

Florida execution of Aileen Wuornos: another morbid media spectacle

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Americans tuning in to network and cable news programs this past Wednesday morning were barraged with coverage of the execution of Aileen Wuornos, a former prostitute who confessed to the murders of seven men in Florida more than a decade ago.

Wuornos, 46, was pronounced dead at 9:47 a.m. October 9 following the injection of two syringes of potassium chloride into her bloodstream at the Florida State Prison. Her state killing was the fifty-sixth so far this year in the US. She was the fifty-second person executed in Florida since the reinstatement of the death penalty in that state, and only the second woman.

Eight hundred and five men and women have been sent to their deaths in the US since 1976, and more than half of these executions have been carried out since 1997. In response to this dizzying pace of state killings, news coverage of many executions has become low-key in recent years. Aileen Wuornos's execution, however, was the occasion for the media to offer up a sickening recounting of the details of her case and her final hours as she awaited her lethal injection.

Viewers were told what she chose for her final meal, and that she was in a "good mood" as she awaited her execution. Reporters repeatedly detailed how the obviously disturbed woman lured and murdered her victims as she hitchhiked the highways and interstates of North Florida over a 13-month period in 1989-90.

The information presented provided little explanation for what led this woman to carry out these brutal killings. Rather it was intended to shock viewers and, by sensationalizing the story, lead those watching to conclude that the only "reasonable" response to Aileen Wuornos's crimes was to put her to death.

The media response to this woman's execution was the latest in what can only be described as a perverse fascination with her case by what purports to be

"popular culture" in America. It has been the subject of numerous true-crime books, a comic book and at least three movies, including "Damsel of Death, The Aileen Wuornos Story," which was selected for this year's New York International Independent Film Festival. "Wuornos"—*the opera*—premiered in San Francisco in June 2001.

Wednesday's coverage of the Wuornos case offered little insight into the social and psychological factors that produce individuals capable of carrying out such atrocities. The details that are known about her life depict a woman confronting violence and tragedy from a young age. She was born in Michigan and was raised by her grandparents after her mother abandoned her as an infant. Her father, a convicted child molester, committed suicide in prison. She was pregnant by age 14—the result of a rape, according to Wuornos—and was forced to give up her child. She was working as a prostitute by age 15, and began abusing alcohol and drugs.

For years, she maintained that she murdered her victims in self-defense while being raped and sodomized, but she later recanted these claims. She said she robbed and killed one of her victims because she needed \$200 to rent an apartment for herself and her lover.

Fort Lauderdale attorney Raag Singhal wrote a letter to the Florida Supreme Court last month expressing "grave doubts" about her mental condition. But Florida authorities have always maintained that Wuornos was competent to stand trial. State-appointed psychiatrists interviewed her for half an hour last week and determined that she was "cognizant and lucid," i.e., ready for the execution chamber. They rejected the arguments of Florida Support, an anti-death penalty group, that she was "borderline psychotic."

She was a “volunteer” for execution, one of a growing number of condemned inmates in the US who choose to be put to death rather than languish on death row. Florida Governor Jeb Bush signed her death warrant on October 2, even though the constitutionality of the state’s capital punishment system has been called into question by a US Supreme Court ruling on Arizona’s death penalty. In both states, trial judges, and not juries, have the final say on whether or not to sentence defendants to death.

One prosecutor described Wuornos at her 1992 trial as a “homicidal predator,” saying “She was like a spider on the side of the road, waiting for prey—men.” As is the norm, this behavior is explained by the authorities and the media as the actions of an individual inexplicably possessed by evil. No real connection is made between her past and her resort to violent and psychopathic behavior.

The prurient coverage of Wuornos’s execution reflected the media’s obsession with sex and its fascination with state killings. But it also had a political function: to desensitize the public to the barbarity of capital punishment and legitimize state violence.



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