and behavior (Showalter 3). But, for some feminist theorists who rely on the theories of post structuralism and psychoanalysis, (Freudian and post-freudian based mainly on Lacanian theory) gender is first constructed in language acquisition. For these scholars, the terms gender and sexual difference have the same connotation.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Ginsberg, in her essay "Lesbian Violence", presents the term *positioning* rather than *orientation* to refer to sexual desire. This idea is further developed in the following chapters.



Butler, in *Gender Trouble* also claims that gender and sex are unstable categories. For her, the distinctions between gender and sex have originally been regarded to confirm the fact that once sex is a stable and unquestionable category in biological terms, gender is a social and cultural construction, hence gender is as a multiple interpretation of sex.(6)

According to Butler,

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies. (6)

Moreover, Butler also contests the stable order of sex. For her, prior to a fixed categorization of gender and sex, it is necessary to examine why and how a given gender/sex is constructed. She raises the debate by posing questions which relate to biological (anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal) and to facts that associate to a history or genealogy of the category that would explain why sex is given as such. Summing up, she states that if the immutable character of sex (6) is questionable then its construction has also a social constructed feature as gender does. Therefore, for her it would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category (6).

### **1.3. Compulsory Heterosexuality, Lesbian Existence/Continuum and Female Bonding: Adrienne Rich's Contributions for a Concise Lesbian Identity**

Much has been written on the different configurations of lesbian existence and the political implications of the term. Among a variety of scholars, Adrienne Rich in her controversial essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" has provided a consistent theory for the creation of a lesbian identity as well as the promotion of

female bonding as a way to encourage women to question male authority. The author's intention is to question the erasure of lesbian existence in literature and criticism, and also to invite heterosexual feminists to perceive heterosexuality as being compulsory as well as a political institution which disempowers women (Rich 203). The author claims that lesbians would feel the depth and breadth of woman identification and woman bonding that has run like a continuous though stifled theme through the heterosexual experience, and that this would become increasingly a politically activating impulse, not simply a validation of personal lives. (203). On this reading, the importance of female bonding is the key for women to face the so-called mandatory heterosexual way of life which imprisons them and dictate what is "compulsory" for a woman to be.

Rich defends the idea that theory or social/political manifestations cannot perceive lesbian existence merely as a minor relationship or as well as a reflex of heterosexuality and male homosexuality. According to Rich, "feminist theory can no longer afford merely to voice a toleration of "lesbianism" as an "alternative life style" or make token allusion to lesbians. Moreover, Rich cites Alice Rossi's work "Children and Work in the Lives of Women" by saying that biologically men have only one innate orientation- a sexual one that draws them to women,-while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and reproductive toward their young (apud Rich 205). Thus, what the author highlights is the idea of a heterosexual woman who has only to satisfy emotionally and sexually her husband and to take care of the children. A woman who does not take part of this standard is seen as "abnormal", or as a lesbian, a bitter woman who takes "lesbianism" as a way to discard men and that "the lesbian is simply acting out of her bitterness toward men, are by no mean theirs alone; these assumptions are widely current in literature and in the social sciences". (Rich 205)

Still according to Rich, compulsory heterosexuality has grown through the years and it has been reinforced by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery, and efforts to censorship (204). In this context women are seen as the emotional and sexual property of men, and that the autonomy and equality of women threaten family, religion and state (204). Therefore, women must share experiences with other women in order to, at least, start challenging the heterocentricity<sup>2</sup> imposed by the society.

Rich states that all women ought to work on erasing the different shades within what she calls the *lesbian continuum*. She wants women “to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, [and] the given and receiving of practical political support” (apud Yorke 80). Opposing the term lesbianism—which has a clinical connotation—lesbian continuum suggests a whole range of human erotic experience through history, including the sharing of work and support, usually lost when physical contact is seen as the only aspect defining *lesbian existence*.

However, Janice Raymond has questioned the term *lesbian continuum* as it could blur the differences and include all women within the same group. Raymond feels more comfortable with the word “gyn affection” which she believes is broader, since it would include lesbians and those who do not define themselves as such (Yorke 80). Along with issues of equality and collapsing of differences is the question of male domination, which is seen as an important element in the definition of lesbian women. Rich further states that compulsory heterosexual orientation for women should be re-examined to foreground the politics of domination implicit in this practice. For her, heterosexuality is strongly connected to various forms of male domination in a society

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<sup>2</sup>The term heterocentricity is not being used here to present a critique against heterosexual relationships between men and women, but it is to call attention that heterocentricity according to Rich is a stipulated social concept that weakens women who live in a male dominant society.

where women's role is directed to procreation and family functions. In this perspective, characteristics of male power include the power of men<sup>3</sup>

1. *to deny women [women's] sexuality*

[by means of clitoridectomy and infibulation; chastity belts; punishment, including death, for female adultery; for lesbian sexuality; psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris; strictures against masturbation; denial of material and postmenopausal sensuality; unnecessary hysterectomy; pseudolesbian images in media and literature; closing of archives and destruction of documents relating to lesbian existence];

2. *or to force it [male sexuality] upon them*

by means of rape (including marital rape) and wife beating; father-daughter, brother-sister incest; the socialization of women to feel that male sexual "drive" amounts to a right, idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising, and so forth; child marriage; arranged marriage; prostitution; the harem; psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm; pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation (a subliminal message being that sadistic heterosexuality is more "normal" than sensuality between women)];

3. *to control or rob[women] of their children*

[by means of father-right and "legal kidnapping"; enforced sterilization; systematized infanticide; seizure of children from lesbian mothers by the courts, the malpractice of male obstetrics; use of the mother as "token torturer" in genital mutilation or in binding the daughter's feet (or mind) to fit her for marriage];

4. *to use them as objects in male transactions*

[use of women as "gifts," bride-price; pimping; arranged marriage; use of women as entertainers to facilitate male deals, for example, wife-hostess, cocktail waitress required to dress for male sexual titillation, call girls, "bunnies," geisha, *kisaeng* prostitutes, secretaries];

5. *to cramp their creativeness*

[witch persecutions as campaigns against midwives and female healers and as pogrom against independent, "unassimilated" women; definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female within any culture, so that cultural values become embodiment of male subjectivity, restriction of

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<sup>3</sup> Characteristics adapted from Rich's text. The words in italics are Gough's; the elaboration of each of her categories is Rich's.

female self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood, sexual exploitation of women by male artists and teachers; the social and economic disruption of women's creative aspirations; erasure of female tradition]; and

6. *to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments*

[by means of noneducation of females (60 percent of the world's illiterates are women~; the "Great Silence" regarding women and particularly lesbian existence in history and culture; sex-role stereotyping that deflects women from science, technology, and other "masculine" pursuits; male social/professional bonding that excludes women; discrimination against women in the professions] (207-208)

The categories aforementioned cited can be applied to my analysis in both movies due to their relation to Celie and Aileen's experiences. Celie is raped and marries a man she does not love, while Aileen is also sexually abused and is been oppressed by society in a male dominant environment. The idea of each one of these categories is included and it is further developed in the following film analysis chapters.

Moreover, in *The Straight Mind*, Monique Wittig commenting on the political implications on lesbian identities and their relation to male power and compulsory heterosexuality proposes

Heterosexuality not as an institution but as a political regime which rests on the submission and the appropriation of women. In desperate straits, exactly as it was for serfs and slaves, women may "choose" to be runaways and try to escape their class or group (as lesbians do), and/or to renegotiate daily, and term by term, the social contract. There is no escape (for there is no territory, no other side of the Mississippi, no Palestine, no Liberia for women. The only thing to do is to stand on one's own feet as an escape, a fugitive slave, a lesbian. (Preface)

According to Wittig's citation, in the movies I shall analyze, the two characters feel like fugitives having to escape from their harsh reality in search of their identities. Celie fortunately finds her liberation due to her relation with Shug Avery who helps her search for her identity and freedom. Aileen, even though connected with another woman

and having partially escaped from a male and violent environment, has not a fortunate ending; she becomes a killer and loses all her chances of being released from her “slavery”. Thus, both filmic representations construct notions of gender and female history that ought to be analyzed within a broader context of patriarchal domination. Both characters Celie and Aileen have always been assaulted by men. Even though their female bonds have helped them try to overcome their oppressions, they are still under the domination of a male and sexist society. Therefore, the relations between men and women are problematical in both representations.

Having exposed an overview on the studies of gender and their associations with sex and sexuality as well as Adrienne’s Richs contributions for the creation of a lesbian identity, I now move on to the film analysis chapters that embrace an investigation of selected scenes relating the theories aforementioned presented with film theories in order to question lesbian filmic configurations in the proposed movies.

## CHAPTER II

### Female Bonding and Colored Love in *The Color Purple*

"I'm poor, black, I maybe be ugly, but dear God, I'm here, I'm here" (*The Color Purple*, 1985)

This chapter aims at analyzing the cinematic version of *The Color Purple* (1985) and its implications to the study of gender studies focusing on Adrienne Rich's theory on lesbian existence/continuum which is based on female bonds as a way to overcome male dominance and to contest compulsory heterosexuality. My focus of analysis is mainly two selected scenes which provide support for my hypothesis. In the first selected scene I shall investigate how filmic elements (mise-en-scene, costume, make-up, lighting, music, camera movements, among others) are configured in order to convey meaning as related to Rich's assumptions on female bonding. In the second selected scene, I explore how the aforementioned filmic elements are configured in order to express biased lesbian images.

Although the film is my object of analysis<sup>4</sup> and not the study of adaptation, I begin this chapter by raising important issues as well as passages from the book which can illustrate my assumptions concerning the novel in relation to the movie such as the controversy caused by its filmic adaptation.

Steven Spielberg is a well succeeded Hollywood movie director and producer who directed among others, the films *Duel* (1971), *Jaws* (1975), *ET- The Extra Terrestrial* (1982), *The Color Purple* (1985), and *The Schindler's List* (1993), a seven Academy Award winner including Best Director and Best Motion Picture Movie.

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<sup>4</sup> Besides the initial references from the book *The Color Purple* related to the movie, in some other parts of this study I shall make some comments and intersections between these two cultural productions. This association seems relevant in order to reinforce my assumptions and arguments.

The film *The Color Purple* was adapted from the Pulitzer Award-winning novel of the same name by Alice Walker in 1982. The movie received mixed responses from the audience and specialized criticism due to its controversy in the process of adapting the novel into a movie. First, many people have claimed that Steven Spielberg being Jewish, white, middle-class and having directed mostly fantasy movies was not able to portray in *The Color Purple* the sufferings of a black community living in a racist and sexist environment. In addition, by that time, Steven Spielberg was not introduced to the author Alice Walker who, at first, refused the idea of having another person telling her story. But after watching *E.T* she gave in by saying in an interview that “If he can do Martians, he can do us” (interview featured, as a bonus, in the DVD). She also believed that the movie would open room for those who could not have access to the novel, but could watch the movie. When the film was released some scholars praised Spielberg for not depicting black people merely as supporting characters, but as the center of the action. The African American scholar Donald Bogle<sup>5</sup> believes that

For Black viewers there is a schizophrenic reaction. You're torn in two. On the one hand you see the character of Mister and you're disturbed by the stereotype. Yet, on the other hand, and this is the basis of the appeal of that film for so many people, is that the women you see in the movie, you have never seen Black women like this put on the screen before. I'm not talking about what happens to them in the film, I'm talking about the visual statement itself. When you see Whoopi Goldberg in close-up, a loving close-up, you look at this woman, you know that in American films in the past, in the 1930s, 1940s, she would have played a maid. She would have been a comic maid. Suddenly, the camera is focusing on her and we say I've seen this woman some place, I know her.

However, the director Steven Spielberg was not acclaimed by gay audiences, for having downplayed, in the movie, the homoerotic encounter of Shug and Celie, which is more explicit in the novel. The director, in an interview (featured as a bonus in the DVD) in an attempt to excuse himself for having erased and only suggested the homoerotic passage between Celie and Shug argued that the audience was not able to

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC33folder/CIPurpleBobo.html>



“achieve understanding”, due to the fact that the scene was very advanced for that time, and thus he was not the “right” director to conceptualize the scene. In a more comprehensive analysis on film industries’ positioning on film versions and their reflections on lesbian identities, the scholar Shameem Kabir in *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* has argued that “the presence of lesbian sexual desire in the written texts has been deliberately erased in the screen versions, possibly because the film industry has until recently been reluctant to grant screen space to something as progressive and disruptive as lesbian identity” (113). The author’s idea on the politics of movie industries provides us with a line of investigation on the ways mainstream productions have been depicting lesbian relationships in cinema until today. This subject will be explored in the analysis of the second selected scene of this study.

The film narrative starts with the opening credits which appear in purple letters, making an allusion to the movie title *The Color Purple*. Besides that, a fact that calls attention is that although the film is a story of women and against male power over women, the indication of the actors’ names begins with the males Danny Glover and Adolpho Caesar, (who does not even have a leading role in the movie). Whoopi Goldberg, who plays the leading role as Celie, is only introduced at the end of the credits.

In the opening scene, a non-diegetic music plays prior to the action. The presence of a melodic music and a crane shot express both young sisters Celie and Nettie’s joy and excitement while they are playing in the woods as “the film comes full circle to its metaphoric opening, with the sisters clapping hands among symbolic flowers in affirmation of the bond that ties them together and to the permanent joy of nature” (Digby 165). In the following shot Celie gives birth to a girl who is, in fact, her own father’s daughter. The issues of incest and rape are first shown in this sequence, but

they are present all through the film. But as the movie advances, what calls our attention is the drama lived by Celie who, after being raped by her father, marries a strict man called Mr., who also assaults her both psychologically and physically.

Contrary to her sister Nettie, who is brave and strong, Celie has always seen herself as an ugly and weak woman and this idea is often confirmed by her father: “You got the ugliest smile this side of the creation” and Celie is “spoiled and ugly”; or by Mr. who says: “You’re poor, ugly”. Celie believes that life is merely grounded on her condition as the wife who supplies her husband’s needs; therefore, she does not feel capable of overcoming this situation. “I don’t know how to fight; all I know how to do is stay alive”, she says. Thus, this passage suggests Celie’s weakness and submissive positioning in the male and sexist environment she lives in.

Celie is not only a prisoner of men, but also of herself. She is fourteen years old and has already given birth to two children from her own father. “You better not tell nobody but God”, says Celie’s father after taking her child away. This situation makes Celie develop her own way to express her feelings which is by talking to God. Celie’s voice over announces herself talking to God and it conveys her loneliness and incapacity to get over a difficult life situation. According to Joan Digby, Celie’s voice “is full of aphorisms that reveal an energetic wit repressed by abuse. For as long as she accepts abuse, her sententious perceptions are presented as voice over”; therefore, “the film concentrates more on the power of language to shape life” (Digby 163).

Hence, language plays an important role in Celie’s construction of identity. The only bond she has is with her sister Nettie who is also taken from her life after being banished by Mr. for not having accepted his brutal advances. Differently from her sister Nettie, Celie is almost an illiterate. Afraid of the possibility of being broken apart by Mr, Nettie teaches Celie to read so that they can communicate through letters.

Therefore, with Nettie's help Celie starts to develop both language skills and confidence. Language becomes for Celie a matter of power in the sense that as she develops her language skills she becomes more confident and stronger. In the movie, this is illustrated in the scene that Nettie teaches Celie to read by playing a sort of spelling game using objects in the kitchen.

In order to provide argument for my assumptions I shall now explore one of the proposed scenes in this study. In this scene, all the characters are together for an Easter dinner reunion that culminates in a climax in the plot. Celie has discovered, with Shug's help, Nettie's old letters which were hidden by Mr. for over fifteen years. Due to this fact, Celie finally decides to leave her home and abandon her husband. The dinner sequence has as a setting Mr.'s house and it begins in a high angle in which all cast is together in a dramatic scene as a single long take (figure 1) to convey the "symbolic family-gathering at which all the principal characters might witness the awesome power of Celie's spoken truth". (Digby 163).



**The Easter dinner reunion (Figure 1)**

In the sequence, what first appears is the image of Sophia's sad face reflected in a plate which functions as a prop/symbol to convey her suffering and sickness (figure2).



**Sophia's face reflection (Figure 2)**

Besides Nettie and Shug, Sophia also plays an important role in the plot composition. She has always been a strong and brave woman who does not allow men to treat her as a simple object, “like Shug she is a model of a woman who can hold her own” (Digby 160), but now she is fragile and sick due to the fact that she has, in her defence, beaten a white man and consequently has been in jail for many years.

In this mise-en-scene, facial expressions and performance are objects worth of analysis. Celie has experienced a life of pain and exploitation, but now she is leaving her home and consequently her cruel husband Mr. Thus she is obviously apprehensive and fearful; for this reason Celie’s facial expression and her make-up connote this subservience (figure 3).



**Celie’s facial expression connotes her initial subservience (Figure 3)**

However, while Mr. humiliates Celie by saying “You’re ugly, You’re skinny, You’re shaped funny, You’re too scared to open your mouth to people, All you fit to do is be Shug’s maid; and nobody’s crazy to marry you” she, for the first time in her life, has the courage to defy the cruel husband by threatening him with a knife. At his moment, “when she takes control of her life, she delivers her one-liners out loud” (Digby 163). Celie, through language, turns from a passive into a valiant woman (respectively figures 4-5).



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**

Consequently, Mr., who has always mistreated and assaulted women as he “is as gentle as a great kind bear, not at all slick-sweetness and maybe the fear of God in his expressive eyes” (Dworkin, 180) now, also suffers a transformation. But contrary to Celie, Mr. goes, as a result of Celie’s speech and confrontation, from a “brave” and cruel man into a weak; frightened one (as his facial expression confirms) (figures 5). Besides that, Mr.’s father, also a cruel and sexist man, is seen as a fool. Sophia says “Hush you old fool, always meddling in somebody’s business”; therefore, men’s words are no longer heard by women anymore. Male power has been silenced and dissolved by women in this scene.



Sophia's and Squeak's turning points (Figures 6-7)



Figure 8

In this context of women power, Sophia and Squeak, Harpo's wife, also have their turning points. Sophia, after having witnessed Celie's transformation, goes from a sad (as it is on figure 2) woman to a lively one and returns to 'life' (figure 6) like "the dead has arisen" says Mr.'s father. Squeak, in the same manner, also changes her position as a submissive wife (figure 7) by deciding to leave the town with Shug and Celie to pursue her dream of becoming a singer. Contrary to her nickname which has a negative connotation, she reveals her true name, Marie Agnes. Finally, at the end of the scene, while Celie is leaving with Shug, Mr. still tries to beat her up. In her defence Celie, through a gesture, impedes him to assault her. Celie's use of the hands (figure 8) allows her agency which, according to Digby, "culminates in the curse, delivered with a conjuring gesture reminiscent of *E.T.*, full of magical power that makes her untouchable

by the devil” and, thus able to face the man who, for many years, has physically and psychologically assaulted her.

Besides facial expressions and acting, costumes and color also play an important role in the development of this scene and consequently in the plot as a whole. In *The Color Purple* costumes have the function to convey women’s liberation and transformation. In the Easter dinner sequence, attached to her transformation from a “slave” into a free woman, Celie’s costumes play an important role. Celie was always exploited by Mr., thus she never had the chance to enjoy life or to feel as a desirable woman by dressing her up like Shug did. Celie’s activities are mainly focused on household chores such as cleaning the house and taking care of Mr’s children and, as a consequence of that, she became a sad and hopeless woman. Celie’s emotions are symbolically reflected in her costumes which are composed of heavy boots, long working dresses and dark hats as if she were dressed for a funeral. However, in her confrontation moment with Mr., she is dressed up wearing jewelry and her best dress which was probably given by Shug. From the day Celie is released from her “slavery” her clothes also change thereby connoting her transformation.

Shug plays many roles in the film (lover-sister-teacher-confidante) and her costumes and make-up express it throughout the narrative (Digby 171). Shug’s costumes express her journey from the sensual jazz singer who enchants every men around her (“the sinner” as her father calls her), to a married woman looking for her father’s mercy. Being a jazz singer and a single mother, her conservative father, “the Preacher” does not acknowledge her as a daughter anymore. While singing to a crowd in Harpo’s jazz club she wears a vivid sensual red dress, getting all men’s attention to her. But, at the end of the movie, as a married woman, seated in the Easter dinner table, she wears a discreet dress and her make up conveys the idea of an experienced woman.

In conclusion, the analysis of this scene suggests that female bonding has operated as a means to produce in women a sense of kinship. Although not being family, all women in the movie take care of each other. George Rawick's commenting about the creation of black communities and the importance of family for black people after slavery states that

[t]he slave community acted like a generalized extended kinship system in which all adults looked after all children and there was little division between "my children for whom I'm responsible" and "your children for whom you're responsible." ... A kind of family relationship in which older children have great responsibility for caring for younger siblings is obviously more functionally integrative and useful for slaves than the pattern of sibling rivalry and often dislike that frequently comes out of contemporary middle-class nuclear families composed of highly individuated persons. ... Indeed, the activity of the slaves in creating patterns of family life that were functionally integrative did more than merely prevent the destruction of personality. ... It was part and parcel, as we shall see, of the social process out of which came black pride, black identity, black culture, the black community, and black rebellion in America. (apud Zinn 173)

Although slavery had been abolished since 1865, women in the movie at some extent are considered as slaves, thus the creation of a bond that ties these women up is extremely important for their survival. These women, like the slaves, feel the need of a family that shares the same sufferings and experiences. Rawick's uses of the expression "my children for whom I'm responsible", can be applied for the female characters that feel the necessity and the responsibility to take care of each other.

According to Adrienne Rich, female bonding is perceived as an important instrument for women to face male power.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as the aforementioned analysed scene shows, women have struggled to overcome sexism, racism and essentially male dominance. The sequence investigated in this section exemplifies how the film

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<sup>6</sup> See page 10 of this work.



summarizes the experiences of these female characters, in the sense that it conveys their transformation and how their connection produced their liberations.

### 2.1. Lesbian Images and the Colored love in *The Color Purple*

Since Hollywood is a film industry that tends to entertain a predominantly heterosexual conservative mass audience, it usually presents biased gay/lesbian representations. In Hollywood films<sup>7</sup>, gay and lesbian characters have usually representations of deviants (*Basic Instinct*, 1992); monsters/vampires (*The Hunger*, 1983); brutal killers (*Cruising*, 1980; *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991); the ones who make people laugh (*Birdcage*, 1996 ) or the ones who receive *pseudo gay/lesbian images* (*Fried Green Tomatoes*, 1991 ). According to Chris Jones,

Representation is a social process which occurs in the interactions between a reader or viewer in a text. It produces signs which reflect underlying sets of ideas and attitudes. An integral part of the process of reading a film is the use of stereotyping, the depiction of characters according to their perceived membership of a certain social group such as Asians, mothers in law, businessman, lesbians. This is a form of shorthand; a few visual or sound cues give the audience a view of a certain type of person which is widely accepted the nature of this view is generally shaped by the dominant groups in a society. (apud Nelmes 258)

For Jones, representation is a process of interaction between the film and the audience which constructs meanings due to its identification according to values, social class and gender *positioning*. Since, as aforementioned cited, most Hollywood films tend to consider a heterosexual audience, the construction of biased portrayals and negative models of gays and lesbians in cinema perpetuate and reinforce *compulsory heterosexuality* in society. In this subject of biased representations and homoerotic

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<sup>7</sup> a) In *Basic Instinct* (1992) Sharon Stone plays Catherine Trammel a seducing woman who is accused of murder and sometimes has lesbian relationships; b) In *The Hunger* (1983) the character of Catherine Deneuve is a vampire who eventually begins a homoerotic relationship with the character played by Susan Sarandon. c) The polemic film *Cruising* tells the story of a serial killer who kills gay people. d) In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Buffalo Bill is a gay man and a serial killer who brutally kills several women; e) In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, although being clear that the character played by Mary Stuart Masterson loves her sister in law, the relationship lived by the two female characters is merely portrayed as fraternal.

images, I shall investigate Celie and Shug's kiss scene. Although having analyzed, in the previous section of chapter II, the scene which underlies the importance of the female bonding in women's lives in the movie, I would like to explore the sequence which conveys the homoerotic love between Shug and Celie. At this point, my analysis is divided into three parts: the sequence in which Shug sings to Celie in Harpo's bar; the kiss scene between the two women; and finally, the sequence which shows Shug visiting her father in the church.

My intention when analyzing these sequences is to show how cinematic elements (editing, mise-en-scene, camera movements, angles, etc) operate in order to depict the homoerotic love between Celie and Shug as a biased lesbian relationship in the sense that their love is considered to be fraternal and as a consequence of male mistreatment. Besides that, Shug is a sinner (a woman who has a lover and does not follow the rules imposed by society) at the same time that she is the woman who "teaches" Celie how to discover love through a mouth kiss, although, according to Walker, *The Color Purple* does not portray a convincing lesbian kiss since "In the movie almost all the women kiss each other, making the kiss between Celie and Shug less significant." (Walker, 168).

Although all the props and motifs in this scene convey the idea of female sensuality and lesbian desire, the homoerotic relationship between Shug and Celie is, at the end, never consummated. Due to this fact, the female bonding between these women on the one hand promotes Celie's liberation; on the other, it becomes as means to erase *lesbian existence* since Shug's and Celie's relationship is silenced in the movie. The scene in question has received many criticisms by feminist and gay theorists due to the fact that the lesbian environment between Celie and Shug was downplayed both by the

screenwriter and the movie director in order to please a mainstream audience who, according to Steven Spielberg, “was not prepared to understand the scene”<sup>8</sup>

In the scene that precedes this sequence, Shug is the woman who mostly triggers men’s attention and sexual desire, while she is in Harpo’s bar dancing and singing in a vivid red dress: “Oh sugar dumpling, let me taste some” and “You can catch a fish without a hook”, says a man to Shug. (figure 9)



**The editing conveys the idea of a predominant male point of view (Figures 9-10-11)**

In the sequence, the scene cross-cuts to Shug’s father preaching in a church (figure 10) by saying: “Babylon ain’t no far-off place in the desert. It’s right here! Just a few hundred yards from this holy place” and then cuts to Shug’s face again (figure 11). This shot conveys the idea that Shug, wearing a vivid red dress and sensually dancing, metaphorically represents lust and sin and, due to this fact, Shug will not be worthy of her father’s forgiveness. According to Alice Walker, Shug is seen in the film as an “outlaw, renegade, rebel, and pagan” (Walker 35). Walker’s words about Shug’s character, in the movie, imply the idea that Shug is a woman who does not follow the standards imposed by religion and society and also challenges male dominance. Shug’s father does not accept the fact of having an unmarried daughter who does not follow social norms. Since he is a preacher, a man of God, he sees Shug as an outsider, a prostitute and consequently a person who does not fit into the moral and sexist society she lives in. This scenario also implies the question of patriarchy and male dominance

<sup>8</sup> Further comments on the controversy of this scene are on page 17 of this work.

in which the woman is judged by men based on sexist and moral values, one which frames a woman who refuses to accept the norms of a male dominant and sexist society as a sinner, an outlaw.

Contrary to this male power, in the next shot, Shug is no longer playing the role of pleasing men and being the object of their *male gaze*, but dedicating to the weak Celie a song called *Miss Celie's Blues (Sister)* that conveys the power of the female bonding between the two women as it is illustrated in the following lyrics

Woh woh .....Uhm uhm .....Uhm uhm .....Sister, you've been  
 on my mind  
 Sister, we're two of a kind  
 So sister,  
 I'm keepin' my eyes on you  
 I betcha think  
 I don't know nothin'  
 But singin' the blues  
 Oh sister, have I got news for you  
 I'm somethin'  
 I hope you think  
 that you're somethin' too  
 Oh, Scufflin',  
 I been up that lonesome road  
 And I seen a lot of suns goin' down  
 Oh, but trust me  
 No low life's gonna run me around  
 So let me tell you somethin' sister  
 Remember your name  
 No twister,  
 gonna steal your stuff away  
 My sister  
 Sho' ain't got a whole lot of time  
 So shake your shimmy,  
 Sister  
 'Cause honey this 'shug  
 is feelin' fine, (Quincy Jones, 1985)

According to Walker: “The song *Miss Celie Blues (Sister)* which [she] immediately imagined as a signal of affirmation that women could hum to each other coast to coast, is an immeasurable gift to the bonding of women.” or that

“MmmmMmm, MmmmMmm”<sup>9</sup> could become the women’s national anthem” (Walker 31, 46). Walker’s words express the importance of music in this sequence and consequently for the film as whole, since women, through music, express their feelings and life experiences.

In this scene, at first, while Shug is dancing for men, Mr. is full of enthusiasm and the close-up of his face connotes his superior position over Celie on the screen. A low key light makes Celie appears as only a dark shadow behind Mr.(figure 12). Nonetheless, as Shug starts to sing for her, she immediately assumes a different position on the screen. Now, the focus is in on Shug and Celie, and Mr. is merely placed in the background of the framing in an inferior position under the two women (figure 13). However, when this sequence is analyzed more carefully, one may perceive that this sequence’s editing (a cross-cutting connecting the male voice of Shug’s father followed by his moral and religious judgments while Shug is singing to men, and especially, when the scene cuts to show Shug singing to Celie) not only conveys the idea aforementioned presenting Shug as sinner, but it also permeates Shug’s attitude toward Celie, and, consequently, the following kiss scene between the two women. In other words, due to the editing of this sequence, what seems to predominate is the male point of view of Shug’s father.



**Figure 12**



**Figure 13**

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<sup>9</sup> Walker makes allusion to the scene in which Celie takes care of Shug when she is sick by singing the hum “MmmmMnn, MmmMmm” and which is performed by Shug in Miss Celie’s Blues.

After having analysed this sequence, I shall move on to the scene which is the core of my study in this chapter: the kiss scene between Celie and Shug. It starts right after a fight among some men at Harpo's bar.

This scene is composed of twenty one shots. The first shot begins with a close up of a record player playing diegetic music which seems to be a jazz song from the early twenties and then cuts to the second shot that shows Shug's hand holding a cigarette and a bottle of whisky. The third shot is a medium close up of Shug dressed up wearing a fancy red robe, jewelry and smoking a cigarette. The scene's setting is the room where Shug is staying in Albert (Mr.) and Celie's house. The bedroom is full of colored objects and clothes which seem to have come from a cabaret act. Shug's costumes and performance connote her position as an experienced and independent woman, but completely out of the standards imposed by society for a woman at that time: she smokes, does not dress like a married woman and also drinks alcohol. (figure 14).



**Figure 14**

In the fourth shot, as opposed to Shug, Celie looks shy and has never had many experiences in life but taking care of her cruel husband and sons-in-law. In this shot, Shug dresses Celie in the same red dress she wears in her performance at Harpo's bar (figure 15). Shug's act by lending her red dress to Celie is to make her feel beautiful and

self-confident. Shug tries to encourage Celie to perceive herself as a woman and more than that, as a human being.



**Figure 15**

Thus Shug’s red dress, besides connoting the idea of lust<sup>10</sup>, also portrays female power in the sense that when Celie wears it she feels beautiful for the first time in her life. However, the sentences that Shug says to stimulate Celie seem to be sexist and male-oriented such as: “You can make a blind man see” or “You can catch a fish without a hook”, both sentences are coincidentally the same used by men to express their desire for Shug while she sings at Harpo’s bar.

In the fifth shot, Shug’s attempt is to make Celie quest for her identity and consequently her sexuality. Since Celie has always been assaulted and told by her father and husband she was “ugly” and “spoiled”, or as “the ugliest smile this side of creation” she always covers up her smile and is afraid to look at people. Contrary to this repressing situation, in the sixth shot, Shug says she wants to give Celie “a smiling lesson” by teaching her how to look/gaze at herself in the mirror and then smile. In the seventh shot, Shug holds Celie’s hand and turns her in front of the mirror so that she can see her face without covering up her smile and consequently seeing herself. According to bell hooks in “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators”, the gaze is

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<sup>10</sup> See page 26 of this work.

political. The author comments on her childhood memories and the the power of looking:

[...] I remember being punished as a child for staring, for those hard intense direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority. The “gaze” has always been political in my life. Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand through repeated punishments that one’s gaze can be dangerous. The child who has learned so well to look the other way when necessary. Yet, when punished, the child is told by parents, “Look at me when I talk to you”. Only, the child is afraid to look. Afraid to look, but fascinated by the gaze. There is power in looking. (hooks 247)

On this reading, Celie is also seen as a child afraid to look. Due to the fact that men have always been in control of her life, Celie has never been allowed to look. In most of the sequences of the movie, when Celie is asked something, her head is in a downward position. Besides, Celie’s attitude towards men is entirely of subservience. In this sense, the gaze for Celie is also a matter of position of power. In the eight shot Shug asks Celie to stop covering up her smile (figure 16) and to look at herself in the mirror, at first she feels shy, but she gives in and releases a loud laugh (figure 17).



**Figure 16**



**Figure 17**

Once Celie can look at herself in the mirror and smile, she discovers who she really is: a wanting person who has never had the opportunity to see herself as a woman or simply as a human being. According to Foucault “power is a system of domination which controls everything and which leaves no room for freedom” (apud in Hooks 248).



However, when Celie sees her smile in the mirror it becomes a prop that portrays the beginning of an inner process of liberation against male power. This idea is reinforced by Digby who states that

[t]he mirror [is] a prevalent symbol of self in the film. It is the opposite of looking through a window, which is used many times figuratively, along with glasses of water and of lemonade, to convey the essence of Celie as a transparent female vessel who nevertheless has the power to see through deceptions to truth. (Digby 166).

Thus, for Digby, differently than other scenes in the movie in which Celie sees her image only reflecting her condition as a passive woman under the control of men, now Celie's reflection in the mirror is a symbol of her transformation. However, it is not present, in this sequence of the movie, Celie's identification with her own body. Unlike the movie, in one passage of the book, Shug asks Celie to look at her vagina in the mirror. Looking at her body, Celie becomes more capable to deal with her anxieties and fears she faces for living in a sexist and predominantly male society. The discovery of Celie's body according to Daniel Ross is

“One of the primary projects of modern feminism [which] has been to restore women's bodies. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even hate their bodies. Consequently, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a pattern evident in Walker's Celie. To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for women a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status”. (70)

Along the issue of identity presented in this scene, the tenth shot introduces Celie's discovery of her sexuality. The atmosphere of happiness caused by Celie's liberation is interrupted when they start a conversation about Celie's husband at the same moment that Shug announces she is leaving the town. Celie's facial expression cannot hide her pain and sadness when she tells Shug that Mr. beats her for not being

Shug. Despite having sexual relationships with the same man, Shug and Celie have mixed opinions about it. In the fourteenth shot, we have a close-up of Shug's hand putting some music possibly to calm Celie down. The frame then cuts to the fifteenth shot to show in a medium close-up both talking, sitting on bed. In the talk, Shug admits having a passion for Mr. "I know he a bully, but there's some things I love about him [...] I got what you call a passion for him, If was ever going to have a husband he'd been it. But he weak". Besides that, she admits to love having sex with him. On the contrary, Celie claims that although having sexual relations with her husband, she has never felt loved or desired by him. Celie when asked by Shug about her sexual relations with Mr., she says:

Celie: "He don't even ask me how I feel, He never ask me about myself, He just climb on top of me and do his business"

Shug: Do his business? Miss Celie you sound he going to the toilet on you

Celie: That's what it feel like

Shug: Then, Miss Celie, that mean you still a virgin

Celie: Yeah, because don't nobody love me

In this context of Celie's lack of desire and passion, Shug is amazed by Celie's revelations and concludes that since Celie has never felt pleasure in a sexual relationship and consequently has never had an orgasm, she is still a virgin. Thus, Shug as an experienced woman, in the art of love, teaches Celie how to be loved by kissing her. However, the scene that would be a revelation for Celie, as it was with her smiling in front of the mirror, becomes a male focused conversation. Mr. is the focus of their talk, thus relating lesbian desire to men and, then opening room for two possible interpretations: first, it expresses the idea that Shug does not have a lesbian desire for Celie, namely she only wants to help Celie to discover her sexuality as she did by making Celie smile to the mirror; second, it indicates that Celie might not have a lesbian desire for Shug as well, due to the fact that men have always mistreated her. She would

see in Shug a way to discard men and the lesbian[desire] is simply acting out of her bitterness toward men.(apud Rich 205) and, thus to fall in love with a woman would be her only “choice”. According to Siegel,

The lesbian relationship that develops between Celie and Shug again reinforces the richness of female bonding. For Celie, such a relationship is her only choice. Men are brutal and oppressors, they are the enemy. With regard to Celie’s past, it would be illogical for her to choose sex with a man, and lesbianism can be a learned preference rather than a biological or genetic orientation (sic) (apud Dieke 61)

Since homosexuality is not a matter of choice or preference due to the fact that people do not choose to be lesbian or gay, it seems illogical to portray Celie and Shug’s desire as being simply a consequence of Celie’s dissatisfaction toward men. Once sexuality is a complex category and it is associated to the field of desire, it becomes problematic to try to look for explanations for Celie’s desire for Shug. Still in the subject of portraying lesbian existence as a cause of male mistreatment, Philip Royster states that

Celie’s homosexuality is clearly portrayed not as congenital but as a predilection or pathology that results from being the victim of not merely male but also father figure abusiveness. She is too afraid of her [step] father to look at boys; she expresses a desire for only one person; and she seems unaware of the sexuality of other women. (Royster apud Thielman 70).

Once Celie is not aware of her sexuality, it is not possible to affirm that either her disinterest in men or her interest in Shug has an explanation. The words used to refer to a homosexual as not being “congenital” or as being as “a predilection” and “pathology” reveals the biased tone used by the author toward a homosexual desire. Such opinions are also unfortunately, until today, widespread in the media (soap operas, magazines, advertisements, etc.)

Following the scene between Shug and Celie, the seventh shot begins in a medium plan showing Shug and Celie seated on the bed. A low key light and diegetic

music (the instrumental jazz 1920's song) is still playing in order to create a scenario of sensuality and intimacy between the two women. Besides that, the fire in the fireplace reinforces the idea of comfort and passion, contrary to what Celie is used to have in her daily life of hard work and suffering. In the eighteenth shot, Shug kisses Celie in the face and she immediately opens up a big smile (figure 18) like she did in the mirror. In this sense Celie's smile is again portraying her emancipation as a woman. Shug's caresses culminate in a close-up of a kiss between the two women (figure 19).



**Figure 18**



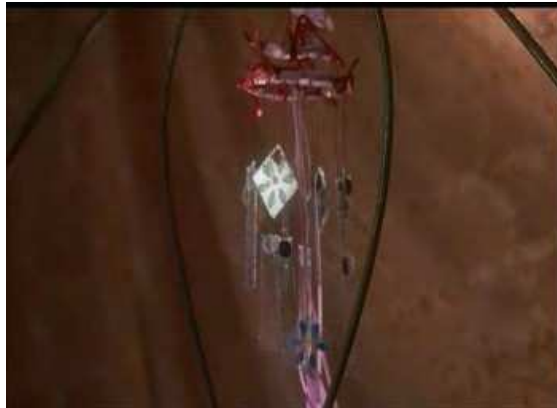
**Figure 19**

In the nineteenth shot, the use of the hands also plays an important role in the development of the scene. While they kiss each other, the frame cuts to focus on Shug and Celie's hands. Their hands are strategically used to express both the female bonding between the two women and the love correspondence between the two women as "Celie recoils into herself, using her hands as a mask to hide her face until the love-scene with Shug when Celie's hand is shown gingerly responding"(Digby 166). (figure 20)

**Figure 20**



However, in the last shot of this scene, instead of having a continuation of the homoerotic love between Celie and Shug, what we have is simply a diegetic sound and a close-up of an object twinkling suggesting a possible lesbian relationship between the women. As the scene ends, the idea is left open to the audience to construct their own meanings. (figure 21)



**Figure 21**

In addition, in the next scene what we have is Shug on her way to visit her father in the church he preaches. Contrary to her position as “femme fatale” in the last two analysed scenes (in which she wears a red dress that conveys the idea of passion and desire), she wears a long and discreet pink dress that portrays purity and chastity. In fact, Shug wants her father to forgive her for being a sinner, an outsider, a lesbian and this is confirmed, at the end of the movie, when she enters the church by singing a gospel song and imploring her father for forgiveness “See Dad, sinners have soul too” she says. According to Digby, “In the context of the film’s ending the scene defuses Shug’s restless quest for love and releases her from the spell of her own sexual self-image (Digby 164). Besides that, when Shug enters in the church, the position she is framed on the screen (Shug is on the door and what we see is her shadow and her voice while her father is seen in a high angle which makes him seem superior over Shug) places her in a inferior position in relation to her father. (figure 22)



Figure 22

In this context, it is pertinent to state that in this scene, we have predominantly Shug's father's point of view. Although he does not say a word while Shug is trying to resume their father/daughter relationship, Shug's speech is full of regret which conveys her need to be accepted as a "good" woman who must be forgiven for her sinful acts including having kissed a woman. Thus, the editing plays an important role in the composition of the three analysed scenes (1. The one in which Shug dedicates a song to Celie at the same time we have a cross-cutting again presenting Shug's father point of view; 2. The kiss scene and, 3. The scene which shows Shug and her father in the church). Summing up, in a circular motion, a male point of view permeates all the discussed scenes, a perspective that understates the love between the two women by making it less significant.

Contrary to the book, the movie deals with suggestions and ambiguity concerning lesbian images. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, instead of symbols and props to convey lesbian desire between the two women, the lesbian scene between Shug and Celie is portrayed in a much more consistent manner. According to Walker "[i]n the movie almost all the women kiss each other, making the kiss between Celie and Shug less significant." (Walker168). However, the lesbian kiss scene which is softened in the film culminates in a sexual relationship as it is illustrated in the following passage from the book:

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I

don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much, she say. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too. Me and Snug [??] sound asleep. Her back to me, my arms round her waist. What it like? ittle like sleeping with mama, only I can't hardly remember ever sleeping with her. Little like sleeping with Nettie, only sleeping with Nettie never feel this good. It warm and cushiony, and I feel Shug's big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. at all. (118-119)

According to Ikenna Dieke “their homosexual reunion is a first for both of them, but it is natural and freeing and a culmination of their love for each other. For Shug, it is an ultimate gift of love, and for Celie, love making and being loved complete her spiritual journey to selfhood” (Dieke 61).

In the movie, during all the narrative, the plot conveys the idea that Celie is in love with Shug: while she is having sex with her husband she thinks of Shug by staring at her picture and, when Shug arrives for the first time she wants to feel beautiful to impress her. However, this desire is only suggested in the film. The relationship between Shug and Celie is merely grounded as being fraternal and supportive, but it is never portrayed as if they were lovers.

Shug’s representation in the film as a sinner plays an important role in the construction of a biased lesbian identity. Since she is a woman who has had many lovers and does not fit into the social norms, Shug is the only woman in the movie context who seems to have the authority to represent a lesbian. Thus, the image of Shug is biased in the sense that she is seen only as teacher who, as an act of compassion, helps Celie to discover her sexuality.

Thus, since *The Color Purple* is a Hollywood movie, it portrays Shug as a sinner, as a prostitute and eventually a lesbian. Summing up, although the female bonding between Shug and Celie has promoted agency in her discovery as a woman, the homoerotic atmosphere presented in the analysed scene is biased in the sense that it

portrays Shug as merely the teacher who helps Celie to discover her sexuality since men in her life have never fulfilled her desires; on the contrary, they have only mistreated and assaulted her.



## CHAPTER III

### Is Lesbian Love Monstrous?

Patty Jenkins is a North American movie/television director and screenwriter who is a member of the American Film Institute (an independent non-profit film organization). In cinema, so far, she directed only three movies *Just Drive* (2001), *Velocity Rules* (2001) and *Monster* (2003), which won Charlize Theron the Oscar of Best Actress in a Leading Role. *Monster* is a mainstream independent movie based on the true story of the Daytona Beach prostitute Aileen Wuornos, convicted for having killed seven men and thus considered the first female America's serial killer (Schilt 57; Hart). The film portrays the lesbian love story between Aileen (Lee) and Selby Wall, a countryside girl who lives with some of her father's friends and whose father rejects her for being a lesbian.

The author Terry Ginsberg, in "Lesbian Violence as Fascist Crusade"<sup>11</sup> provides a consistent argument based on the assumption that sexuality in *Monster* is associated to political violence (more specifically to fascism). Since Ginsberg's theory is not the core of my analysis, I will not present it in-depth. However, some of the points raised by the author seem to be relevant to my analysis of lesbian representations in the movie and they will be present throughout my text.

The film *Monster* received many criticisms due to its biased tone. In other words, the film's narrative seems to focus on depicting the love story between Aileen and Selby as deviant and as a possible cause for Aileen's transgressions. In the film, both Aileen's lesbian desire and her motivation for the crimes seem to be explained by

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<sup>11</sup> ([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html))

bad childhood experiences marked by rape and male mistreatment. Aileen is seen as “a classic victim-perpetrator, sadly guilty of her crimes despite their attributivity to paranoid projections of painful, sublimated memories of childhood sexual abuse and economic deprivation triggered by the ambivalent irruption of an ostensibly liberatory lesbian desire”<sup>12</sup>. Opposing such depiction, Linda Hart states that

neither criminal violence nor sex-gender positioning are simply-or at all-an efficient result of childhood experience, however painful or damaging: both poles of the ostensible equation must be seen as socio-economically, politically, and historically overdetermined, and therefore as more complexly related than is evidently conceivable via a direct causal model.<sup>13</sup>

Hart’s conclusions are remarkable in the sense that she does not attribute lesbian desire simply to a causal effect of male mistreatment or painful childhood experiences. Along this idea what Judith Butler states is that sex-gender positioning relates to the social, political and cultural aspects on the construction of gendered identities that intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities., According to the researcher J.Boswell,

[i]n the latter twelfth century hostility toward homosexuality began to take root, and eventually spread throughout European religious and secular institutions. Condemnation of homosexual acts (and other nonprocreative sexual behavior) as "unnatural," which received official expression in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and others, became widespread and has continued through the present day.<sup>14</sup>

*Monster*’s pretension to portray homosexual desire on the ground of male mistreatment or bad childhood would thus seem superficial and merely based on empirical assumptions and biased discourse. Katrina Fox, in an article for LOTL<sup>15</sup> magazine, claims that

Despite numerous articles, documentaries and th[e] latest Hollywood production of her life, the image of Wuornos as bad or not human -

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html)

<sup>13</sup> ([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html))

<sup>14</sup> ([http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/facts\\_mental\\_health.html](http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/facts_mental_health.html))

<sup>15</sup> LOTL is Australia's national lesbian magazine covering.

literally a 'monster' prevails. While the acceptable face of lesbianism is espoused by programmes like *The L Word*, mainstream media continues to show its bigotry and fear of women who break the mould of expected female behaviour". (2004)

According to Fox, the construction of Aileen's character perpetuates, in cinema and in discourse, her image as a "monster", a deviant, a violent lesbian. As commented in the previous chapter of this study, Hollywood has a large history of portraying lesbians as deviant, violent and pervert and it is not unlike in Aileen's characterization in the movie. Besides that, the feminist magazine editor Angelita Manzano states that

[The film *Monster*] was not the story of a psychopath but a survivor, not a monster, but a woman struggling to be recognized as a human being, worthy of love, respect, and dignity [...] In this context, Aileen's murders do not seem evil; they appear to be rational, even moral decisions, when made in the context of gross gender and class oppression [...] For some viewers, this may be overwhelming. Please be advised that this movie will be painful to watch. ([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html))

Although not relating sex-gender positioning or Aileen's murders as effects of painful childhood, Manzano sees Aileen's crimes as the acts of a woman's resistance in a world dominated by men. Drawing on the feminist film theorist De Lauretis who claims that "the representation of gender is its construction" (3), to portray Aileen as a negative model (a pervert, a lesbian killer, a monster) or even as a woman against class oppression is already a means to construct biased sex-gender representations in cinema and, thus to reinforce *compulsory heterosexuality* in society.

Aileen's personification in the movie also plays an important role in the construction of lesbian images in cinema. The act of transforming heterosexual and beautiful actresses into ugly characters has been widespread experienced in mainstream Hollywood productions. In *Monster*, the choice of having the beautiful and heterosexual actress Charlize Theron playing Aileen sounds like as a means to soothe the heavy and negative image (murderer, prostitute, and lesbian) that her character may convey to the

viewer. The image of Aileen as an unattractive woman, a murderer, a lesbian, might be automatically erased of the audience's minds when associated to Charlize's astonishingly feminine figure. What really seems to be important in the construction of Aileen's image is the fact that she is played by an actress who is not the "real" person and consequently not a "real" lesbian. Thus, such imagery is also a way to perpetuate biased lesbian representations in cinema.

Another important aspect that shows how the media has been presenting gay/lesbian is the one which concerns the promotion of the movie. The movie poster (figure 1) becomes worth commenting in the sense that it also reinforces a biased construction of gay/lesbian characters. In the movie poster, Aileen and Selby are designed in order to express the disturbing lesbian relationship lived by these two women. Selby's face looks evil, while Aileen's carries an image of desperation and guilt. These images expressed in the movie poster are present throughout the movie narrative and set the tone for an interpretation of what could be a lesbian relationship.

The movie poster-



Figure 1

My purpose in this chapter is, thus, to investigate in selected scenes how filmic elements operate in order to represent a biased lesbian relationship between Aileen and Selby. My hypothesis is based on the assumption that on the one hand, the female bonding between the two women initially seems to be positive in the sense it promotes Aileen's agency in a male and heterosexist dominant society; on the other, I intend to show how the film tries to provide an explanation for Aileen's lesbian desire and how

the love story between the two women is depicted as the reason for Aileen's crimes and subsequently her death in jail.

The movie begins with Aileen's voice-over narration; she tells us about her adolescent dreams to become a movie star and her wish to be loved by a man who could help her to achieve her dreams:

I always wanted to be at the movies, when I was little I thought for sure that one day I could be a big big star...Or maybe just beautiful and rich like women on TV. So I dreamed about it for hours. [Men] would see me for what I could be and think I was beautiful. They would take me away to my new life and my new world where everything would be different. I lived that way for a long long time. In my head dreaming like that it was nice but one day it just stopped", narrates Aileen.

Aileen's story is presented to the viewers as a film inside the film. In other words, Aileen's voice over is not the only element presented in this scene composition; in addition we have scenes of her past which illustrates her life experiences as an adolescent. According to Aileen's speech, one may perceives that this scene portrays the necessity of the adolescent Aileen to fit into a model determined and imposed by a heterosexist and male dominant society: she wants to feel beautiful and loved by a man who could represent to her, as it is in fairy tales; a prince charming able to make her fell happily ever after.

The next scene contradicts Aileen's fantasy of being a movie star and having a happy life as a married woman. On the contrary, the first shot begins with a disturbing diegetic sound of a pelting rain in a busy road. In this setting, it is framed, in a very wide shot, the shadowed image of Aileen seated in front of this road. She is in an inferior position in relation to the scenario she is part of. The next shot presents the movie title *Monster* in red letters (figure 2) which conveys the idea of blood and murder that is confirmed by a close-up of Aileen's hand holding a gun (figure 3) followed by her rough face designed by heavy make-up (figure 4). Aileen's voice over, at this

moment, starts narrating the first time she meets her girlfriend Selby: “The first time I met Selby Wall, shit, all what I wanted was a beer” says Aileen.

Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Hence, Aileen’s speech in combination with all of this scene’s props (the pelting rain, the red letters, the gun, Aileen’s desperate face) if analysed more carefully implies the idea that, for Aileen, having met Selby was not a happy event; and this fact is reinforced throughout the film. Such idea, since the beginning of the movie, places Aileen’s and Selby’s lesbian relationship as being something negative, harmful. Moreover, since Aileen’s adolescent wishes fail; she becomes a prostitute, a murderer and eventually a lesbian. Her present condition, in the mise-en-scene, metaphorically represents her detachment from society: she is an outsider, a deviant, a “bloody monster”.

Aileen’s voice-over plays an important part in the narrative of the film. The voice over in *Monster*, is the voice of a deceased Aileen who narrates the past events in her life focusing on her relationship with Selby and its consequences. Thus, the relation between Aileen’s narration and the images becomes an important object of analysis in the sense that her voice works as a tool to convey Aileen’s lesbian representation. According to Ginsberg, Aileen’s voice over also plays an important role in the character’s development of her sexual identity as a lesbian. For her,

[t]he voice over (de)sacralised quality hyperrealizes the film’s lesbian aesthetic, reifying Lee’s continued idealization of Selby by positioning same-sex female desire as divinely ordained while refiguring Selby’s reciprocal fetishization of Lee as a proverbial fear of God that has

compelled Selby a recently “out” lesbian, regretfully to confess her wrongdoings and deliver her recalcitrant, unrepentant lover to the cops.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, Aileen’s voice over attributes a religious tone to the movie. Her speech seems to be confessions to a Catholic God of her deviant life trajectory from a prostitute to a murderer as well as her necessity to be accepted in the same society which eventually kills her with a lethal injection in jail. In *Monster*, since it is Aileen’s voice over that narrates the past events of her life, the entire movie narrative can be said to be a flashback. Bordwell states that,

Classical flashbacks are motivated by character memory, but they do not function primarily to reveal character’s traits...Character memory is simply a convenient immediate motivation for a shift in chronology; once the shift is accomplished, there are no constant cues to remind us that we are supposedly in someone’s mind. In flashbacks, then, the narrating character executes the same fading movement that the narrator of the entire film does [...] Psychological causality thus permits the classical viewer to integrate the present with the past and to form clear cut hypotheses about future story events. (43)

Contrary to classical flashbacks, in *Monster*, except for some Selby’s dialogues with other characters, the flashback is the narrative itself. It functions as a subject camera which allows the viewers to perceive Aileen’s events as if they were in her mind, witnessing all her thoughts and sufferings.

According to Adrienne Rich in the essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, prostitution and rape, among others, are seen as means of men to force their sexuality over women and these themes are recurrent in *Monster*. Aileen, who was always assaulted and raped by men since she was thirteen years old and, as a prostitute she experiences a life fulfilled with pain and aggression on the streets and relying on men her only source of survival. Aileen is hopeless about her condition as a prostitute and also for the lack of love and respect in her life, so killing herself seems to

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<sup>16</sup>([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html)).

be the only choice she has. However, while in a bar she meets Selby, a girl that, although having desire for people of the same sex, does not accept her position as a lesbian. She lives under the rules of her traditional father who, according to Selby's words, "wants to save her soul". When Selby meets Aileen in the bar, she immediately sees her as a beautiful and desirable woman. Aileen, however, rejects her advances by saying that Selby is "a dumb dyke", but later gives in and they drink and talk.

The scene I propose for my analysis in order to provide argument for my suppositions, conveys, on the one hand, the importance of Selby in Aileen's life and how the female bonding between the two women initially operates to help Aileen to face a heterosexist and dominant society; on the other, it shows how this same-sex love is, at the same time, portrayed as a resulting model as a result of male disillusion and mistreatment.

The scene setting is Selby's father's friend's house. Aileen, with no money and homeless, accepts Selby's invitation to sleep at her house but under the conditions that no sexual relationship between the two may happen. This scene is composed of seven shots. In the first shot, the two girls enter the house in direction to Selby's bedroom. Since it is late and all Selby's friends are sleeping; the house is dark and calm. Aileen seems to observe everything around her, but what mostly calls her attention is a glowing object which seems to be an angel made of glass (figure 5) Selby's friends are very religious, and the object possibly represents the Catholic persuasion of these people. Such supposition is confirmed later when we see Selby's friends going to the church. In this same shot, Aileen's voice-over expresses Selby's importance in her miserable life marked by male mistreatment and sexual abuse. Aileen's speech, at first reveals her disillusion on men and her incapacity to love or to be loved by them again and directly



associates Selby as her last chance to experience love since it is impossible to be attained with men.



**Figure 5**

“The day I met Selby I’d spent the afternoon about to kill myself. I was flexible. I mean everybody’s got to have faith on something., for me all I’d had left was love and I was sure I would never love a man again so, I was gonna do it...and the only reason I didn’t, was a five-dollar bill. [Aileen talks to God]: God I gotta spend this five bucks but when it’s gone so am I. So if you gotta something for me in this life, bring it on... and there she was” says Aileen.

Thus, her words convey the biased tone the movie assumes through Aileen’s speech, in the construction of her lesbian identity and, especially of her sex-same relationship with Selby. This is explained due to the fact that the bond between the two women is seen as an “acting-out of bitterness toward men” (Rich 205). In other words, it seems that Aileen’s lesbian desire is merely a consequence of the lack of male love and subsequently a same-sex relationship as a sublimation of it. Hence, in this context, *lesbian existence* is merely seen as an alternative life style (Rich 205) caused by male disillusion.

The first shot cuts to show, in the second shot, the two women, still in the dark, entering Selby’s room. As they enter the room, Aileen’s narration finishes with sentences referring to Selby: “So if you got something for me in this life, bring it on... and there she was”. At this moment the lights seem to convey the idea that Selby would be a possible chance for Aileen to find happiness in her sad life. Selby’s bedroom is

small and it has just one bed in which the two women will sleep together. In the bedroom, what calls the attention is a crucifix on the wall (figure 6), above Selby's bed. Such object, as the glowing angel presented in the previous shot, reinforces the idea that Selby's friends are catholic people and probably do not accept Selby's homosexuality. Since the Catholic Church does not accept homoerotic relationships, the fact of having such a catholic object in the bedroom conveys the idea of two same-sex people sleeping together as sinful and thus, presenting a heterosexual tone in the movie as if Selby's bedroom were a "heterosexual and holy place".



**Figure 6**

In the fourth shot, Selby is in bed waiting for Aileen. Selby does not look attractive at all: she has a broken arm and wears a very infantile pyjama. As Aileen comes to bed, we become aware of Selby's happiness due to the fact she is with the woman she desires: "I can't believe you're here", says Selby. Since Aileen does not consider herself a lesbian, she is apprehensive to be in the company of a woman who desires her: "Me neither", says Aileen in response to Selby's comment.

Still in the same shot, Selby's asks Aileen to touch her face and she accepts. The action is followed by low key lighting and non-diegetic music. The low lighting creates a sense of intimacy between the women and it is intensified by a melodic non-diegetic music which is an instrumental song which heightens the melodramaticity of the scene. The moment that Selby touches Aileen's face and says that she is pretty provokes a

change in Aileen's life (figure 7). Aileen has never felt desirable or loved by someone and, with Selby's gesture, she receives her first demonstration of love in her entire life.

In the fifth shot, after having touched Aileen's face, Selby seems to be relaxed and then she falls asleep (figure 8). However, in the next shot Aileen's facial expression, in a close-up, connotes her suffering of several years of male mistreatment and the harsh life on the streets, but Selby's attitude of praising Aileen for her beauty seems to have worked as a relief for this pain. (figure 9). In the next scene Selby's friend opens the door and sees the two women sleeping together. Selby's friend does not admit "a street



**Figure 7**



**Figure 8**



**Figure 9**

person" staying at the house. She also says that they "don't have business" with a person like Aileen. In other words, what is being contested by Selby's friend is the fact that Selby has a lesbian desire. This fact is confirmed in a later dialogue between the two women about Selby's relationship with Aileen, in which the woman says to Selby: "So, are you choosing to go this way"? According to this woman's words, Selby's lesbian desire is just a matter of choice. Such character's supposition leads to a biased interpretation of what a lesbian desire could be.

The aforementioned analysed scene summarizes the power of the initial female bonding between these two women. However, as the movie proceeds, the image of Selby in Aileen's life turns into a negative figure. Aileen's and Selby's lesbian relationship is seen, throughout the movie, as deviant and perverse.

According to Rich, prostitution is a means in which men control and disempower women. Thus, Aileen's prostitution conveys her passive position in the

hands of men. However, Selby's demonstration of love for Aileen and subsequently their bond, initially<sup>17</sup> works to help Aileen to quit prostitution and look for a regular job out of the male dominance she used to live in. Nevertheless, Aileen's plans to fit into society fail in the sense that she is rejected for having been a prostitute in the past. This situation draws the issue of class oppression and social inequality and it is depicted in the movie as a consequence for Aileen's murders. According to many academic feminists "Aileen's murderers were described as liberatory acts performing an oppressed woman's desire for agency and autonomy in a world dominated by white, male, Protestant heterosexism, the reasonable man of law, and likewise by perpetual socio-economic legitimation crisis"<sup>18</sup>

In this context, it seems important to me, more than to try to find reasons for Aileen's criminal actions is to show how possible interpretations are presented in the movie in relation to Aileen and Selby's same-sex love. The female bonding between the two women originally provokes in Aileen a sense of search for freedom and empowerment and, consequently, for Aileen the figure of Selby represents her only chance to become a "normal" person, one who can be loved. Since Aileen could not find a job and Selby is unemployed, the act of killing people seems to be more a consequence of Aileen's necessity to maintain her relationship with Selby. The first client Aileen kills is a man who rapes her and tries to kill her and as self defence she kills him. However, as the movie advances, the reason for Aileen's other crimes are not merely explained on the ground of "working class resentment" or criminal acts which might have been prevented with better parenting"<sup>19</sup>, but as a means to maintain her

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<sup>17</sup> I use the term "initially" to convey the idea that, according my perception on the movie, the female bonding between Aileen and Selby is only depicted as a positive one due to the fact that Selby praises Aileen's beauty and then it becomes a motivation for her to contest her position as a prostitute which, according Adrienne Rich, is a means to imprison women and subjugate them to men.

<sup>18</sup> ([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html)).

<sup>19</sup> ([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html)).

same-sex relationship with Selby. This is explained due to the fact that Aileen, besides killing her clients, also robs their money. According to Ginsberg,

Lee misrecognizes Selby as an ego ideal, the imaginary key to her own salvation from prostitution and unhappiness; Selby misrecognizes Lee paranoiically, as recklessly exploiting her own need for care and support. These psychodramatic episodes present a non-competitive, non-objectivizing but nonetheless socially mediated relationship that affirms, according to New York Times film critic Stephen Holden, the affair's "sad case study of dysfunction and desperate co-dependency." By the same token, these conflictual scenes will also gradually supplement the film's perverse narrative displacement of sexual lure onto scenes of Lee's increasingly heightened violence<sup>20</sup>

Aileen and Selby's relationship seems to be more a matter of co-dependence than female sensuality. Selby represents, for Lee, the absent masculine figure which could see her as a beautiful and desirable woman and Selby sees, in Aileen, the masculine figure that can financially support and take care of her.

Still in the context of Aileen and Selby's bond and its representation of lesbian images, I shall analyse the second scene proposed in my analysis. This scene begins when Selby and Aileen meet at a roller rink, after their first encounter in Selby's house. At this place, among other teenagers roller-skating, Selby finds the son of her father's friends. In this scene Aileen and Selby's same-sex relationship is consummated when, for the first time, they kiss each other. Selby who, at first, seemed to accept her sex-gender *positioning*, expose, during her talk with Aileen, her prejudice about it. Selby says that she feels uncomfortable with the presence of her friend at the same place she is with Aileen. In this same perspective, she says that coming back to her father's house would be a good alternative because he could "save her soul". Selby's comment reveals her necessity to fit into a heterosexist society which until today condemns those who have desire for people of the same sex. According to Rich, society imposes "a manmade

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<sup>20</sup> ([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html))

institution-compulsory heterosexuality-as if, despite profound emotional impulses and complementarities drawing women toward women, there is a mystical/biological heterosexual inclination, a ‘preference’ or ‘choice’ that draws women toward men” (Rich 205). Thus, a same-sex desire who subverts this ‘mystical /biological’ heterosexual inclination is seen as an abnormal relationship. Selby’s conflicts toward her same-sex positioning relates to this idea to fit into a predominantly heterosexist society which imposes a compulsory heterosexuality in her life. In a prior conversation with a friend, Aileen says:

Aileen: I met a friend

Aileen’s friend: Really? Good for you. I hope it’s not the last guy who almost trampled you to death.

Aileen: No, s/he’s ... you know?

Aileen’s speech conveys her confusion in relation to her own sexuality, as if it were an “introjected homosexuality”<sup>21</sup> and consequently her difficulty to perceive Selby in a predetermined sex-gender position as ‘she’ or ‘he’. For Aileen, since Selby has desire for a person of the same sex, Selby’s identity is as a ‘he’, even though her *sexed body* constitution is a female one (she) or, in other words that “the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders”. (Butler 3).

Following my analysis of the proposed scene, Aileen invites Selby to dance in the roller rink. Although there are some other women dancing together, Selby is apprehensive due to the fact that her friend is looking at them. Aileen, however, contrary to her initial position as reluctant to Selby’s advances, convinces her and they start to dance. According to Bordwell “The rhythm, melody harmony and instrumentation of music can strongly affect the viewer’s emotional reactions” (325).

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term introjected to refer to psychology which explains the term as being something incorporated unconsciously into our own psyche (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/introjected>). In the case of Aileen it happens in the moment she is not already aware of her lesbian desire for Selby.

This assumption is confirmed in the tense that, in this scene, the diegetic music, which is a classic ballad from the 80's, seems to announce the romantic climate of the scene and, as the music gets louder; Aileen gives Selby a passionate kiss. (figure 10)

**Figure 10**



Besides that, the camera movement and a close-up shot of the two women kissing each other convey their detachment from the rest of the group which appear only as shadows in the background. The scene cuts to show the women outside the roller rink kissing each other. A low key lighting produces a dark environment between the two women to convey the idea that since they are two women who have a lesbian desire, they need to hide themselves from the heterosexist environment they are eventually part of, as if they were erased figures from society. (figure 11)

**Figure  
11**



*Monster* has the same necessity of independent movies to portray gays/lesbians in a natural manner. However, the representation of same-sex love between Aileen and Selby is grounded on the level of lesbian desire associated with violence. The film seems to convey the idea that this relationship is the reason why Aileen has committed such brutal crimes: “I made it all for us” says Aileen, at the end of the movie, to Selby on the phone while they are talking about Aileen’s crimes. Still in order to reinforce the

arguments of my hypothesis of a biased lesbian relationship in *Monster*, is the brief analysis of one more scene of this movie. This scene shows the first sexual intercourse between Aileen and Selby. At this point of the film, the two women are living together and, after having committed a crime, Aileen goes home to meet Selby. As Aileen arrives at home what the viewer sees is the image of her in front of the mirror completely covered by the victim's blood (figure 12) and, then cuts to the next shot, in which the presence of music conveys a climate of romance between the two women.(figure 13).

According to Ginsberg, “[Aileen and Selby’s love] is accompanied by Lee’s increasingly heightened violence, however, mitigates any coming-of-age trajectory with a politically mediated discourse of regression of the sort commonly deployed to infantilize and demean lesbians”. In this perspective, it seems impossible for the viewer to disassociate the image of the cruel serial killer Aileen, seeing herself in the mirror and covered with blood after she have committed a crime. Thus, for the audience, to feel sympathy for Aileen and Selby’s same-sex love is far from achievement. Such scene works as a means to perpetuate biased lesbian images in cinema in the sense that it portrays a lesbian relationship related to the violent acts committed by Aileen.



**Figure 12**



**Figure 13**



Moreover, *gender performativity* plays an important role in *Monster* and it is directly connected to Aileen's and Selby same-sex relationship and also how Aileen's representation of her identity is portrayed in the film. According to Butler,

Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. That expectation, in turn, is based upon the perception of sex, where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics [i.e., the seemingly unarguable givenness of anatomical differences between male and female]. This implicit and popular theory of acts and gestures as expressive of gender suggests that gender itself is something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known; indeed, gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex. If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. (Butler 128-9)

In *Monster*, Aileen's character construction of her gender identity is depicted through her performative acts. From the moment she starts her relationship with Selby, her performance changes; Aileen's acts assume a male identification which does not identify her with her biological sex. An example of that are Aileen's clothes, which portray Aileen as "both feminine and non-gender-specific. Unisex clothing and hairstyles discordant with corporate media and advertising industry standards of feminine beauty combine with a degree of heterosexual codification that contrasts the culturally pervasive butch-femme caricature of lesbianism as well as resists its common foil, androgyny".<sup>22</sup> Aileen's clothes are basically constituted of long T-shirts, hats and old jeans which identify her with a male standard. Besides that, Aileen's attitudes and her speech also identify her with a male positioning. She takes the position of the 'breadwinner' of the house and then making Selby promises such as buying a house and giving her the good life she always wanted to have. Aileen's speech expresses this idea

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<sup>22</sup> ([http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html))

when she says “I’ve got you [Selby]. I’gonna git you the house, car, the whole fuckin’ shebang”. The idea of possessing Selby is typically attributed to men who think that are in control of women’s lives as if they were weak and needing protection “This is my girl” says Aileen when introducing Selby to her friends.

Summing up, in all analyzed scenes one may perceive a biased tone both relating to Aileen’s representation of her lesbian identity and her relationship with Selby. The first and second scenes, on the one hand, show the importance of female associations, on the other hand, they reveal a moral and biased portrayal of same-sex love. In the last analyzed scene Aileen and Selby lesbian relationship is seen as being something perverse and violent when relating lesbian desire to violence.

## CHAPTER IV

### Final Remarks: From the Colored to the Monstrous Love

In the first chapter of this study I presented an overview on the study of gender studies as well as a review of theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Laura Mulvey, among others in order to provide argument for my assumptions. These theories provided me a basis for the analysis of the selected scenes in this work.

In the second chapter, I worked with the film *The Color Purple* and its relations to gender and sexuality studies. The character of Celie and her associations with other women, especially with Shug Avery, were the core of my analysis. In this chapter I analyzed two main sequences which seem to convey my hypothesis of the ambiguity of Celie and Shug's lesbian relationship in the film.

In the third chapter I analyzed some selected scenes from the film *Monster* which also show the ambiguous mark of female associations in the film. In the analysis of this film I explored, as I did in the *The Color Purple*, issues of identity, sexuality and class.

Here, in these final remarks, I establish a comparison presenting the main similarities and differences concerning issues of sexuality and identity portrayed mainly in the characters of Celie and Aileen, respectively from *The Color Purple* and *Monster*. My conclusions are that, in both films, lesbian representations seem to lead to an erasure of lesbian existence in the sense that lesbian relationships experienced by Celie/Shug and Aileen/Selby are in great part seen as a causal effect of male mistreatment. Thus, the way that cinematic elements operate in these movies seem to confirm my initial hypothesis.

After having examined the representation of lesbian images in these movies, I have also concluded that both films, although confirming Adrienne Rich's assumptions on the power of female bonding to face male dominance, portray lesbian relationships in a biased manner, and consequently, reassert *compulsory heterosexuality*. Although not being my intention<sup>23</sup> to present a deeper discussion on ethnicity and historical periods, some comments on these issues seem to be relevant to the comparison of the main characters of the aforementioned films.

Celie is a black woman who lives in a rural society, in the South of the United States, in 1907. Although slavery had been abolished, she is still a "slave" to the men in her life. As an adolescent she is constantly raped by her own stepfather and, as a result, she gives birth to two children. In addition, she has a forced marriage with a cruel and sexist man who both assaults her physically and psychologically. Her husband Mr. treats her merely as an object to serve his own sexual needs and to take care of his house and children. Besides that, Celie is no longer in the company of her only friend and sister Nettie. Thus, all of the aforementioned facts lead Celie into a process of self imprisonment which makes her feel weak and passive in the male dominant society she lives: "I don't know how to fight, all I know what to do is stay alive", says Celie while in a conversation with her sister Nettie. However, with the arrival of Shug Avery, Celie seems to have her turning point. Her admiration and love, although in disguise in the movie, is a tool which triggers Celie's empowerment and liberation. In the movie this love is portrayed as being fraternal and merely a positive effect of the female bonding between the two women. In the Easter dinner's scene (analyzed in chapter II) it is clear the power of female associations in women's lives: women stay together, as a family, in order to overcome male domination. However, in the second analyzed sequence (Shug

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<sup>23</sup> A in-depth discussion on ethnicity and historical periods will not be developed in this study due to length constraints, but is suggested for further research

singing for Celie, Shug's father preaching and finally the lesbian scene kiss) it is visible the prevalent male point of view which permeates the entire movie.

Although with all advances conquered by women, since the feminist movement started in the 1960's, *The Color Purple* and *Monster* are conservative films. The movie director Steven Spielberg, the film producers and the screenwriter made a soft version of the original *The Color Purple* written by Alice Walker in 1982, thus making *lesbian existence* in the film seems as an "infantile abomination" (Simon apud Digby 170). Typically a Hollywood movie director, Steven Spielberg produced a movie directed to a conservative and mainly heterosexual audience which, he claimed, was not prepared to experience the 'authentic' homoerotic relationship lived by Shug and Celie in the cinema. When I use the word authentic I refer to a more inclusive use of the term homoerotic relationship which seems to be erased from the movie.

However, if we consider the diegetic historical period of the *The Color Purple* (the early 1900's) as well as Celie's own perception of her sexuality we see that it does not seem feasible to perceive the homoerotic relationship between Celie and Shug in a wide visibility within the movie. The movie has as a setting a rural part of Georgia in 1906 in which the illiterate and weak Celie has never had any pleasant sexual experience or ever discovered her own body. Although in love with Shug, Celie's sexuality is something unknown to her. Shug is seen as a sexually experienced woman, but is never portrayed as a woman who has attraction for people of the same sex. On the contrary, Shug's passion for men is confirmed all through the movie. Besides that, the society's mentality, at that time which, without all gay and lesbian advances conquered through the years, was not open to perceive homosexual relationships as natural among people. On the contrary, most of the people, in the movie, are part of a sexist and racist society which still today has strong power in our daily lives. However, my thesis of

biased lesbian images, in this movie, seems to be confirmed in the sense that cinematic elements (camera movements, lighting, editing, etc) have operated in order to construct such images.

In *Monster*, Aileen lives in a contemporary United States in the year of 1989 and she is portrayed as a "white trash" person, a poor and uneducated white woman who lives as a prostitute, on the streets. Like Celie, Aileen has always been assaulted by men in her entire life and also initially finds in a woman a way to overcome the harsh reality of her life. The movie conveys the idea that Aileen is hopeless about finding a man who can support and love her so that she sees in Selby a way to feel as a human being again and to have a 'normal' life away from the streets. However, the female bonding between Aileen and her girlfriend Selby is portrayed, in the movie, as a way to promote violence.

In both movies, *The Color Purple* and *Monster* the props play an important role in their narratives. As an example, the mirror is a symbol which conveys for both Celie and Aileen the representation of their identities. Celie, through Shug, is taught to smile in front of the mirror in order to release herself of several years of pain and mistreatment and this act empowers Celie to subsequently face her cruel husband Mr. In addition, in the mirror's scene, Celie after having discovered herself in the mirror kisses Shug. In *Monster*, the first scene which shows Aileen looking at herself in the mirror is before her first date with her girlfriend Selby: "You look good" says Aileen to her own reflection in the mirror. After having looked herself in the mirror Aileen, like Celie, feels confident about herself and "[she] is now granted spatial grounding and determinacy; she is no longer floating or spectral"<sup>24</sup> to subsequently, like Celie with Shug, have her first lesbian kiss with Selby. However, the mirror in *Monster*, differently than in *The Color Purple*, conveys the idea of the violent tone of Aileen and Selby's

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<sup>24</sup> [http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_ginsberg.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_ginsberg.html)

relationship. As analyzed before in chapter III, Aileen, at home, after having committed a crime, looks herself at the mirror and subsequently has sex with Selby. Aileen's act of looking at the mirror is no longer a way to make her feel confident and empowered, but to show her situation as a murderer, and this fact is associated with her relationship with Selby. Summing up, in both films the mirror works as a way to portray these two women's empowerments, even though in *Monster*, it also works as a means to convey the idea of a perverse homoerotic relationship between Aileen and Selby.

Another important aspect in *The Color Purple* and *Monster* is the voice-over used for both characters, Celie and Aileen. The voice over in these films works as a means to express the characters' feelings and life experiences as well as to portray their lesbian relationships. This fact is stronger in Aileen who, throughout the film, narrates her relationship with Selby and its effect in her life as a whole. For Celie, who is a lonely and sad person, to talk to herself works as a way to release her pain and also to express her love for Shug: "Shug is like honey and I just a bee", says Celie's voice over. To sum up, a voice over feature is a cinematic element which shows the characters' point of view as if the viewer were inside their minds.

Concerning Spielberg's *The Color Purple* and Jenkin's *Monster*, I have concluded that both films present an ambiguous mark. In the former, the female bonding between women has worked as a means to face male dominance as it also initially happens in the latter. However, in *Monster*, Aileen's desire for Selby is, throughout the film, as it is in *The Color Purple*, permeated by a male point of view. In other words, In *Monster*, the lesbian relationships as well as Aileen's murders are explained on the grounds of male mistreatment, as it is Celie's and Shug's relationship in *The Color Purple*.

Films are important sources of representation of lesbians and gay identities. Thus, while movies portray lesbian/gays characters in a biased manner (as vampires, murderers, or having pseudo lesbian/gay relationships) they seem to promote in society the permanence of *compulsory heterosexuality*. Finally, I hope this work has contributed for the debate of sexual identities as well as for the development of further research in this area.



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