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# The (Re)Appropriation of Horror Film Codes with a Feminist Agenda. A Case Study: Jennifer's Body

Constance Sourisse

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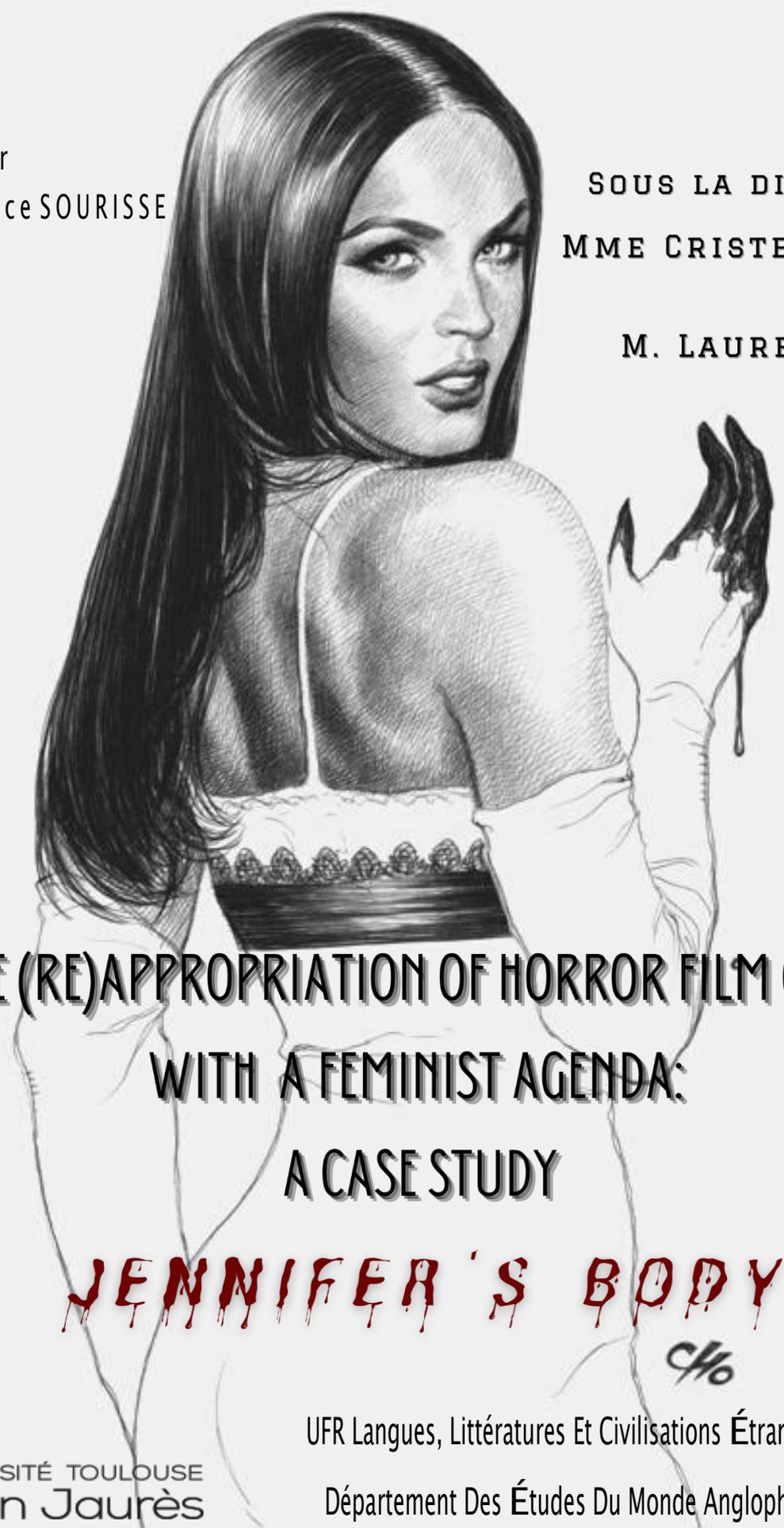
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SOUS LA DIRECTION DE  
MME CRISTELLE MAURY  
ET  
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Juin 2021



THE (RE)APPROPRIATION OF HORROR FILM CODES  
WITH A FEMINIST AGENDA:  
A CASE STUDY

**JENNIFER'S BODY**

CH

UFR Langues, Littératures Et Civilisations Étrangères

Département Des Études Du Monde Anglophone

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Frank Cho, 'Black and White Cover by Franck Cho', in Rick Spears, ed., *Jennifer's Body*, BOOM! Studios, 2009, n.p.

BOOM! Studio is a publishing house which creates comic books and graphic novels.  
Frank Cho's artworks on *Jennifer's Body* were presented at the San Diego Comic-Con 2009.

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## Editorial Notes

The present thesis analyses, discusses and reflects upon Karyn Kusama's horror-comedy *Jennifer's Body* (2009). For this matter, the film studied here corresponds to the extended version, also called director's cut or unrated version, which was released on DVD in 2010.<sup>1</sup> This version [107:23 min] is five minutes and seven seconds longer than the theatrical version [102:16 min], offers sixty-six altered parts including almost thirty alternative footage, eleven edits and the version offers six parts that are longer than the in the theatrical version.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis also includes scenes than are neither in the theatrical version nor in the extended version, but which were made available as deleted scenes in the DVD extras in 2010.<sup>3</sup> When discussed in the thesis, the dialogues and frames are not timed as they are not featured in Kusama's final cut.

Furthermore, for the sake of coherence, Diablo Cody's (*Jennifer's Body*'s scriptwriter) original script,<sup>4</sup> written in 2007 is quoted and sometimes compared to Kusama's film. This way, the thesis can discuss and comment on the correlation and divergence in terms of text and subtext—such as the taming of remarks or the development, modification or deletion of scenes and characters.

Finally, as to work deeper on the complex characterisation in *Jennifer's Body*, the thesis will sometimes rely on Rick Spears's graphic novel,<sup>5</sup> released in August 2009—a month prior to the national release of the film—and presented at the 2009 San Diego Comic-Con. The aim here is to work on the characters' background and to provide depth and dimension to the narrative's monster and male adolescents of *Jennifer's Body*.

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<sup>1</sup> Karyn Kusama, *Jennifer's Body* (2009), 20th Century Fox, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> 'Jennifer's Body', *Movie-censorship.com*, <https://www.movie-censorship.com/report.php?ID=2050657> (last accessed 8 May 2021)

A full comparison of the sixty-six altered part is provided on the website.

<sup>3</sup> K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Diablo Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, Unpublished, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Rick Spears, *Jennifer's Body*, Los Angeles, BOOM! Studios, 2009.

## Introduction: *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009)

### Versus the World

#### The Genesis of *Jennifer's Body* (2009)

So look out big bad world... here I come.<sup>6</sup>  
(Jennifer Check in Rick Spears, 'Epilogue', *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, n.p.)



In 2007, after winning an Oscar for the *Best Original Screenplay* for her script of the teen movie *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), Cody was given *carte blanche* by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox for her next piece of writing. Hence, 'immediately after *Juno* Cody resolved to create a horror film pastiche of the films of the 1970s and 1980s that challenged the demeaning characteristics of young females in the genre.'<sup>7</sup> *Jennifer's Body* came out of the creative free reins given to Cody: a one hundred and fourteen-page long screenplay of a teen horror-comedy which addresses female adolescence, female friendships, sex, empowerment, and revenge.<sup>8</sup> Thence, because of the themes it addresses *Jennifer's Body* falls into the category of the 'woman's film' described by Jeanine Basinger as 'a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman,'<sup>9</sup> and into 'women's cinema' which Alison

Butler conceptualised as a type of cinema that 'might be made by, addressed to or concerned with women, or all three.'<sup>10</sup> Kusama's (*Jennifer's Body*'s director) film actually is all three as

<sup>6</sup> The Figure on the left-hand side comes from Rick Spears's 'Epilogue' as well and the frame is accompanied, in the caption, by the first half of the quotation 'So look out big bad world...' (R. Spears, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, n.p.).

<sup>7</sup> Julie Casali, *Terror of Girlhood: Ideological Representations of the Adolescent Female in Jennifer's Body*, Thesis presented at the Rhode Island College, 2013, 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Jeanine Basinger, 'Introduction', in Jeanine Basinger, ed., *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1993, 3-23, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Alison Butler, *Women's Cinema – The Contested Screen*, London and New York, Wallflower, 2002, 1.

it is a film made by women for women—as I’m going to prove thanks to a study of the reception of the film—and starring women as main characters.

The inscription of *Jennifer’s Body* in the woman’s film is tightly linked to Pam Cook’s idea that, ‘The existence of the women’s picture both recognises the importance of women and marginalises them.’<sup>11</sup> That is where transgenericity—that is ‘the subversion of genres in order to combine genres to create something’<sup>12</sup>—between the woman’s film and the horror genre become particularly significant. Indeed, the horror film acknowledges the importance of its female characters but marginalises them by making them the ultimate scapegoat.<sup>13</sup> *Jennifer’s Body*’s transgeneric nature enables it to address women’s alienation by turning the horror genre on its head as to give female characters in the horror genre a new meaning. The film aims, through its subversion of genres, at empowering the marginalised women of horror narratives and more particularly sexually active young women who are the main targets of the genre.

Cody and Kusama take a strong feminist stance in *Jennifer’s Body*. They address issues which are closely bonded to the third-wave feminism—the celebration of individualism, diversity and sex positivity<sup>14</sup>—, and the Riot Grrrl movement which addresses rape, patriarchy, female empowerment and teenager girls’ anger.<sup>15</sup> The filmmakers also rely on postfeminism whose notions encapsulate ‘femininity [as] a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification, the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; [and] a marked sexualisation of culture.’<sup>16</sup> They even go as far as to anticipate, in some ways, the ideologies of the fourth-wave feminism—which began in the early 2010s—that request gender equality and addressed the marginalisation of women.

*Jennifer’s Body* presents Anita ‘Needy’ Lesnicki (Amanda Seyfried), a nerdy and seemingly ‘get-walk-over-by-her-best friend’ high schooler who will try anything she can to save the boys of Devil’s Kettle high school from being eaten by her best friend Jennifer Check (Megan Fox)

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<sup>11</sup> Pam Cook, ‘Melodrama and the Women’s Picture’, in Sue Aspinall and Sue Harper, eds., *Gainsborough Melodrama*, London, British Film Institute Dossier, 18, 1983, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Cristelle Maury, ‘Transgénéricité et Subversion dans le Cinéma de Todd Haynes’, *Master LLCER Parcours Études Anglophones, Programme, AN00112V - Aperçus Méthodologiques Des Études Filmiques*, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Brunell, ‘The Third Wave of Feminism’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-fourth-wave-of-feminism> (last accessed 8 May 2021)

<sup>15</sup> Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, New York, Harper Collins, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Rosalind Gill, ‘Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:2, 2007, 147-166, 148.

after the latter has been turned into a succubus by a fame-seeking indie band, Low Shoulder. The musicians sacrificed Jennifer as a virgin—which she was not—in exchange of fame and glory from ‘the Beast’ whom they are in league with. The film follows Needy through her quest and transformation from wannabe saviour to survivor and finally avenger.

As film director Kusama stated it herself *Jennifer’s Body* ‘[i]s a little bit more complicated than a straight comedy, a straight horror film, a straight high school movie, [it is] a fresh take on all of those things.’<sup>17</sup> The purpose of *Jennifer’s Body* was thus to perform on several cinematic levels while shedding new lights on the genres it partakes of. Moreover, both scriptwriter and director’s intent were to make a ‘feminist horror’ of *Jennifer’s Body* hence linking the film to American feminist waves, movements and their agenda. Julie Casali explains in her thesis, ‘Both Cody and Kusama confessed that the movie was a *cinematic Trojan horse* meant to entice 15-year-old boys into the audience of a “feminist” horror film.’<sup>18</sup> This decision of turning *Jennifer’s Body* into a cinematic Trojan horse is conterminous with the way some female filmmakers work with and shape their horror films.<sup>19</sup> As Maude Michaud explains

If female filmmakers are first and foremost horror fans [as both Cody and Kusama are] who are aware of the archetypes of the genre and have an alternative reading of the horror films, it is no surprise that their work plays with the genre norms, some of them making it a point of subverting specific elements.<sup>20</sup>

Thence, Cody and Kusama’s aim was to subvert cinematic genres by addressing them in a way that does not strictly conform to the codes, stereotypes and clichés, but which bends them, manipulates them and even mocks them to give them a new purpose and to serve a subjective view on gender. Kusama and Cody’s idea was to present a horror film that seems to adhere to its prescribed ideologies on the surface, but which actually twists them and bends them enough to comment on them<sup>21</sup> and to present them through a feminist agenda. Indeed, Michaud, in her essay ‘Horror Grrrls’ states that:

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<sup>17</sup> Ryan Turek, ‘Exclusive Interview: Jennifer’s Body Director Karyn Kusama’, *Coming Soon*, 2009, <https://www.comingsoon.net/horror/news/714823-exclusive-interview-jennifers-body-director-karyn-kusama> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

<sup>18</sup> J. Casali, *Terror of Girlhood*, *op. cit.*, 25-26, my emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Anna Biller’s *The Love Witch* (2016), Kathryn Bigelow’s *Near Dark* (1987) or Julia Ducourneau’s *Raw* (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Maude Michaud, ‘Horror Grrrls – Feminist Horror Filmmakers and Agency’, *Offscreen*, 18:6-7, 2014, <https://offscreen.com/view/horror-grrrls> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>21</sup> Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies – Writing the Woman into Cinema*, London and New York, Wallflower, 2004, 18.

There are some common threads in women's contributions to the genre; the stories are often told from a woman's perspective, the films often subvert stereotypes and clichés in "turning the table" type scenarios that empower female characters, and others offer an introspective approach to the genre by focusing on topics that appeal directly to women such as eating disorder, body image issues and rape.<sup>22</sup>

Cody and Kusama's film seemingly intends to follow Michaud's 'guideline' to the letter, hence, creating a piece of work that 'pushes narrative boundaries and plays with genre in order to create an exaggerated and campy portrayal of the horrific standards to which women are expected to adhere.'<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the subversiveness of the film and its critiques of society is not what transpires in the film's paratext—in its trailer, in the official and unofficial posters and, later, on DVD covers.

### What You Give Is What You Get or How the Marketing and Advertising Teams Sold *Jennifer's Body*

Shut your mouth, object.  
(Nikolai Wolf in D. Cody's *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 70)

In an interview he gave to *Vulture* in 2010, Adam Brody (who stars Nikolai Wolf, Low Shoulder's lead singer in *Jennifer's Body*) gave his own interpretation on 'why you didn't see *Jennifer's Body*.'<sup>24</sup> In this interview, Brody stated, 'I do think it should win a *Razzie* for Worst Ad Campaign ever.'<sup>25</sup> His remark is directly linked to the marketing of the film, the test screenings and the myriad of negative reviews that followed *Jennifer's Body*'s screening in 2009.

In the one minute and forty-seven seconds teaser of *Jennifer's Body* several mini extracts are shown in order to enhance the viewer's will to see the film. These extracts are separated by short sentences that aim at framing the plot of the film as they state: 'In every school – There's one girl – Every girl wants to be friends with – And every guy – would die for.'<sup>26</sup> This sentence is somewhat reminiscent of films such as *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1988), *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) and *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* (Jonathan Levine, 2008) in which the character of the popular (mean) girl is at stake and in which high school gossip plays a character

<sup>22</sup> M. Michaud, *Offscreen*, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Caitlin Egan, 'Hell is a Teenage Girl': *Monstrous [Im]perfection in Contemporary Horror*, Thesis presented at the California State University of San Marcos, 2017, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Mike Vilensky, 'Adam Brody Explains Why You Didn't See *Jennifer's Body*', *Vulture*, 2010, [https://www.vulture.com/2010/09/adam\\_brody.html](https://www.vulture.com/2010/09/adam_brody.html) (last accessed 5 April 2021)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> 'Jennifer's Body | Official Trailer | 20th Century Fox', *20th Century Fox*, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8azftM5puI> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

of its own. However, and while these films may have had an impact on the script and the direction of *Jennifer's Body*, the latter, in Cody and Kusama's minds, does not put its focal point on 'Megan Fox Hot.'<sup>27</sup>

What the marketing and advertising teams focused on in the trailer, but also on the film posters (*Figures 1* and *2*) and, later, on DVD covers (*Figures 3* and *4*) is the objectification of Fox's body or rather of Jennifer's body. As explained by Jordan Crucchiola, 'Twentieth Century Fox promoted the film around a ginned-up, vixenish version of Fox's media-friendly persona, seemingly downplaying *Body's* potential audience of young girls in favor of horny boys aged 18 to 24,'<sup>28</sup> who would rather objectify Fox's character than see the subjectification of society's issues.<sup>29</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox thus chose to take the film title rather literally and to focus on Nikolai Wolf's caustic reflection to Jennifer in Cody's script, 'Shut your mouth, *object*.'<sup>30</sup>



Figure 1: *Jennifer's Body* movie poster.<sup>31</sup> Fox is lasciviously sitting on a school desk, dressed in a revealing outfit and looking candidly at the camera while a hand is hanging from the front of the desk.

Figure 2: *Coming Soon* film poster.<sup>32</sup> The poster is reminiscent of the *True Blood* (Alan Ball, 2008-2014) teaser poster and emphasises Jennifer's luscious lips which she lasciviously licks as blood drips from them.

<sup>27</sup> In an interview for *ET Live*, Diablo Cody stated that one of the emails from the marketing team of the film was made of only three words: 'Megan Fox Hot' and that it summarized the idea the team had on the film and its target audience. ('Jennifer's Body Reunion: Megan Fox and Diablo Cody Get Candid About Hollywood (Exclusive)', *ET Live*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2JLRtWlq0o> [last accessed 5 April 2021])

<sup>28</sup> Jordan Crucchiola, "'It Was a Dark Time": Megan Fox and Karyn Kusama Revisit the *Jennifer's Body* backlash', *Vulture*, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/megan-fox-karyn-kusama-talk-jennifers-body-at-beyond-fest.html> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

<sup>29</sup> One might explain this choice by quoting Rick Altman who states that actors' names 'designate more than just actors and actress – they guarantee a certain style, a particular atmosphere and a well-known set of attitudes.' (*Film/Genre*, London, British Film Institute, 1999, 25) Fox's precedent roles presented her as a sexual object, present on screen to satisfy the male gaze, and while *Jennifer's Body* completely turned this representation of the actress on its head, the marketing team and subsequently the audience did not understand this change in characters.

<sup>30</sup> D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body Script*, *op. cit.*, 70, my emphasis.

Note that this line was not kept in the film and was changed to a tamed version that reads, 'You don't have to talk if you don't wanna.' (K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*).

<sup>31</sup> The poster was retrieved online, from the following website: <https://www.amazon.fr/JENNIFERS-BODY-FILM-MOVIE-POSTER-DIMENSIONS/dp/B00D1YCA2S> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

<sup>32</sup> Retrieved from 'New One-Sheet for Jennifer's Body', *Coming Soon*, 2008, <https://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/47116-new-one-sheet-for-jennifers-body> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

The marketing and advertising chose to focus on Fox and her status as ‘sex symbol’ in order to target an audience that has been very specific to horror films since their booming in the 1970s and more specifically to the specific audience of teen horror films. This audience is, as Cody explains to *ET Live*, made of ‘guys’ who were expecting a particular characterisation of Fox, which is to see her feminine attributes and to see her suffer as young, luscious and sexually enhancing females are meant to suffer in slasher films.<sup>33</sup> Fox herself deplores the advertising of the film and, as Kusama and Cody, feels like the film was mis-marketed.<sup>34</sup>



Figures 3 and 4: *Jennifer's Body* DVD Covers.<sup>35</sup> Fox is presented in revealing outfit, luring at the camera with a frightening expression (Figure 3) and a luscious expression (Figure 4).

This mis-marketing can be linked to the fact that, ‘For a film text to bear meaning, the codes and conventions it employs must be recognisable, justifiable and plausible for spectators and producers.’<sup>36</sup> Thus, this objectification and destruction of the sexually attractive character in a horror movie is what bears meaning to the spectators and to the producers, because it represents what has been done, times and times again, commented and twisted since the 1960s horror films.

While the spectators search for what is recognizable and stable<sup>37</sup> in *Jennifer's Body*, or in other words what is part of their knowledge of the genre(s), some failed to understand that *Jennifer's Body* aims at subverting the horror genre rather than aligning with it. This failure might explain why ‘that movie was a commercial failure,’<sup>38</sup> why ‘the test screenings were horrible’<sup>39</sup> and

<sup>33</sup> Diablo Cody to *ET Live*, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> See for example *ET Live* (2019) and Peitzman (2018).

<sup>35</sup> The DVD covers were found online.

Figure 3: <https://www.amazon.com/Jennifers-Body-Megan-Fox/dp/B002USF1WC> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

Figure 4: <https://www.dvdfre.com/dvd/f46373-jennifers-body.html> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

<sup>36</sup> Claire Berlyn, *Teen Angst with a Body Count: Genre, Discourse and the Killer Girl Hero in Popular Film*, Canterbury Christ Church University, Dissertation submitted for the MSc in Social Research Methods, 2013, 27.

<sup>37</sup> James Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*, Oxford UP, 1985, 84; and R. Altman, *Film/Genre, op. cit.*, 84 and 88.

<sup>38</sup> Diablo Cody to *ET Live*, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

why the reviews that followed the film were for the most part withering, trenchant and in a word negative.

### Test Screening, Film Release, and the Downfall and Renaissance of *Jennifer's Body*

What's wrong with *you*? I mean,  
besides the obvious surface flaws.  
(Jennifer Check to Needy Lesnicki in D. Cody's *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 80, my emphasis)

In his book, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s: Why Don't They Do It Like They Used To*, David Roche evoked film theorist Laurent Jullier when talking about the different criteria used by critics and moviegoers to evaluate a film. According to Jullier, six criteria are taken into consideration 'to evaluate the quality of a film: economic success, technical achievement, "enlightenment" (i.e. what the film teaches us about the world or about film), emotion, originality, and cohesion.'<sup>40</sup> When it comes to *Jennifer's Body*, the audience at the test screenings was partly made of '[p]eople who were fans of Juno, which is not the same kind of movie [and] the other part of the audience were guys who wanted to see something very specific from [Fox].'<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the criteria of enlightenment, emotion, originality and cohesion were not specifically those expected from a teen horror-comedy, but those expected from a light teen comedy, a sexploitation film<sup>42</sup> or 'skin flick'<sup>43</sup> in which the sex and skin interest would be Fox. Kusama and Cody's intentions of making a feminist and subversive teen horror-comedy did not match the audience's interpretations of the film—as most of them, in 2009, saw *Jennifer's Body* at the crossroad of 'three popular genres: horror, comedy and teen angst. [But which] [u]nfortunately [] fails at all of them.'<sup>44</sup> However, as Janet Staiger explains in her work *Media Reception Studies*, speakers cannot hope 'to influence, persuade or merely enlighten their audiences'<sup>45</sup> if their intentions do not match the audiences' interpretations.

Rachel Schmitz tries to rationalize the mismatch between intention and interpretation by explaining that the spectators present at the test screenings—and, later, screenings in cinemas—

<sup>40</sup> David Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s – Why Don't They Do It Like They Used To?*, Mississippi UP, 2014, 7. In reference to Laurent Jullier, *Qu'est-ce qu'un bon film?* Paris, La Dispute, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Diablo Cody to *ET Live*, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Sexploitation means the 'exploitation of sex in the media and especially in films.' ('Sexploitation', *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexploitation> [last accessed 7 March 2021]).

<sup>43</sup> A skin flick is 'a movie featuring nude people' ('Skin Flick', *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/skin%20flick> [last accessed 7 March 2021]).

<sup>44</sup> James Berardinelli, 'Jennifer's Body (United States, 2009)', *Reel Views*, 2009, <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/jennifer-s-body> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>45</sup> Janet Staiger, 'Introduction', in Janet Staiger, ed., *Media Reception Studies*, New York and London, New York UP, 2005, 1-16, 1.

might have been missing some ‘[k]nowledge in film, literature, and feminist theory [which] is [...] indispensable to understanding the message of *Jennifer’s Body* (2009).’ Thus, to the majority of the spectators, ‘the film is barely more than an absurd film.’<sup>46</sup> Schmitz’s conclusion on the reception of the film by the spectators is largely visible on film reviewing websites. The most striking example being *Rotten Tomatoes* which constitutes the prime sources of reviews used in this thesis.<sup>47</sup> The review-aggregation website’s ‘Tomatometer’—an aggregation of professional critics’ reviews—granted a 45% fresh<sup>48</sup> to *Jennifer’s Body*—with an average rating of 5.30/10—and gave as critics’ consensus, ‘*Jennifer’s Body* features occasionally clever dialogue, but its horror/comedy premise ultimately fails to be consistently funny or scary enough to satisfy.’<sup>49</sup> With 115 ‘Rotten’ reviews for 93 ‘Fresh’ in total,<sup>50</sup> the film is not even close to the eulogistic reviews and the percentages of freshness given to films *Jennifer’s Body* has been compared to. Indeed, *Heathers* and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) both received a 93% of ‘Freshness’, *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000) an 90% and *Mean Girls* an 84%.<sup>51</sup> The major problem of *Jennifer’s Body*, according to the reviews,<sup>52</sup> seems to be that it is not stable, or recognizable and moves too far from the conventions it has been attached to.

Out of the two hundred and eight critic reviews provided on *Rotten Tomatoes*, more than one hundred and eighty were written in 2009 and present different types of critiques which can be seen through the dichotomous spectrum of ‘good’ film versus ‘bad’ film. Rachel Simon fully summarises the polarity of the reviews as follows, ‘For all the positive reviews and fan reactions that praised the film’s feminism and Diablo Cody-penned script, there were just as many scorching ones, responses that railed the films supposedly bad writing, weak acting, and ludicrous plot.’<sup>53</sup> Indeed, some reviews from 2009 were positive, and praised the film and

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<sup>46</sup> Rachel Schmitz, ‘Horrifying Stereotypes: The Construction of New Gender Roles in “Jennifer’s Body”’, *The Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts*, 4, 2012-2013, 29-40, 38.

<sup>47</sup> Since only twelve reviews of *Jennifer’s Body* dating from 2016 to 2021 are indexed on *Rotten Tomatoes* other reviews were retrieved from numerous websites, magazines and podcasts as to provide a fairer examination of the film consensus under the different eras examined here (pre-#MeToo and post-#MeToo eras).

<sup>48</sup> The percentage changed from 44% to 45% on October 20, 2020 with new positive reviews which show a change of perception concerning *Jennifer’s Body*. Since this date, seven new reviews were added to the website *Rotten Tomatoes*.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Jennifer’s Body’, *Rotten Tomatoes*, [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jennifers\\_body](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jennifers_body) (last accessed 5 April 2021)

<sup>50</sup> ‘Rotten’ and ‘Fresh’ are terms used by the website *Rotten Tomatoes* to determine if a film was good—here ‘Fresh’—or bad—here ‘Rotten’.

<sup>51</sup> Although, *Ginger Snaps*, *Carrie* and *Heathers* scores were based on 50 to 70 reviews, while *Jennifer’s Body* counts more than 200 reviews, which reveals that while it is consider as less good it seems to be a hotter topic.

<sup>52</sup> J. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, *op. cit.*, 84.

<sup>53</sup> Rachel Simon, ‘Why “Jennifer’s Body” Got So Much Hate’, *Bustle*, 2016, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/151334-why-jennifers-body-got-so-much-hate-according-to-director-karyn-kusama> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

provided arguments and explanations to their positive views of the film; some reviews, although positive, explored the elements that provoked the failure of the film. The negative comments, on the other hand, can be divided into three categories: the ones which deplored the unclarity of the message *Jennifer's Body* wants to convey, the ones which blamed its failure on the director, the scriptwriter and/or the actors—most of these reviews focused solely on Fox's performance—and the ones which stated that for a horror-comedy, the film was neither funny (enough) nor scary (enough).

In 2009, critic Anne Billson, writing for *The Art Desk*, demonstrated that critics—and probably some spectators too—understood *Jennifer's Body* just the way the marketing team wanted them to understand the film as she stated 'Megan Fox is hot. And evil. But mostly hot.'<sup>54</sup> Critics such as Michael Sragow from the *Baltimore Sun* emphasised this idea as he stated, 'The one perfect aspect of *Jennifer's Body* is its title: No one is going to like this movie for its brain.'<sup>55</sup> Hence, in this type of reviews, the context and subtext of the film are completely ignored and only its visual effects are being judged. Other reviews, in 2009 (and 2010), addressed the question of the context and subtext in relation to the film genre. These reviews were either eulogistic, such as Anthony O. Scott from the *New York Times* who stated that *Jennifer's Body* '[t]akes up a common theme of slasher films—that queasy, panicky fascination with female sexuality that we all know—and turns it inside out.'<sup>56</sup> Or they were rather cynical, such as Adam Lippe's reviews for *A Regrettable Moment of Sincerity*, in which he wrote, 'If Cody truly had the courage to tell the story [...], she would have gone the mean and nasty route that *Heathers* hinted at, instead of all this self-conscious dialogue and wimpy horror.'<sup>57</sup> Ben Child, who wrote for *The Guardian* in 2009, even made a comment on the feminist aspect of the film as he wrote, 'Neither Diablo Cody's script nor a vampiric Megan Fox have sold critics on *Jennifer's Body*. Did the feminist subtext convince you or did the high school horror outing just drain your patience?'<sup>58</sup> Hence, in 2009 the consensus, for the major part, was that the film genre was

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<sup>54</sup> Anne Billson, 'Jennifer's Body', *The Art Desk*, 2009, <https://theartsdesk.com/film/jennifers-body?page=0.1> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>55</sup> Michael Sragow, 'Of Taste and Tastelessness', *Baltimore Sun*, 2009, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2009-09-18-0909170071-story.html> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>56</sup> Anthony Scott, 'Hell Is Other People, Especially the Popular Girl', *New York Times*, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/18/movies/18jennifer.html> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>57</sup> Adam Lippe, 'Jennifer's Body', *A Regrettable Moment of Sincerity*, 2009, <https://regrettablesincerity.com/?p=4461> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

<sup>58</sup> Ben Child, 'Your Review: Jennifer's Body', *The Guardian*, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/nov/09/jennifers-body-megan-fox> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

dubious, the plot was deceptive, and the subtext was unconvincing. However, in less than a decade, this consensus was almost totally reversed in every part of its argumentation.

Since 2015 and more specifically since 2018, the speech on the legitimacy of the inscription in the horror genre of *Jennifer's Body*'s feminist subtext has changed. Petrana Radulovic's review, for example, in Matt Patches' article for *Polygon*, states that *Jennifer's Body* is 'gory without being gratuitous, sexy without being degrading, empowering without being pandering.'<sup>59</sup> It seems now that critics, as well as moviegoers, understand the stand and the purpose of the film in the light of the #MeToo<sup>60</sup> and the Time's Up<sup>61</sup> movements. Frederick Blichert mentioned it in his article for *Vice* as he stated that 'it's worth considering that [*Jennifer's Body*] themes of abuse, empowerment, and accountability would likely be a winning formula with horror movie critics in the #MeToo era.'<sup>62</sup> Fox, herself, admitted that people involved in the making of the film 'were eight years ahead of everybody else with what [they] were doing and feeling and thinking and saying and speaking.'<sup>63</sup> However, while film reviews evolved through time, the film has not changed and the message it wanted to convey and the issues it wanted to address have not changed either. Hence, some critics, such as Louis Peitzman, regrets the fact that '*Jennifer's Body* is suddenly being called "timely" in the #MeToo era, as though the abuse and exploitation of women in a patriarchal society is merely part of a recent trend,'<sup>64</sup> while female exploitation and the critic of the patriarchal hegemony were already at the heart of Cody and Kusama's project in 2007 and 2009.

The comment on society and the criticism of the patriarchal hegemony which holds sway over women's representation of themselves and projection onto other is what make *Jennifer's Body* an alternative film in women's cinema in 2009. As alternative films in women's cinema were described by Teresa de Lauretis as films

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<sup>59</sup> Petrana Radulovic in Matt Patches, 'Jennifer's Body, Over the Garden Wall and Everything we watched this weekend', *Polygon*, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/10/19/21524290/what-to-watch-netflix-amazon-hulu-jennifers-body-babadook-over-garden-wall> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>60</sup> Created in 2006 by Tarana Burke, the MeToo Movement rose in 2017 when 'the #metoo hashtag went viral and woke up the world to the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence.' ('History and Inception', *me too.*, <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/> [last accessed 7 March 2021]).

<sup>61</sup> Time's Up 'aims to create a society free of gender-based discrimination in the workplace and beyond.' ('About', *Time's Up*, <https://timesupnow.org/about/> [last accessed 7 March 2021]).

<sup>62</sup> Frederick Blichert, "'Jennifer's Body' Would Kill it If It Came Out Today', *Vice*, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qv99y3/jennifers-body-would-kill-if-it-came-out-today> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>63</sup> Megan Fox to J. Crucchiola, *Vulture*, *op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup> Louis Peitzman, 'You Probably Owe "Jennifer's Body" An Apology', *Buzzfeed News*, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/louispeitzman/jennifers-body-diablo-cody-karyn-kusama-feminist-horror> (last accessed 5 April 2021)

which engage the current problems, the real issues, the things actually at stake in feminist communities on a local scale, and which, although informed by a global perspective, do not assume or aim at a universal, multinational audience, but address a particular one in its specific history of struggles and emergency.<sup>65</sup>

*Jennifer's Body's* subtext and the issues it addressed were not global, nor were they openly addressed in the late 2000s. However, with the evolution of feminism, and with events that happened in the private as well as in the public sphere, *Jennifer's Body's* themes, soon became topical and largely discussed issues.

## Teen Angst with a Body Count and a Feminist Twist on the Patriarchal Hegemony in High School Horror

I have a feeling we're gonna blow up.  
(Nikolai Wolf in D. Cody's *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 27)

The present thesis will seek to observe, analyse and then discuss how Cody and Kusama used the codes and tropes of classic horror films to subvert the genre and serve feminist purposes such as the criticism of girl-on-girl hatred, female (s)exploitation and the condemnation of patriarchal hegemony through a horror film pastiche. In the field of cinema, '[p]astiche structures can be seen as constructive of postmodern film, movies that share their stylistics and ideological criticism with postmodern art, literature and general critical theory.'<sup>66</sup> It is precisely the critical theory of postmodernism that Kusama and Cody address in their horror film pastiche. The aims will be to understand how Cody and Kusama used the horror codes and tropes, but also how they transformed them and subverted them enough to shock the critics in 2009 and enough to delight recent critics in the way it addresses the horror genre within a feminist lens. In addition, this thesis will intend to understand how the film serves a topical cause in 2021, the cause of women's sexual emancipation and women's emancipation from patriarchal values, while it addressed it more than ten years ago, when this topic was only burgeoning online and barely tackled in this manner in films.

This present research understands itself a work in the field of reception studies in some ways. Indeed, the discussion around *Jennifer's Body* emerges primarily from the way the film and its subtext are understood by critics and spectators at large. The issues raised in critics' reviews thus act as starting point in this thesis. Hence, the discussion will evolve around the way

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<sup>65</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, 'Guerrilla in the Midst: Women's Cinema in the 80s', *Screen*, 31, 1990, 6–25, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, 'Cinematic Pastiche', in Ingeborg Hoesterey, ed., *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 2001, 45–79, 46.

Kusama's film was received and perceived in different social and political contexts and eras—namely the pre-#MeToo and post-#MeToo eras. The first context being when the film came out in 2009, and the second one starting in 2018, thus almost a decade later, when *Jennifer's Body* started its resurgence.

This thesis will first analyse to what extent the film belongs to the horror genre as it was questioned by critics in 2009. The [first chapter](#) will focus on the horror genre in which *Jennifer's Body* falls, or rather on the subgenres' elements—such as the luring and deceived voyeurism trope of rape/vengeance, the evilness of the possessed teenage girl, or the invasion of horror in high schools' boredom which is tightly linked to teen horror and slasher films—borrowed by Kusama and the way she used them in the film. Four subgenres will thus be discussed in the light of their codes and tropes, the way they are used in *Jennifer's Body* and the way they reflect on the ideologies of society in 2009 and since 2018. These four genres are: the teen horror, the slasher, the possession film, and the rape and revenge film.

The complex inscription of *Jennifer's Body* in the horror genre leads to what will be discussed in the [second chapter](#), that is the complex characterisation. The symbolic dimension of the characterisation of the interiorized horror stereotypes—by horror film critics, connoisseurs and fans—and what *Jennifer's Body* reveals about the representation of males, females and teenagers in a given time will be discussed. This chapter will first focus on the figure of the monster in *Jennifer's Body*: the impersonated monster that Jennifer represents and the actual, yet symbolical, monster that is the patriarchy—represented by the indie band Low Shoulder. The figure of the monster will then give way to the figure of the heroine and the way she is represented in *Jennifer's Body*. Finally, the male victims and their diverse representations will be analysed in order to demonstrate that the range of male victims in *Jennifer's Body* says a lot about the patriarchal society the characters, but also the spectators, live in.

The manipulation, transformation and subversion of one of the most codified film genres, in terms of plot and characters, reveals the main issue encountered by *Jennifer's Body*. This issue concerns the dissonant interpretations of the meaning of Kusama's film linked to a seemingly misunderstood feminist subtext in 2009 and the new light which has been shed on it a decade later. The controversy will be discussed in the [third and last chapter](#) which deals with the social contexts, society's normative values and their evolutions. This chapter will first discuss the feminist dimension of the film which has alternatively been acknowledged and refuted since 2009. This chapter will, then, discuss the way *Jennifer's Body* addresses misogyny, why it has

been called misandrist, and in which way this gender contempt themes have been interpreted in 2009 and since 2018, going from gratuitously displaying lesbianism and male-hatred for no apparent reason, to cleverly turning norms on their heads and comically commenting on the complexity of female relationships in an adolescent context.

## Chapter 1: *Jennifer's Body's* Genre – A Feminist Horror Film or Feminist Horror Films

As discussed in the introduction, the consensus around *Jennifer's Body* in 2009 is quite different from the one reached in 2018, at least for the most part, as 57% of the reviews on *Rotten Tomatoes* dating from 2009 were negative,<sup>67</sup> while 75% of the reviews written after 2016 were positive.<sup>68</sup> It seems that the critics in 2009 were mitigated as the 'audience consensus labell[ed] the film marginal at best, vapid at worst.'<sup>69</sup> One of the main elements cited in the 2009 negative reviews addressed the genre of the film. *Jennifer's Body*, according to some critics, is not scary enough, its characters are not campy enough or the film just does not work as a horror flick. In 2018 the consensus changed almost completely as *Jennifer's Body* is now called a 'cult classic horror film'<sup>70</sup> and a 'wickedly funny retro slasher pastiche,'<sup>71</sup> which indicates that the postmodern dimension of the film and its subversiveness was grasped in 2018 while the genre imitation and the comment made on it by Kusama, and Cody were not (totally) understood in 2009.

Tania Modleski, in her chapter 'The Terror of Pleasure,' argues that postmodernism in horror film manifest itself through three cornerstones: the suspense concerning the actual death of the killer (is Jason really dead? Why is Carrie's hand raising from the grave?), the minimality of the plot and the interchangeability of the characters, and the inability for the spectators to identify to those same characters.<sup>72</sup> *Jennifer's Body* presents seemingly interchangeable male victims, and the plot seems, at first, reductive—a shallow teenage girl turns into a literal man-eater and eats any boys who comes her way to stay pretty—but proves to carry a deeper meaning if the subtext is looked at more carefully. Furthermore, Cody and Kusama both argued

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<sup>67</sup> One hundred and four negative reviews were written in 2009 against eighty positive ones.

<sup>68</sup> *Rotten Tomatoes* only indexed twelve reviews dating from 2016 on (nine positives for three negatives). However, multiple other websites, magazines and even podcasts present positive reviews of the film which are not listed on *Rotten Tomatoes* (see for example Constance Grady for *Vox* [2018], Frederick Blichert for *Vice* [2018], Valeska Griffiths for *Grim* [2018] or Edward Raube-Wilson and Orlando Segarra from *Gratuitous Sex and Violence* [2020]).

<sup>69</sup> Ginger Simons, "'Jennifer's Body' and the Female Gaze', *The Screening Room*, 2019, <https://screeningroom.home.blog/2019/09/21/jennifers-body-and-the-female-gaze/> (last accessed 8 March 2021)

<sup>70</sup> Marian Philips, 'Jennifer's Body (2009): Sexuality and Social Relevance in Diablo Cody and Karyn Kusama's Cult Classic Horror Film', *The Re/Visionist*, 2019, <https://slcwhblog.com/2019/08/16/jennifers-body-sexuality-and-social-relevance-in-diablo-cody-andkaryn-kusamas-cult-classic-horror-film/> (last accessed 8 March 2021)

<sup>71</sup> L. Peitzman, *Buzzfeed News*, *op. cit.*

<sup>72</sup> Tania Modleski, 'The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory', in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1986, 155-166, 160-161.

in the DVD commentaries that Jennifer could still be alive by the end of the film.<sup>73</sup> Hence, *Jennifer's Body* plays with conventions, old and new, uses them to deconstruct them and gives them a new meaning. A meaning which reflects a political reality for Cody and Kusama that is female empowerment and female agency, and this political reality is what is at heart of postmodernist films for Linda Hutcheon.<sup>74</sup> When Kusama and Cody address women's empowerment by giving access to pleasure to the ultimate horror film scapegoat, namely women, that is when the subversiveness of the film comes into action.

The generally negative consensus observed in 2009 might come from the difficulty for the audience to accept changes in an established genre, in which they expect to recognize invariable elements as well as the generic identity of the film.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, *Jennifer's Body* falls into the category of 'generically marked films' which are:

Films which rely on generic identification by an audience—and hence specific forms of audience knowledge—in order to make sense. [...] [I]t refers more to the moment of reception and may include instances of generic reworking and generic rejection as well as instances of generic conformity.<sup>76</sup>

The mismarketing of the film clearly had an impact on the audience as explained in the introduction. However, the subversive tone of the film also unsettled the audience and created unease, because the text, the context and the subtext do not seem to conform to the traditional horror genre. Indeed, in *Jennifer's Body*, the horror genre is modified and reworked to serve a new purpose which is to present a feminist horror film.

In 2009, Kusama explained that *Jennifer's Body*

is not a remake, nor a franchise, which became rare in this genre. However, those who liked the new versions of *Halloween* [a teen slasher] or *The Last House on the Left* [a rape and revenge film] should like this film too, because it respects the traditions attached to those films while taking a fresh look at them.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Karyn Kusama and Diablo Cody in Karyn Kusama, 'Audio Commentaries', *Jennifer's Body* (2009), 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1988, 5.

<sup>75</sup> R. Altman, *Film/Genre*, *op. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 25-26.

<sup>77</sup> Karyn Kusama in Cédric Delelée, 'Du Sang Pour Lolita – Jennifer's Body de Karyn Kusama', *MadMovies*, 222, 2009, 44-49, 49. Kusama's speech was translated in French for the magazine and the translation back to English is mine.

The traditions Kusama refers to here can be read as the stereotypes in terms of gender and sexuality that the horror genre is using and abusing,<sup>78</sup> especially in the subgenre of the teen horror: the ‘dumb whore’ à la Jules (Anna Hutchinson) in *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2011) or Marlin (Melissa Price) in *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*, the prude à la Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), the quarterback, the nerd, the weirdo. While all those categories of people are found in *Jennifer’s Body* they are manipulated and twisted to serve a feminist purpose by commenting on horror genre stereotypes.

Cody and Kusama’s manipulation of codes and tropes seems to echo ‘the Freudian understanding of femininity as a battle for power and agency in a misogynistic culture, a battle that females are instinctively primed to fight, [and which] finds a vivid representation in the woman’s film and later in modern horror.’<sup>79</sup> Hence, scriptwriter and director inscribe *Jennifer’s Body* in the woman’s film through the themes of female empowerment and the subjects of misandry and misogyny—which will be further discussed in the [third chapter](#). But they also carve it in modern horror as they comment on female monstrosity, thus using ‘the horror genre [to express] male fear of the feminine,’<sup>80</sup> and its corroboration with the patriarchal culture.

Caitlin Egan, in her thesis, summarises *Jennifer’s Body’s* aims as she states, ‘[It] pushes narrative boundaries and plays with genres in order to create an exaggerated and campy portrayal of the horrific standards to which women are expected to adhere.’<sup>81</sup> This summary of *Jennifer’s Body’s* social and political engagement highlights two fundamental elements: the fact that *Jennifer’s Body* plays with the horror genre, and the fact that it does so to critique and indict society’s standards imposed upon women. Kusama and Cody chose to exploit the horror genre in its wide variety in order to provide a reflective but satirised vision of the impact of the pressure society exerts over (young) women.

In the media, *Jennifer’s Body* has been tagged as a comedy horror film, however, the term ‘comedy horror’ is an umbrella term which encompasses several subgenres of horror,<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> R. Schmitz, *The Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts Liberal Arts*, *op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> David Greven, *Representation of Femininity in American Genre Cinema – The Woman’s Film, Film Noir, and Modern Horror*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 28.

<sup>80</sup> Cristelle Maury and David Roche, ‘Introduction’, in Cristelle Maury and David Roche, eds., *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Film and Series of the Post-Feminist Era*, London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 1-30, 22.

Maury and Roche here quoted Barbara Creed (B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, *op. cit.*, 7).

<sup>81</sup> C. Egan, ‘Hell Is a Teenage Girl’, *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>82</sup> [Annex 1](#) gives a non-exhaustive view of different genres and subgenres of the horror film, which emphasises first the multitude of film subgenres the term ‘horror’ refers to but also demonstrates, as this chapter intends to, the transgenericity of *Jennifer’s Body*.

addressed with a comic tone<sup>83</sup>—which can be seen in dialogues, situations or even characters. Steve Neale considers that ‘most films are multiply generic,’<sup>84</sup> and ‘in consequence, genres often overlap, and individual films are sometimes considered [...] under a number of different generic headings.’<sup>85</sup> Michael Meere defines this intertwinement of genres when he gives a broad definition of transgenericity as ‘the inscription of a genre in another and the passage from one mode of representation to another.’<sup>86</sup> Here, genre ‘implies operative aesthetic laws and the possibility of their violation.’<sup>87</sup> A violation that Kusama and Cody used and abused in their work. It thus appears, at the same time, reductive to call *Jennifer’s Body* a horror comedy and unclear because, first, both comedy and horror encompass multiple subgenres. Second, defining *Jennifer’s Body* as merely a horror comedy obliterates the ‘women’s film’ dimension and third, because violation of these subgenres occurs multiple times so as to subvert them.

Carol J. Clover states that ‘it is surely safe to say that horror is probably the most convention-bound of all popular genres [and] that its conventions are organized around the experience of fear,’<sup>88</sup> and *Jennifer’s Body* is no exception to the rule. Indeed, the film uses conventions which are specific to four main subgenres of the horror film: the teen horror film (which is a branch of the teen movies), the slasher film, the possession film and the rape and revenge film, but twists them in a manner that address Cody and Kusama’s feminist agenda. In this chapter, each of these subgenres will be discussed in order to understand how Cody and Kusama use and modify codes and tropes to focus on a political issue in *Jennifer’s Body*. The aim being to understand the divided consensus on the legitimate stance of *Jennifer’s Body* in the horror genre that occurred in 2009, and which has been addressed again since 2018.

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<sup>83</sup> In *Jennifer’s Body*’s case the comic tone can even be understood as a satire of society, which might explain the reception as societal satire in comedy horror were not particularly well received in the 2000s. (Bruce G. Hallenbeck, *Comedy-Horror Films: A Chronological History, 1914-2008*, Jefferson, North Carolina and London, McFarland & Company, 2009, 189)

<sup>84</sup> S. Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Meere, ‘The Politics of Transgenericity: Pierre Du Ryer’s Dramatic Adaptations of John Barclay’s *Argenis*’, *Studia Aurea*, 10, 2016, 313-334, 313.

<sup>87</sup> Jane M. Graines, ‘The Genius of Genre and the Ingenuity of Women’, in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, University of Illinois Press, 2012, 15-28, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Women and Chain Saws – Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), Princeton UP, 2015, 212-213.

## I. Teen Horror - 'Hell Is a Teenage Girl,' A Yearbook Picture Teenage Girl

'Hell is a teenage girl' are the first words uttered by *Jennifer's Body's* (2009) narrator Anita 'Needy' Lesnicki in Karyn Kusama's theatrical cut [0:01:35].<sup>89</sup> This sentence is somewhat reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Hell is other people' written in his play *Huis Clos*,<sup>90</sup> in which Sartre comments on the objectification of the Other and the shame of projecting oneself onto the Other.<sup>91</sup> In her screenplay, Cody returns to Sartre to comment on female adolescence, on the objectification of the teenage girl, but also on girl-on-girl hatred. Hence, with this five-word sentence, Cody encompassed all the difficulties of the rite of passage that is puberty: the shame of being seen as a teenage girl and the consequences that this objectification has on the self and on the projection of Others.

Adolescence is thus depicted as a purgatory; a path between childhood and adulthood upon which all the shameful acts, behaviours and deviances must be purged. This metaphorical purgatory is linked to the idea that '[t]een films concern themselves with the physical and emotional consequences of adolescence, as children become adults, assuming a social identity shaped by gender, social class and ethnicity.'<sup>92</sup> That is why hell is not a teenage boy but a teenage girl, because in the patriarchal hegemony, the female sex will always be deviant and divergent.<sup>93</sup> It is the sex that must be criticised and punished for its abjection,<sup>94</sup> it is hell personified.

In *Jennifer's Body*, hell becomes a teenage girl, or rather is personified in teenage girls. Firstly, in Jennifer's character, who allegorically represents the threat that physical ideals and social pressure can pose to women, and their consequences. Then, in Needy, who represents the literal hell that a teenage girl can represent when she deliberately chooses to fight for women's power and agency. However, Kusama and Cody had to establish a teen horror setting in their narrative

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<sup>89</sup> This timing is the only one that refers to the theatrical version of *Jennifer's Body* every other timing concerns the extended version.

<sup>90</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos*, Paris, Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, 1944.

<sup>91</sup> Tim, 'Sartre: Hell is other people (Explanation)', *Philosophy & Philosophers*, 2018, <https://www.the-philosophy.com/sartre-hell-is-other-people> (last accessed 8 March 2021)

<sup>92</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Bodies and Genres in Transition: *Girlfight* and *Real Women Have Curves*', in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, University of Illinois Press, 2012, 84-95, 87.

<sup>93</sup> Wood comments that in our society there is a 'particularly severe repression of female sexuality / creativity; the attribution to the female of passivity, her preparation for her subordinate life and dependent role in our culture.' It is so because, 'Woman' can be seen as the Other as '[t]he dominant images of women in our culture are entirely male-created and male-controlled.' ('An Introduction to the American Horror Film', in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, ed., *The Monster Theory Reader*, Minnesota UP, 2020, 108-135, 111-112).

<sup>94</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, Columbia UP, 1982, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, 4.

to introduce the normality which will be disturbed by the Other and which will establish what is repressed in *Jennifer's Body*, a horror film which deals with adolescence. The teen horror setting is established in *Jennifer's Body* via a flashback narrated by Needy from the confines of her cell in a mental institution.

### A. Yearbook Pictures and the All-American Mean Girls

'We were yearbook pictures. Nothing more, nothing less' [0:05:29] declares Needy after black and white cartoons-like pictures of her, her boyfriend, Chip (Johnny Simmons), and her best friend Jennifer are displayed on-screen. This flashback scene [0:05:13-0:06:12] both introduces the protagonists and the initial setting, but also emphasises the idea that *Jennifer's Body* undeniably inscribes itself in the teen movie genre as it ticks all the boxes: the pep rally, the classic categorization of high schoolers with the cheerleaders, the 'jocks,'<sup>95</sup> the school mascot, brass band members and other adolescents cheering from the grandstands; the spectators are basically witnessing a teensploitation<sup>96</sup> à la *Mean Girls*, *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1996) or even *The Breakfast Club*<sup>97</sup> (John Hughes, 1985). Yet, this flashback is introduced both by the camera, frozen on a decaying Jennifer [0:05:13], and by Needy's voice-over from her cell in a psychiatric facility. Hence, something differs from the classic teen comedy, and goes more along the lines of a dark comedy/horror-comedy à la *Heathers*—to which *Jennifer's Body* has often been compared<sup>98</sup>—or a hormonal horror<sup>99</sup> à la *Ginger Snaps*.

The camera, frozen again, but this time on a photograph of Jennifer in her flag team uniform (*Figure 1*) [0:05:21], then tracks down to reveal, first, a picture of Needy 'inspecting a school newspaper layout'<sup>100</sup> (*Figure 2*) [0:05:25] and then, a picture of Chip 'playing a strap-on snare drum at a school pep rally' (*Figure 3*) [0:05:30], as if the photographs were reducing them to

<sup>95</sup> Jérémy Belando, *Les Slashers Ou La Pureté Cinématographique*, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, Ocrée, 2019, 12. As Belando wrote his essay in French, every quotation from his work present in this thesis has been translated by me, unless stipulated otherwise.

<sup>96</sup> Adrienne Boutang and Célia Sauvage, *Les Teen Movies*, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, 2011, 17.

<sup>97</sup> Fausto Fasulo, in the editorial of the 222<sup>nd</sup> issue of *Mad Movies* states that *Jennifer's Body* is a 'teen horror comedy filled with strong hints of gore and girly (and which 'dwells undeniably under John Hughes's shadow' [Fausto Fasulo, 'Editorial', *Mad Movies*, 222, 2009, 1, my translation]).

<sup>98</sup> From the two hundred and eight reviews available for *Jennifer's Body* on *Rotten Tomatoes*, thirty-two reviews compared *Jennifer's Body* to *Heathers* in one way or another. See, for example, Clark (2009), Rodriguez (2009) and Putman (2009).

<sup>99</sup> Joshua Rithkopf, 'Jennifer's Body', *Time Out*, 2009, <https://www.timeout.com/movies/jennifers-body-1> (last accessed 3 March 2021) and Nigel Floyd, 'Jennifer's Body', *Time Out*, 2009, <https://www.timeout.com/movies/jennifers-body-1> (last accessed 4 March 2021)

<sup>100</sup> D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, op. cit., 12 for this quotation and the following one.

their social category. Kusama, in the DVD, even comments on Needy's phrase, 'We were yearbook pictures', as she says, 'people in high school just so desperately want to be categorized.'<sup>101</sup> This categorization plays a role in the horror aspect of the film as Kusama and Cody, through labelling, reveal 'the adolescent anxiety toward fitting into gendered stereotypes and physical ideas.'<sup>102</sup> The spectators are here introduced to the normality of Devil's Kettle that will soon be disturbed by the Others, which are embodied first by Low Shoulder's members and second, and most importantly, by Jennifer's newly acquired monstrous identity as a succubus—a man-eating female demon. But this Otherness is already being addressed here as it is first and foremost the horror of adolescence and the anxiety it induces that create monstrosity in *Jennifer's Body*.



Figure 1: Jennifer's yearbook picture. Jennifer is at the top of the high school food chain as head cheerleader.



Figure 2: Bookish and dorky Needy as a stereotype of the mousy girl.

<sup>101</sup> Karyn Kusama in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>102</sup> C. Egan, 'Hell Is a Teenage Girl', *op. cit.*, 74.



Figure 3: Introduction of Needy's boyfriend Chip, whose stereotype matches his girlfriend's.

The fact that the three protagonists are pictured on the same page could imply that there is a triangular relationship going on between them. Needy seems to prove this hypothesis right as she states, 'Just two months ago, *me, Jennifer and my boyfriend, Chip*, were completely normal people' [0:05:24]. The order of the enumeration seems to have its importance here. The story revolves around Needy, Jennifer and, lastly, Needy's boyfriend, Chip. It seems here that the relationship between Jennifer and Needy, whatever its nature may be, is what is at stake for Needy. The events which are going to happen throughout the film follow those lines as 'there is some kind of a rape/revenge narrative to this movie [as it will be discussed in [one of the following subchapters](#)] but it's definitely more about these two girls and their relationship and this co-dependent friendship/romance they have.'<sup>103</sup>

Needy and Jennifer's 'BFF [Best Friend Forever] [and seemingly sapphic] bonding'<sup>104</sup> is even made explicit by one of Jennifer and Needy's classmate, Chastity (Valery Tian), as she states, 'You're totally lesbi-gay' [0:06:03] in a disdainfully and haughtily way. Chastity, here, verbalises one of the main themes of *Jennifer's Body* that is the latent lesbianism between Jennifer and Needy, which appears throughout the film. In addition, the tone employed by Chastity highlights 'the true horror of the movie, [which] is how teenagers treat each other and how cruel and hurtful they can be.'<sup>105</sup> The cruelty that adolescents can express toward one another will mainly be personified and amplified by Jennifer, as she is 'a compendium of every bullying personality trait known to young womanhood.'<sup>106</sup> However, and as seen here, the

<sup>103</sup> Trace Thurman and Joe Lipsett, 'Jennifer's Body (2009)', *Horror Queer*, 2019, <https://play.acast.com/s/horror-queers/jennifersbody-2009-> (last accessed 7 March 2021)

<sup>104</sup> Mark Dujsik, 'Jennifer's Body', *Mark Review Movies*, 2009, <http://www.markreviewsmovies.com/reviews/J/jennifersbody.htm> (last accessed 3 March 2021)

<sup>105</sup> Emanuel Levy, 'Jennifer's Body: Directed by Karyn Kusama', *EmanuelLevy.com*, 2009, <https://emanuellevy.com/review/jennifers-body-directed-by-karyn-kusama-5/> (last accessed 3 March 2021)

<sup>106</sup> Michael Philips, 'Megan Fox Brings Nothing Beside Jennifer's Body', *Chicago Tribune*, 2009, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2009-09-18-0909170300-story.html> (last accessed 18 May 2021)

tormentors are the adolescents at large and not only a ‘generic clichés about jocks/hotties doing war with nerds/notties,’<sup>107</sup> as Chastity seems—physically—at least as nerdy as Needy.

Chastity’s sarcastic and sardonic comments and even mocked impersonation of Needy reflect upon Cody’s exploration of the ‘intense baffling and all-consuming relationships that bind and repel adolescents to and from one another’<sup>108</sup> by focusing on the horror which is associated to the woman’s look. Indeed, as stated by Linda Williams in her renowned essay ‘When the Woman Looks,’ ‘The horror film may be a rare example of a genre that permits the expression of women’s sexual potency and desire, and which associates with the autonomous act of looking, but it [may] do[] so [...] to punish her for this very act, only to demonstrate how monstrous the female desire can be.’<sup>109</sup>

The introductory scene is thus not prominently reflective of the teen horror as the horror is underlying and rather implicitly represented through the aural channel than visually presented on-screen, although it does introduce the normality that will soon be disturbed by the Other. The teen movie setting is explicitly represented through characterisation, props and the trope of the pep rally. *Jennifer’s Body* could thus be seen as ‘a hybrid horror and teen angst film that tracks the ups and downs of a female friendship.’<sup>110</sup>

## B. High School Slaughter, Classic Characters and Prom Night Massacre

*Jennifer’s Body* encapsulates the essence of what *Le Bistro de l’Horreur* calls ‘High School Slaughter’<sup>111</sup> in which the quintessential element resides in adolescents’ obsession with sex, sexual frustration and the violence that arises from this frustration.<sup>112</sup> The violence that results from sexual frustration is not visually displayed in the scene that has just been analysed but is presented throughout Jennifer’s killing spree. The characterisation of Jennifer’s victims

<sup>107</sup> Sonny Bunch, ‘MOVIES: “Jennifer’s Body”: One Part Horror, Two Parts Camp’, *Washington Times*, 2009, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/18/drag-me-to-high-school/> (last accessed 3 March 2021)

<sup>108</sup> Andrea Chase, ‘Jennifer’s Body’, *Killer Movie Reviews*, 2009, <https://www.killermoviereviews.com/?movie=jennifers-body> (last accessed 4 March 2021)

<sup>109</sup> Linda Williams, ‘When the Woman Looks’, in Barry Keith Grant, ed., *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (1996), Austin, University of Texas Press, 2015, 17-36, 32-33.

<sup>110</sup> Anne Cohen, ‘Jennifer’s Body & The Feminist Revenge Hero Who Came Too Early’, *Refinery29*, 2018, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/08/206237/jennifers-body-review-defense-female-revenge-movie> (last accessed 3 March 2021)

<sup>111</sup> My translation from an episode of the French programme *Le Bistro de l’Horreur*, in episode 51, ‘Lycées Sanglants’ (Erwan Chaffiot, François Cognard and Fausto Fasulo, ‘Lycées Sanglants’, *Le Bistro de l’Horreur*, episode 51, FilmoTV, 2016)

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

coincides with the classic scheme of the categorised teenagers of teen horrors. She first goes after Jonas (Josh Emerson), a stereotype of the jock; then transforms Colin (Kyle Gallner), Devil's Kettle High emo kid, into lasagne with teeth; and, by the end of the film, chases Needy's boyfriend, Chip, who perfectly embodies the nerdy teenager. Hence, 'Jennifer ensnares and eats a few stereotyped caricatures [...] which is the fullest extent of Cody biting into social high school satire.'<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, Jennifer's rampage comes to an end during the 'dance', another classic trope of high school horror and which is reminiscent of other such films as *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980; Nelson McCormik, 2008) and more specifically *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976; Kimberley Pierce, 2013). Indeed, both Needy and Jennifer's dresses are soiled by Jennifer's black bile and by blood [1:27:16], just as Carrie's (Sissy Spacek; Chloë Grace Moretz) has been stained with pig blood [1:13:19; 1:13:30].

'[E]very teen trope is present, but twisted just enough to cancel out the rules of the genre,'<sup>114</sup> states Blichert, and indeed, the tropes and codes are twisted: both the hero (Needy) and the supposedly villain (Jennifer) are females; the victims are all males, and the prom night trope is completely secondary, as Jennifer and Needy's confrontation starts in the abandoned swimming pool [1:24:29] and ends in Jennifer's bedroom [1:30:26], leaving the prom and Low Shoulder's concert completely unattended by the main protagonists and thus not constituting the setting of a climactic scene.

*Jennifer's Body* does fall into the subgenre of teen movie because it addresses teen issues of friendships and fitting into society's ideals. But the film is even more relevant to the genre as it addresses society's expectations of women. The purgatorial phase of adolescence from which young females' bodies which are particularly fetishized in teen horror,<sup>115</sup> transition from childhood to adulthood<sup>116</sup> in a monstrous way is exacerbated. This exacerbation emphasises the empowerment of the young female protagonists and their diverging way to deal with the patriarchal hegemony and the normative sexuality imposed upon them.

Far from inscribing their film into one specific horror subgenre, Kusama and Cody choose to use and twist codes and tropes of different subgenres so as to pick on specific elements of each to address, comment and, sometimes, condemn generic aspects. The first subgenre, which has

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<sup>113</sup> M. Dujcik, *Mark Review Movies*, *op. cit.*

<sup>114</sup> F. Blichert, *Vice*, *op. cit.*

<sup>115</sup> Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley, 'Teenage Trauma – Youth, Affective Politics, and the Contemporary American Horror Film', in Steffen Hantke, ed., *American Horror Film – The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, Mississippi UP, 2010, 77-102, 95-96.

<sup>116</sup> Pascal Françaix, 'Teen Horror', *MadMovies*, 343, 2020, 46.

been analysed, was teen horror. Indeed, *Jennifer's Body* through the tropes of the pep rally and the dance, through the stereotyped characters and ultimately by using high school as main setting establishes its narrative as a teen movie which then crosses the horror line when one of its teens starts a killing spree. Both killing spree and '[t]een-movies are deeply linked to the slasher film. The slasher borrows the setting or characters of teen horror and adds up murders. The ultimate goal of the teen flick is to have sex. The ultimate goal of the slasher film is to know who's going to get killed, and who'll stay alive.'<sup>117</sup> By linking these 'ultimate goals'—who is going to get killed by trying to have sex—Cody and Kusama tied the two subgenres together so as to use elements of both to create a pastiche 'as opposed to the ideal of a stylistically unified-product typical of the Hollywood tradition, it is cinematic impurity that is pursued with a vengeance.'<sup>118</sup> Here, the vengeance consists of addressing a horror film to a feminine and queer audience rather than to a classic (heteronormative) masculine audience.

## II. Slasher Film - 'Their Blind Eyes See Nothing of the Horror to Come' (*The Cabin in the Woods*, Drew Goddard, 2011)

Jérémy Belando, in his essay *Les Slashers ou la Pureté Cinématographique*, states that the 'slasher film is in fact a hybrid between two genres. The first one being the thriller [and] the second the teen movie.'<sup>119</sup> The teen movie and more specifically the teen horror subgenre which deals with coming-of-(r)age adolescents and thus presents hormonal horror has been discussed in detail in the [previous subchapter](#). Thence, this subchapter will focus on the thriller aspect of *Jennifer's Body*, as the renowned critic Roger Ebert states about the film that it 'isn't your assembly line teen horror thriller' and that 'after you've seen enough teen thrillers, you begin to appreciate these distinctions.'<sup>120</sup> This subchapter will also address *Jennifer's Body's* reflection in the slasher genre.

When it comes to explaining how the slasher differs from the teen horror film, it seems important to first understand what a slasher film is. Belando summarises the narrative arcs of the slasher film as follows:

The first part introduces the main characters while implying that a killer is on the loose. Then, in the second part, murders happen one after another at a regular pace. In the third part, everyone is

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<sup>117</sup> J. Belando, *Les Slashers Ou La Pureté Cinématographique*, *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>118</sup> I. Hoesterey, *Pastiche*, *op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>119</sup> J. Belando, *Les Slashers Ou La Pureté Cinématographique*, *op. cit.*, 12.

<sup>120</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Popular Girl Goes Bad, Begins to Devour Teen Flesh', *RogerEbert.com*, 2009, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/jennifers-body-2009> (last accessed 14 March 2021)

dead except for one girl who is directly confronted to the killer and who will have to escape from *him* by being strong.<sup>121</sup>

*Halloween*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hopper, 1974) or *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) are salient examples of films which follow these narrative arcs. Michael Myers (Nick Castle), Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) and Jason Voorhees (Ari Lehman)—or his mother (Betsy Palmer)—are eminent killers who prowl like shadows and hunt and kill teenagers on an ongoing basis. The scene analysed in the previous subchapter introduces the characters. However, this scene does not imply that a killer is on the loose and, if it had hinted so, the killer would be understood to be Needy as she is the one locked in a cell. As a result, it appears from the outset that *Jennifer's Body* does not scrupulously follow the slasher guideline. It is only fifteen minutes after the film has begun that the spectators are presented with a new potential killer in the person of Nikolai Wolf. Because, more often than not, the slasher film killer is a 'misogynist prick,'<sup>122</sup> which Nikolai most certainly is. More generally speaking, the killer is, in most cases, a man. The ominous extra-diegetic sounds that accompany the first apparition of Low Shoulder at Melody Lane, the caustic remarks that Nikolai makes about Jennifer and Needy [0:12:51-0:13:15], and the fact that Needy refers to the band members as 'evil' [0:18:46] and calls them rapists [0:20:10] seem to be conterminous with this hypothesis. Kusama then smashes this hypothesis to smithereens, because within the first thirty minutes of the film she makes it clear that *Jennifer's Body* is 'completely subverting that usual thing of a man hunting a woman.'<sup>123</sup> The hunter is not a man, and *she* is not hunting her victims but her best friend, she does not have to put so many efforts to entice her male preys.

#### A. 'Oh! Cheese and Fries, There's Somebody Here!'<sup>124</sup>

Twenty minutes into the film, right after Melody Lane burnt down and Jennifer left with the members of Low Shoulders, Needy is at home, frightened and upset that her friend decided to follow 'douchbags, with their douchebag haircuts and their man-scara'<sup>125</sup> [0:20:16]. She calls her boyfriend, Chip, to share her feelings and (perhaps) seek comfort or reassurance from him. However, the doorbell rings and ensues a slasher episode pastiche [0:20:19-0:22:58]

<sup>121</sup> J. Belando, *Les Slashers Ou La Pureté Cinématographique*, *op. cit.*, 18.

<sup>122</sup> Katie, Emrys and Nikki (Guest), 'The Horrorphobe - Jennifer's Body (2009) vs Crimson Peak (2015)', *The Curators of Horror - A Horror Movie Podcast*, 2019, <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-the-curators-of-horror-50844174/episode/the-horrorphobe-jennifers-body-2009-52355706/> (last accessed 14 March 2021)

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Needy Lesnicki in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.* [0:20:20].

<sup>125</sup> Chip Dove in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

which introduces *Jennifer's Body* as an atypical slasher and more importantly as a female slasher.

Kusama, when introducing the killer for the first time, does not use a point-of-view shot to position the spectator as the killer, as it is the case for most of the slasher films (see *Figure 1* from *Halloween* [0:05:48]), but chooses to follow Needy (*Figure 2*) [0:20:37] around the house and thus puts the viewers in the 'victim's' shoes, and here, in the shoes of a teenage girl. As for accentuating the victimization aspect of the spectators, the camera is handheld, thus shaking and emphasising the rising anxiety. Kusama's camera angles aim at creating tension as she chooses which elements are highlighted and which are hidden or fall by the wayside. Needy opens the front door, but there is nobody there [0:25:57]. She then approaches the cellar, a place commonly known as dreadful and scary where horrible events are meant to happen—at least in slasher films and psycho-killer films such as *Mum and Dad* (Steven Sheil, 2008). She opens the door and leans in [0:21:50]. At this instant, the open door is presented as the vanishing point (*Figure 3*) [0:21:56] and, because every element suggests that this is a slasher scene—the built-up tension, the eerie music and the lengthening of time—the viewers expect to find the killer behind that very door.



*Figure 1:* Michael Myers's sister (Sandy Johnson) seen through the killer's eyes, Michael Myers (Will Sandin), in *Halloween*.

*Figure 2:* Dorsal shot of Needy. The camera does not adopt the killer's point-of-view in *Jennifer's Body*.



*Figure 3:* The cellar door presented as vanishing point. Is there someone behind it?

The expectation of the audience is defeated as the corridor remains empty, with the exception of Needy. Thus, the suspense builds up even more as Needy has been outside on her own, has courageously opened the cellar door and leant her head toward the gloomy room and still nothing has happened to her, yet. However, as the shots accelerate, the extra and intra diegetic sounds accumulate and the camera angles shift quickly. Time then freezes upon revelation. Needy's point-of-view shot pictures Jennifer's monstrous face that mixes trickling make-up and dripping blood (*Figure 4*) [0:22:56], thus introducing the *monstrous-feminine*:<sup>126</sup> the 'sexpot' Jennifer has been turned into a frightening zombie-like figure.



*Figure 4:* Jennifer as *monstrous-feminine*, keeping her feminine attributes but disfigured by the monstrousness of her blood-dripping mouth.

What the close-up shot of Jennifer reveals, as it occurred after numerous deceived *jumpscare*s<sup>127</sup> is that Cody and Kusama twisted the most capital trope of the slasher film as the genre is 'marketed by a recurrent use of the point of view or the subjective shot taken *from the perspective of the killer*. This is not followed by a typical reverse shot; *the identity of the killer frequently remains unknown until the very end*.'<sup>128</sup> Scriptwriter and director thus chose to reveal the killer's identity from the outset, but what remains unknown, until late in the film, is Jennifer's motive.

<sup>126</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, *op. cit.*

<sup>127</sup> Collins online dictionary describes a jumpscare as 'the sudden appearance of a shocking image, often accompanied by a burst of loud music.' ('Jumpscare', Collins, [https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/jumpscare#:~:text=\(%CB%88d%CA%92%CA%8Cmp%CB%8Csk%C9%9B%C9%99\),to%20frighten%20him%20or%20her](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/jumpscare#:~:text=(%CB%88d%CA%92%CA%8Cmp%CB%8Csk%C9%9B%C9%99),to%20frighten%20him%20or%20her) [last accessed 20 May 2021])

<sup>128</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, *op. cit.*, 125, my emphasis.

## B. Jennifer Kills Boys, Not People and Does So by Luring Them, Not Hunting Them

‘Diablo Cody and Karyn Kusama thus start turning inside-out the usual slasher scheme [...] which expects girls to be the scatter-brained, abandoned to the (usually adults) male killers while boys become collateral damage, made defenceless by their hormonal frenzy.’<sup>129</sup> It is indeed their hormonal frenzy which leads men to their own peril. Nonetheless, men are in no way collateral damage, but targeted victims, chosen by Jennifer for a very specific reason: to avenge her objectification and establish her power as a strong woman. The connection between Jennifer’s rampage and the affirmation of woman’s power will be discussed in more detail in the [third chapter](#) of this thesis.

In *Jennifer’s Body*, murders happen one after the other, at a regular pace, nevertheless, Jennifer is not an intruder like most slasher killers are.<sup>130</sup> Jennifer neither chases, nor hunts her male victims, but she lures them and simply asks them to follow or meet with her. Unsurprisingly, the teenage boys willingly accept without further question or refusal (See *Figures 5,6, 7 and 8*) [0:31:35, 0:50:13, 1:06:03, 1:21:28], because ‘Jennifer’s victims don’t view her as a threat because *she is a girl* and because *they wanna have sex*.’<sup>131</sup> However, as Clover warns, ‘[V]iolence and sex are not concomitant but alternatives,’ in a slasher film, and Erin Harrington to add ‘you can never have sex, because sex equals death.’<sup>132</sup> Both Clover’s and Harrington’s warnings prove to be deadly right for men as every single male victim who agrees to follow Jennifer—to potentially have sex with her—perishes, as will be discussed in the [second chapter](#) of this thesis.



<sup>129</sup> Thomas Sotinel, “‘Jennifer’s Body’: Par la Vertue de l’Horreur et du Pastiche, le Sex-Symbol Devient Piège Mortel”, *Le Monde*, 2009, [https://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2009/10/20/jennifer-s-body-par-la-vertu-de-l-horreur-et-du-pastiche-le-sex-symbol-devient-piege-mortel\\_1256314\\_3476.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2009/10/20/jennifer-s-body-par-la-vertu-de-l-horreur-et-du-pastiche-le-sex-symbol-devient-piege-mortel_1256314_3476.html) (last accessed 15 March 2021), my translation.

<sup>130</sup> A. Boutang and C. Sauvage, *Teen Movies*, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>131</sup> Chris Stuckman, ‘Jennifer’s Body - Movie Review’, *ChrisStuckmann.com*, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21LZ\\_O5fgRw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21LZ_O5fgRw) (last accessed 14 March 2021), my emphasis.

<sup>132</sup> Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film - Gyneahorror*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, 42.



*Figures 5, 6 and 7: Jonas (top left), Ahmet (Aman Johal) (bottom) and Chip (top right) willingly following Jennifer, unconscious of the premature death waiting for them.*



*Figure 8: Colin surprisingly happy to see Jennifer in the abandoned house she pretends is hers (and then theirs). Still, Jennifer intrudes a house, one very specific house, and she does so on two occasions. The first one has already been discussed as it occurs when Jennifer first appears after her transformation at Needy's house [0:22:56]. The second takes place when Jennifer joyfully initiates a slumber party at Needy's house [0:56:12] after ruining Needy's intercourse with her boyfriend, Chip, by appearing as a gargoyle-demon perched on Chip's armchair [0:52:59], in one of Needy's hallucinations—while she was actually drinking blood from a Fountain of Youth made of Colin's ribcage [0:54:14]. Thence, by using the slasher trope of the intrusion, Cody and Kusama stress the importance of the relationship between Jennifer and Needy. Jennifer lures and kills male victims, but she does not kill Needy when she intrudes her place.*

The last intruder of the film is Needy herself; she intrudes Jennifer's place during their final confrontation [1:31:21] and intrudes Low Shoulder's hotel suite when she makes sure 'tonight, is going to be their last show' [1:37:47]—although she is kind enough to ring this time instead of forward rolling through their window. When it comes to Needy, as it will be discussed later, the trope illustrates the idea that the Final Girl may become the monster if patriarchy pushes her hard enough towards her limits. Once again, director and scriptwriter use an unmistakable trope of the slasher film and twist it so as to shed new light on the purpose of this trope, on the

subgenre at large and to comment upon how society views and treats young women. This idea is directly linked to the notion of postfeminism as Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller state that,

[e]ven though many critics have drawn attention to the apparently empowering aspects of postfeminist discourse – comprising philosophies that espouse equality, inclusion and free choice – they have also highlighted how this celebration of the power of the individual is part of a more insidious process whereby the social constraints placed upon contemporary girls and women are deemed inconsequential.<sup>133</sup>

Kusama and Cody comment on this inconsequentiality by empowering their teenage girls and freeing them from their social constraints through the use of the female slasher.

### C. Slasher Ideologies and the Female Slasher

The slasher film experienced its golden age in the mid-1980s, with its three main cornerstones being *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, and ultimately met its downfall in the 1990s, although it was revived by Wes Craven and its meta-slasher series *Scream* which began in 1996. Throughout the 2000s, the genre was strongly criticised due to the numerous remakes, reboots and sequels (e.g., *Halloween* [Rob Zombie, 2007], *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* [Marcus Nispel, 2009], *My Bloody Valentine* [Patrick Lussier, 2009], *The Hills Have Eyes* [Alexandre Aja, 2006]). One can thus wonder why Kusama and Cody chose to give a slasher tone to their 2000s' film. The answer could be found in the ideology behind the subgenre.

The slasher film 'gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience.'<sup>134</sup> When it comes to *Jennifer's Body* the slasher parts mainly concern Jennifer's monstrosity, hence acting as an answer to the violent sexual assault she was the victim of by the indie band Low Shoulder. Consequently, Jennifer's violence towards men is a response to the misogyny she endured during the sacrifice. This very sacrifice presents a twist that goes against the current, because Jennifer owes her 'survival' solely to the fact that she was not a virgin.

Harrington states in 2018 that 'a quantitative content analysis of slasher films conducted in 2010 showed that female characters who engaged in sexual behaviour were not only less likely

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<sup>133</sup> Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, 'Introduction: Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema', in Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 1-10, 2.

<sup>134</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saw*, *op. cit.*, 70.

to survive than their non-sexual female peers and their male peers, but that their death scenes were measurably longer. (Welsh, 2010).'<sup>135</sup> *Jennifer's Body* seems to be a perfect counterexample of these results, as not only does Jennifer survive precisely because she was not a virgin, but Needy, the hero of the film—who first seems to be despite of herself, but after the death of her boyfriend takes her life in her own hands—, is actually involved in sex and does not fear for her life for the most part of the film.

In *Jennifer's Body*, Kusama and Cody demonstrate that although tropes must be present to guarantee genre identification, they can, and sometimes should, be manipulated. *Jennifer's Body* thus plays with the codes and tropes of the slasher genre. By, sometimes, using them in their pure form—through the killing spree, the numerous victims and the use of a monstrous and seemingly unkillable murderer—and other times twisting them to comment on them and on society's social climate. The film 'goes from a Wes Craven's pastiche to a psychology study reminiscent of *Juno*,'<sup>136</sup> to the perfect representation of a female slasher which 'through destruction and mayhem, is an anomaly in the slasher genre that deviates from expected narratives and casts a spotlight on restrictive expectations placed on women.'<sup>137</sup> Female slashers are directly linked to the bond between women and society-based representations of women, ergo *Jennifer's Body* can be read as a female slasher as it questions women's place in society through the characters of Needy and Jennifer, and through the relationships the two of them have, between themselves and with their male classmates.

Throughout this subchapter, it appears that Jennifer is the villain of the film as she kills men who dare to objectify her by devouring their innards. She goes after men, lures and seduces them only to better substitute sex for violence and to empower herself as a female killer. However, she acts as such because of the demon that lives within her. Indeed, Needy, through her research in the occult section of the school library<sup>138</sup> [1:08:30-1:10:45], establishes that Jennifer *has been turned* into a succubus, a woman demon who feeds on males to stay beautiful and desirable. Hence, Jennifer is not demonically possessed the way Regan (Linda Blair) is in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) or as Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy) is accused of being

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<sup>135</sup> E. Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*, *op. cit.*, 43.

<sup>136</sup> T. Sotinel, *Le Monde*, *op. cit.*, my translation.

<sup>137</sup> Alexandra West, 'Slash Her: The Female Killer in Film', *Grim*, 2, 2018, 13-14, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/grim-no2-mascara-machetes-digital.pdf> (last accessed 9 March 2021)

<sup>138</sup> The school library is another major trope of the teen movie, but the fact that this library actually has an occult section gives it a comical twist and almost satirically comment on the American educational system.

in *The VVitch*<sup>139</sup> (Robert Eggers, 2015), however, she does present signs of devilish behaviours after her encounter with evil ‘agents of Satan’ in the persons of Low Shoulder members. Devilish behaviours that she sometimes seems to have control over, and which sometimes overpower her, illustrating the idea that Jennifer is conflicting from within concerning her place in society.

### III. Possession Film - ‘The Devil Always Lies, Always’ (*Exorcismus*, Manuel Carballo, 2010)

‘On the face of it, the occult film is the most “female” of horror genres, telling as it regularly does tales of women or girls in the grip of the supernatural.’<sup>140</sup> It is thus no surprise if *Jennifer’s Body*, a film whose main protagonists are both female and whose triggering factors involve a virgin sacrifice gone wrong, finds some of its roots in the occult film genre. Although the demonic portal was open by Low Shoulder themselves, and even if they are the ones messing the ritual up by sacrificing a non-virgin, the satanic possession, being gendered feminine no matter what the portal is,<sup>141</sup> ultimately falls upon Jennifer, who ends up being possessed by a flesh-eating demon.

‘In popular U.S. horror films featuring demonic possession, the possessed female is helplessly entrapped by the demon taking over her body and has no control over the violence that she performs.’<sup>142</sup> Jennifer, however, does not seem to be overtaken by the demon or to lose herself in her transformation, and she is certainly not the one who is helpless as she tells Colin she *needs* him to be hopeless [0:53:09] and frightened [0:52:36] in order to devour him, hence entrapping him both mentally and physically.

#### A. The Manifestation of Jennifer’s Occult Faculties – Jennifer as *Vagina Dentata*

Jennifer manifests real signs of possession solely when she substitutes sex for violence with her male victims. When the succubus devours the young men, Jennifer’s face turns into a snakelike maw (*Figures 1 and 2*) [0:33:06, 1:24:47], filled with pointy fangs and her pupils

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<sup>139</sup> The title of Eggers’s film is sometimes spelt ‘The Witch’ but appears as ‘The VVitch’ on the film poster and on DVD covers.

<sup>140</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saw*, *op. cit.*, 65.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>142</sup> J. Casali, *Terrors of Girlhood*, 39.

turn whitish and blood injected. It is worth noting that only Jennifer's face is transformed and presents monstrous specificities, the rest of her body remains as luscious as she intends it to be. Harrington, in *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film – Gyneahorror* comments on the teenage girl's transformation as she states, '[T]his image of her dangerous, gaping maw, framed by bright red lipstick, is a symbolic representation of the other [as opposed to the virgin], more dangerous and unruly side of female sexuality: *vagina dentata* or the toothed vagina.' She adds that this *vagina dentata* 'acts as a cautionary tale to men about the hypothetical dangers of sex with unknown women, and expresses rapacious, unbounded desire in a manner that is coded as threatening and transgressive.'<sup>143</sup>



Figures 1 and 2: Jennifer's snake-like maw is contrasting with her feminine attributes and creates a metaphorical *vagina dentata*.

It seems thus that while Jennifer was the victim of a wrongful sacrifice, Jennifer's 'transformation into a succubus is a fulfilment of her character, not a negation of it.'<sup>144</sup> In other words, Jennifer's non-virginal character allows her not only to survive the sacrifice, but to thrive as a sexually active young woman.

## B. The Source of Jennifer's Curse and Power

During the improvised slumber party initiated by Jennifer at Needy's house [0:56:45-1:07:49], the former confesses to Needy that she cannot keep secrets from her best friend and has to tell her what happened the night Melody Lane, the local roadhouse, burnt down and Jennifer chose to follow Nikolai in his 'spooky van' [0:20:06]. After a flashback, which rather explicitly presents the sacrifice to the spectator, Needy, eyes filled with tears, declares 'They killed you' [1:04:02], to which Jennifer nonchalantly answers, 'I'm still here, aren't I?' [1:04:04] and continues, 'It should have killed me, but for some reason, it didn't,' [1:04:10] in

<sup>143</sup> E. Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film, op. cit.*, 53 for both this quotation and the preceding one.

<sup>144</sup> Noah Berlatsky, 'A Supernatural Bitch,' *Chicago Reader*, 2009, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/a-supernatural-bitch/Content?oid=1200721> (last accessed 18 March 2021)

a satisfied way. Needy, unconvinced, replies, ‘Maybe it did’ [1:04:17]. Indeed, Low Shoulder needed a virgin for the sacrifice, which Jennifer has not been since Junior High, and that is why the sacrifice did not work as it should have. She died that night, but she also came back as a succubus, *because* she was not a virgin. For this reason, the film seems to comment on performative virginity (i.e., The action of pretending to be a virgin while one is not to fit in a given situation<sup>145</sup>) but also, on young adults’ sexuality and in particular on the sexuality of young women.

Kusama and Cody, by giving power to a sexually active young woman after she has been killed on the supposition that she was not, thus empowers women’s sexuality and adolescents’ sexuality. The latter, as Robin Wood comments in his seminal essay ‘An Introduction on the American Horror Film’, is the fourth and fundamental repression in our culture.<sup>146</sup> The possession here does not act as a punishment as it is sometimes perceived for Carrie’s telekinetic powers—which can be assimilated to witchcraft—or Mia’s (Jane Levy) drug addiction in the *Evil Dead*’s remake (Fede Alvarez, 2013), but as a way for Jennifer to violently affirm her active and unashamed sexuality which saved her from the clutches of misogynistic, opportunistic and pathetic men. The very men who have no shame in using a young woman’s sexuality to their advantage and disparaging both Jennifer’s sexuality and her character as Nikolai explains to Dirk (Juan Riedinger), ‘There’s always that girl. They love to show it off, but they do not give it up’<sup>147</sup> [0:13:07].

There is here a reverse of power. Low Shoulder take advantage of Jennifer because they have power over her, they have knowledge—although they proved to be erroneous—and most importantly they have control over her because she idolises them. The same scheme then repeats itself with Jennifer and her victims. Therefore, while the sacrifice is a source of suffering and is demeaning Jennifer as a sexually active woman, the supernatural consequences of her victimization enable her to bring about a major change in terms of gender power relations, thus giving a feminist dimension to an act of hatred performed on a woman.

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<sup>145</sup> Another example of performative virginity could be seen in the character of Tobey Cobb (Hale Appleman) in *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007) as he declares being a virgin in ‘His’ eyes (the eyes of the Lord) [0:19:27], hence supposedly acquiring a new virginity.

<sup>146</sup> Robin Wood, ‘An Introduction to the American Horror Film’, in Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, Tony Williams and Robin Wood, eds., *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, Robin Wood, Richard Lippe & Festival of Festivals, 1979, 7-28, 8-9.

<sup>147</sup> Nikolai Wolf in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*

### C. The Meaning of *Jennifer's Body* as Occult Portal

‘It is not just *Jennifer's Body* subversive tone that distinguishes it from your standard demon possession [...]. It was essential to both director and screenwriter that the film has a specifically female perspective.’<sup>148</sup> Indeed, Jennifer’s possession does not only symbolize her monstrosity, but also and primarily the monstrosity that was imposed upon her by (a male-govern) society which punishes her for (supposedly) being a virgin—through the sacrifice—and for not being a virgin—through the menstrual-like curse of cannibalistic feeding to survive and thrive. Thus, the spectators, who love to despise Jennifer Check—and her impersonator Megan Fox—cannot help but feel compassion for Jennifer and to understand Jennifer’s way of coping with a heteronormative, bourgeois,<sup>149</sup> and borderline puritan society that categorises and belittles her whether she is perceived as a virgin or as a whore.

Jennifer, through her possession, is entrapped in the societal expectations of young girls in a patriarchal culture. However, the way she copes with the curse of having to feed on men to remain beautiful and luscious is conscious. She is aware of what she is doing and does it voluntarily because she *wants* to remain beautiful and to remain the ideal of a woman’s body. Thereupon, Jennifer appears to be morally entrapped in the succubus, but she should be able to stop the killing if she was not so self-obsessed and egocentric.

By the end of the film, however, or rather, by the beginning of the film, Jennifer seems to have let go of her ‘State Fair Butter Princess’<sup>150</sup> [0:12:59] status as she is picking a scab on her pale skin [0:00:38] and is chewing on her dull hair with her teeth stained with blood [0:00:48]. Hence, just as Regan lost her battle against the demon that possesses her and is, thus, presented as monstrous with her face covered with scars and her own vomit (*Figure 3*) [1:28:17], Jennifer is presented in a similar way (*Figure 4*) [0:05:12]. She is so before being freed from all forms of possession by the vengeful Needy, who stabs her to death [1:32:13]. Nevertheless, Jennifer’s dullness has nothing to do with Regan’s disfigured face, which only emphasises the shallowness and superficiality of the former and the futility of her cannibalistic rampage.

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<sup>148</sup> L. Peitzman, *Buzzfeed News*, *op. cit.*

<sup>149</sup> The term bourgeois must be read here as ‘marked by a concern for material interests and respectability and a tendency toward mediocrity.’ (‘Bourgeois’, *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bourgeois> [last accessed 20 May 2021])

<sup>150</sup> Nikolai Wolf in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*



Figure 3: Regan (*The Exorcist*) marked by the burden of her demonic possession as she is unable to fight it back.



Figure 4: Jennifer looking 'rough' after the beneficial aspects of her possession worn off.

Jennifer's 'vagina dentata' can be reframed as a discursive strategy through which [she] can reclaim [her body], resist corporeal colonisation, or retaliate against a conceptual framing of masculine sexual prowess that serves to denigrate, objectify and subjugate [her].<sup>151</sup> It thus appears that Jennifer, by embracing her second chance at life, in the form of a succubus curse, becomes one of those 'women who embrace violence as a refusal of victimhood.'<sup>152</sup> Which is a key trope in postfeminist cinema. Indeed, Sarah Gamble states, 'Very generally speaking [...], postfeminist debate tends to crystallise around issues of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility.'<sup>153</sup> This interpretation of postfeminism goes back to Mary Ann Doane interpretation of 'woman's film' as she 'claims that it is through such scenarios of victimization and suffering that the 1940s woman's film addressed a specifically female spectator.'<sup>154</sup> Cody and Kusama tied this postfeminist aspect to another subgenre particularly attached to women

<sup>151</sup> Annie Potts, *The Science/Fiction of Sex: Feminist Deconstruction and the Vocabularies of Heterosex*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, 213.

<sup>152</sup> Martin Fradley, "'Hell Is a Teenage Girl'?: Postfeminism and Contemporary Teen Horror", in Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, eds., *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 204-221, 214.

<sup>153</sup> Sarah Gamble, '4. Postfeminism', in Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (1998), London and New York, Routledge, 2006, 36-45, 36.

<sup>154</sup> Pam Cook, 'No Fixed Address: The Women's Picture from *Outrage* to *Blue Steel*', in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinema*, University of Illinois Press, 2012, 29-40, 32.

suffering and that involves a more literal form of possession exerted on the female body by a man or by men.

#### IV. Rape and Revenge Film - 'What is a pretty thing like you doing here, all alone?' (*I Spit on Your Grave*, Steven R. Monroe, 2010)

The rape and revenge<sup>155</sup> subgenre, made popular by Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) and Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978), emerged because, in the 1970s and 1980s, 'rape becomes a problem for women themselves to solve.'<sup>156</sup> Jennifer, and later Needy, thus take revenge upon themselves as they consider society unfit to tackle the burden of victimhood and incapable of blaming it on the perpetrators instead, the same way women did back in the 1940s, and 1970s and 1980s.

*Jennifer's Body* can be identified to the rape/revenge subgenre because it 'react[s] not just to individual wrong, but to systemic violence.'<sup>157</sup> Indeed, Jennifer answers the to the violence she has been the victim of by externalizing her own anger against perpetrators at large, hence luring and killing boys who dared to objectify her—or, in other words, men who objectify women's bodies. Needy, on the other hand, exteriorizes her trauma on people directly responsible for the violence perpetrated. Those perpetrators being, first Jennifer, who killed her boyfriend, Chip, and her friend, Colin, and second, Low Shoulder, who are responsible for the physical and psychological loss of her best friend, Jennifer. *Jennifer's Body*, thus, diverges from the linear narrative of rape/revenge films in which '[y]ou start out with a healthy, unmarked woman [who] is abused, suffers, strikes back, and destroy her tormenter.'<sup>158</sup>

#### A. The Revenge of a 'Rape in All but Name'<sup>159</sup>

Rape and revenge films can, quite literally, treat of an actual rape and the consequences of that rape being the revenge sought by the victim. It was the case for *I Spit on Your Grave* the original, but also the remake (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) and their sequels/reboots (*I Spit on Your Grave 2* [Steven R. Monroe, 2013], *I Spit on Your Grave 3: Vengeance is Mine* [R.D.

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<sup>155</sup> In this thesis 'rape and revenge' and 'rape/revenge' are used interchangeably as they refer to the same subgenre with no distinctive subtility in their meanings.

<sup>156</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saw*, *op. cit.*, 138.

<sup>157</sup> Noah Berlatsky, *Fecund Horror: Slashers, Rape/revenge, Women in Prisons, Zombies, and Other Exploitation Dreck*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016, 107.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>159</sup> M. Fradley, *Postfeminism and Cotemporary Hollywood Cinema*, *op. cit.*, 214.

Braunstein, 2015], *I Spit on Your Grave: Déjà vu* [Meir Zarchi, 2019]). They can also involve the revenge from a third party, as it is the case in *The Last House on the Left* in which it is not Mari (Sandra Cassel) herself, who seeks revenge—as she has been raped and killed—but her parents, the Dr John Collingwood and his wife, Estelle (Gaylord St. James and Cynthia Carr). *Jennifer's Body* works on this aspect as it is Needy who goes after Low Shoulder and not Jennifer herself. The last aspect of the rape and revenge, and the aspect that most particularly concerns *Jennifer's Body* is that it does not necessarily have to be a rape *per se* to act as one but has to do with the near annihilation and the exploitation of the woman's body, who then rose to annihilate her attacker(s)<sup>160</sup> (literal or subliminal). Low Shoulder's members do not rape Jennifer in the strict sense of the term, but they do penetrate her body with a phallic weapon (*Figure 1*) [1:03:44] with the verbalised will to gain something from this act of penetration.



*Figure 1:* Nikolai penetrating Jennifer with a knife as she is strapped to a stump as a martyr on the cross.

Although the ritual is closely related to the occult film and to the subsequent possession of the sacrificed, the sacrifice in itself is based on the rape/revenge scenario type. Martin Fradley, in his essay, “‘Hell Is a Teenager Girl’?: Postfeminism and Contemporary Teen Horror”, even states that Low Shoulder's sacrifice of Jennifer is ‘a rape in all but name.’<sup>161</sup> This symbolical rape is then perpetrated by Jennifer as, just as Nikolai did, she substitutes sex to violence and becomes a *femme castratrice* who (metaphorically) castrates and (literally) kills teenage boys with her *vagina dentata* (*Figure 2*) [0:53:20]. Noah Berlatsky summarises these two tropes when he says, ‘The depiction of rape is reviled as misogynist; the depiction of castration and murder is denigrated as glorifying violence. The genre appeals to the worst in everyone.’<sup>162</sup> However, the consequences of the all-but-name-rape, and the murders, are quite different for Jennifer than they are for Low Shoulder.

<sup>160</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saw*, *op. cit.*, 150.

<sup>161</sup> M. Fradley, *Postfeminism and Cotemporary Hollywood Cinema*, *op. cit.*, 214.

<sup>162</sup> N. Berlatsky, *Fecund Horror*, *op. cit.*, 80.



Figure 2: Jennifer symbolically castrating Colin by devouring him with her *vagina dentata*.

## B. Who Actually Seeks Revenge in *Jennifer's Body*?

Clover, in the third chapter of *Men, Women and Chain Saw*, entitled ‘Getting Even,’ describes and analyses the rape and revenge subgenre. In her analysis she explains that rape/revenge narratives are ‘a premier processing site for the modern debate on sexual violence in life and law.’<sup>163</sup> She argues that these narratives are paradoxical in the sense that rape/revenge films are ‘overwhelmingly consumed by young males’<sup>164</sup> while they heroize women and vilify men. *Jennifer's Body* could thus be used to comment on the infamous asking-for-it-ness<sup>165</sup> that women are often confronted with. As for the retaliation, it confronts young men with the reality of consent and the emotional, psychological and physical after-effects of a rape. These after-effects are amplified and apparently vilified in Jennifer’s case as she quite literally becomes evil after her symbolic rape and materialises her trauma by cannibalizing her male classmates. Needy is also affected by this exploitation of Jennifer’s body since she is a second-hand victim of it and a first-hand avenger as she turns into a literal serial killer. Jennifer and Needy are turned monstrous by Cody and Kusama to better reflect on the actual monstrosity of the symbolic rapists.

The female monsters created by men in *Jennifer's Body* reveal who the true monsters are. These monsters are male, and ‘through the figure of the male monster, the horror film speaks to us about our origins, our deep-seated anxieties and our debt to women, nature, the animals and death.’<sup>166</sup> As Marian Philips states in 2019 ‘*Jennifer's Body* is a movie about the teenage girl that was brutally taken advantage of by men for their benefit.’<sup>167</sup> Kusama and Cody both address an issue that was topical but stifled back in 2009 and which is still topical and globally

<sup>163</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saw*, *op. cit.*, 151.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Asking-for-it-ness is used to term the way women are questioned on the role they played in their rape and are made feel guilty for being too compliant or not assertive enough.

<sup>166</sup> Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic: Film Horror and the Primal Uncanny*, Melbourne UP, 2005, xv.

<sup>167</sup> M. Philips, *Re/visionist*, *op. cit.*

fought against more than ten years later. By using the horror genre—and more specifically the specificities of several of its subgenres—as an allegorical satire of society’s dysfunctional gender disparities *Jennifer’s Body*’s filmmakers adopted a feminist discourse and hence created a feminist horror film.

The rape/revenge subgenre in *Jennifer’s Body* seems to reflect on an earlier piece of work by Abel Ferrara called *Ms. 45* (1982) in which a mute fashion worker, Thana (Zoë Lund), is raped and assaulted by two men. She manages to kill one of her aggressors and, as a consequence of her trauma, starts a quest to ‘kill[] not only for her own literal rape, but for the figurative rape of all women.’<sup>168</sup> The same way, and quite hyperbolically Jennifer kills males who dare to objectify women’s body one way or another by only perceiving Jennifer as a physical ideal and not as a fully-fledged woman. Needy on the other side, turns her weapon and newly acquired powers against the literal perpetrators of wrongful deeds so as to protect young women such as Low Shoulder’s hysterical fan seen in the end credits (*Figure 3*) [1:37:19]. Both Jennifer and Needy aim to protect women, but they do so in a very different manner. Nonetheless, both of their ways of coping with their first-hand and second-hand rape victim status echo society’s way of perceiving rape victims, the devastating effects rape may have and the possible annihilation of good-vs-evil acts in terms of retaliation.



*Figure 3:* Low Shoulder’s fanbase, solely made of young women who could be the next victims in their quest of fame and glory.

### C. Rape/Revenge Film as a Mirror of Society’s Issues

In the eighth episode of *American Horror Story, 1984* (Gwyneth Horder-Payton, 2019) a female character, Montana Duke (Billie Lourd), pronounces the following tirade,

Men do heinous things all the time. Carve up tits, fuck dead corpses. And, you know what? They’re treated like rock stars. Fan mails, movies and books up the wazoo. And, somehow, it’s

<sup>168</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws, op. cit.*, 144.

always Mommy's fault for not loving them, or the wife who couldn't satisfy them, or the pretty girl who rejected them. Why are we always the scapegoat for sick men to blame their bullshit on?<sup>169</sup>

This tirade reflects on what happens in the sacrifice scene in *Jennifer's Body* as, while Jennifer's murderous acts are meant to be stopped, first by the (incompetent) officer Warzak (Juno Rinaldi) who want to 'get [] the *man* who did this'<sup>170</sup> [0:35:31] and second and foremost by Needy; Low Shoulder's act of violence only brings them what they wanted: fame and fortune, until they are stopped by, once again, Needy. Thus, 'it could be argued that Jennifer's monstrosity exposes a cultural double standard. When a man acts this way toward women, it is expected. When a woman acts this way, she is monstrous.'<sup>171</sup>

This idea could help us better grasp why the subtext was not understood in 2009 as the issue of men's benefits over women's well-being was not yet overtly and politically addressed. However, this sort of issue was and still is familiar, '[n]ot in the sense that being a literal blood sacrifice is common, but [Jennifer's] total loss of control and bodily autonomy at the hands of men that wish to grow into a place of power feels all too familiar.'<sup>172</sup> Its relevance is even more equivocal 'in a post MeToo context, [in which] the idea of a woman's body being used for men's gain [...], and her coping with this violation by using her sexuality to entrap and feed on those who once objectified her, feels like something to be celebrated, not mocked.'<sup>173</sup> Therefore, while the issue addressed in 2009 through Jennifer's sacrifice might not have been understood back then, the satire was justified and still is, more than 10 years later, as it is now spoken about and overtly and publicly addressed.<sup>174</sup>

As John Sayles states, in Christine Smallwood's article for *The New York Time Magazine*, Kusama makes 'psychological horror films with sociological impact.'<sup>175</sup> She, and Cody, use the horror genre to comment on societal issues, and they might have chosen the horror genre because it 'is a constantly evolving genre, and while some tropes never die, it is in fact horror's

<sup>169</sup> Montana Duke in Gwyneth Horder-Payton, *American Horror Story: 1984*, 20th Century Fox, episode 8, 2019.

<sup>170</sup> Officer Warzak in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 47, my emphasis.

<sup>171</sup> C. Egan, 'Hell Is a Teenage Girl', *op. cit.*, 52-53.

<sup>172</sup> M. Phillips, *Re/Visionist*, *op. cit.*

<sup>173</sup> A. Cohen, *Refinery29*, *op. cit.*

<sup>174</sup> See, for example, Phillips who states, 'The sacrifice of Jennifer speaks to personal and publicized stories of assault by the hands of privileged white men that hold high positions of power politically and socially – for example, the case of Christine Blasey Ford against Brett Kavanaugh [which started in 2018 but goes back to 1986].' (*The Re/Visionist*, *op. cit.*)

<sup>175</sup> Christine Smallwood, 'The Filmmaker Karyn Kusama Explores the Many Dimensions of Women's Rage', *The New York Times Magazine*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/magazine/destroyer-movie-karyn-kusama.html> (last accessed 14 March 2021)

precise capacity to address “big questions” that makes it such a vibrant and multi-faceted pool to play in.’<sup>176</sup> Pascal Françaix even encapsulates Cody’s aims in terms of genres when he states that the scriptwriter uses elements of ‘rape/revenge, girl horror and teen sex comedy to deliver a post-feminist and queer lampoon in which codes belonging to the three genres are puckishly restyled.’<sup>177</sup>

E. Ann Kaplan, in ‘Troubling Genre/Reconstructing Gender’, states that:

[g]enre categories not only proved useful as critical referents through which to comment on positions women occupied in certain genres (such as the horror film or film noir [...]), but they inspired feminist directors to imagine aspects of their social and political worlds through a genre lens, combining aspects of Hollywood genres with the generic feminist critics “invented”, namely the woman’s film.<sup>178</sup>

Kaplan's interpretation of the intertwined genres and their connection to the woman's film appears to be at stake in Cody and Kusama's film. *Jennifer's Body*'s filmmakers chose the horror film, a genre ‘perceived as “masculine”’<sup>179</sup> in order to address women’s issues in society. Moreover, they use specific elements of four subgenres of horror that are known to be specifically abusive towards women. The teen horror is known to diminish female adolescents; the slasher chases, de-humanises and kills sexually active women; the possession film magnifies the idea that evil has feminine overtones; and the rape/revenge narrative inflates the physical and psychologic consequences a rape may have on women and their entourage.

*Jennifer's Body*, thus, finds its place in the horror genre as it both uses and twists codes and tropes of the teen horror, the slasher, the occult film and the rape and revenge narrative. By infusing all of those subgenres into one film, *Jennifer's Body*'s filmmakers made what Harrington called a ‘gyneahorror’ film, that is a film that ‘inform[s] and reflect[s] broader social and cultural processes of meaning-making within a patriarchal culture that situate women’s sexual, erotic and reproductive lives largely in the context of their relationships with and between men, and in service of the ongoing construction of male subjectivity.’<sup>180</sup> *Jennifer's Body*, in this sense, addresses and comments on societal issues such as female friendships in a

<sup>176</sup> Nia Edwards-Behi, ‘Cinema | A Respond to Post-Horror’, *Wales Arts Reviews*, 2017, <https://www.walesartsreview.org/cinema-a-response-to-post-horror/> (last accessed 14 March 2021)

<sup>177</sup> Pascal Françaix, *Teen Horror - De Scream à It Follows*, Paris, Rouge Profond, 2020, 231. As Françaix wrote *Teen Horror* in French, every quotation from his book has been translated by me, unless stipulated otherwise.

<sup>178</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, ‘Troubling Genre/Reconstructing Gender’, in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, University of Illinois Press, 2012, 71-83, 72.

<sup>179</sup> P. Cook, *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, *op. cit.*, 31.

<sup>180</sup> E. Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*, *op. cit.*, 75.

patriarchal society, amorous relationships in a heteronormative society and girl-on-girl, boy-on-girl and girl-on-boy hatred in a gender-divided society.

Kusama and Cody, to emphasise and amplify the manipulation of codes and tropes, go even further than simply commenting on genres and subgenres, but work on their characters in depth ‘by resist[ing] to normative female roles’ and ‘refusing to be reconciled to patriarchal requirements,’<sup>181</sup> just as woman’s films are supposed to, according to Kaplan. Not only are Jennifer and Needy three-dimensional characters who literally and figuratively, physically and mentally change throughout the film. The secondary characters also present specific features which, at first, seem to contribute to the genre and subgenre they belong to, but are then turned inside out to reflect on the filmmakers’ feminist agenda and to link *Jennifer’s Body* to the process of ‘feminist cinema’<sup>182</sup> by aiming at reinterpreting the horror genre. The troubling characters, their multi-layering and their categorization and recategorization in terms of hero vs. villain scheme unsettled the viewers when the film was released. Therefore, knowledge on the horror genre solely is not enough to understand the complexity and the profound comment on society of Kusama’s film.

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<sup>181</sup> E. Kaplan, *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, *op. cit.*, 73.

<sup>182</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, ‘Strategies of Coherence – Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer’, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, Indiana UP, 1987, 107-126, 115.

## Chapter 2: Breaking Codes – Monsters, Victims and Female Empowerment

‘[G]enre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations.’<sup>183</sup> Although *Jennifer’s Body* tells the familiar story of a coming-of-(r)age teenager girl, it does it first, by varying the subgenres of the horror film and second, by turning the familiar characters inside out and presenting a singular set of characters who break the horror codes and subvert the definition of their roles (victims, killers, monsters, villains). In this way, ‘dorks [in *Jennifer’s Body*] aren’t virginal. [The] slut doesn’t die (technically),’<sup>184</sup> and female lead characters seem to be twofold, torn between good and evil. Screenwriter Cody created, with *Jennifer’s Body*, a horror film narrative free of male lead characters as the plot revolves almost solely around Jennifer and Needy, while the men around them, although accurately specific in terms of stereotypes, are secondary. The choice of female lead characters seems to subvert the genre already as ‘horror is notorious for portraying women as victims, brutalized by killers that are often men.’<sup>185</sup> While Jennifer is indeed brutalised by Low Shoulder the night she is sacrificed [1:00:56-1:03:57], she, and not Low Shoulder, becomes the killer who brutalises male victims throughout the film.

In the horror genre, the macabre resides in the destruction of the protagonists’ physical and/or mental well-being, enlivened by terror.<sup>186</sup> Jennifer’s body is what is at the same time objectified<sup>187</sup> and destroyed in the eponymous film, while Needy ends up being mentally disturbed. However, these destructions are not annihilating but empowering for those female lead characters as they enable Jennifer to rise against the heteronormative objectification of her body and allow Needy to literally fight the patriarchy which reduces ‘woman [to being] the

<sup>183</sup> Barry Keith Grant, ‘Introduction’, in Barry Keith Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader*, Austin, University of Texas Press, xi-xvi, xi.

<sup>184</sup> Tricia Olszewski, ‘Body and Mole: *Jennifer’s Body* and *The Informant*’, *Washington City Paper*, 2009, <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/227810/body-and-mole-jennifers-body-and-the-informant/> (last accessed 2 April 2021)

<sup>185</sup> Morgan Milobar, ‘Sugar, Spice & Everything Nice: Gender Roles, Meta Horror & the Female Horror Fan’, *Grim*, 5, 2019, 7-8, 7, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2019/06/grim-no-5-living-dead-girls-digital.pdf> (last accessed 23 March 2021)

<sup>186</sup> Blair Davis and Kial Natale, ‘“The Pound of Flesh Which I Demand”, American Horror Cinema, Gore, and the Box Office, 1998-2007’, in Steffen Hantke, ed., *American Horror Film – The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, Mississippi UP, 2010, 35-57, 39.

<sup>187</sup> In Rick Spears’s graphic novel *Jennifer’s Body*, Jennifer states in the ‘Epilogue’, ‘Not one of them saw me for who I am. They only saw this...Jennifer’s body.’ (2009, n.p., his underlining)

universal scapegoat, the sacrificial victim,<sup>188</sup> used for men's benefit. While 'in most horror movies the female characters are sort of interchangeable or [...] don't even serve a purpose [as] they all always end up getting slaughtered at some point, [in *Jennifer's Body*] the women are the predators.'<sup>189</sup> Needy and Jennifer are not interchangeable here, because these three-dimensional characters serve a purpose of their own, which could not have been served by any other character. Jennifer is the stereotype of the cheerleader whose shallowness and selfishness lead her to be killed and subsequently to rise as the ultimate avenger of female objectification by the male hegemony. Needy, on the other hand, is the warm, submissive and gentle woman who rises to break stereotypes to become competent, assertive, cold and rough—traits that are more often than not connoted as masculine<sup>190</sup>—and subsequently to fight the patriarchy at large. These two female characters must fight their battle on their own as neither men, nor parental figures will help them in their quest for emancipation.

In *Jennifer's Body*, as several critics noticed,<sup>191</sup> all parents are relegated to the background. It almost seems that—as it is the case for most horror films—teenagers do not have parents,<sup>192</sup> until they die. Robert Cumbow states that parents in slasher films are 'absent or ineffectual.'<sup>193</sup> They are 'incapable of protecting their children and always arriving after the murder.'<sup>194</sup> It is the case for every single parent in *Jennifer's Body*: Needy's mother (Amy Sedaris) is working swing shift and is only present to tell Needy the nightmares she had on Needy being taken away from her; Jennifer's mother (Carrie Genzel), Jonas's parents (Bill Fagerbakke and Marilyn Norri) and Colin's family are only displayed on screen after the death of their children and represent parental grief and rage, and Chip's mother (Cynthia Stevenson) is totally blind to the danger that prowls around her son. The absence of parents in *Jennifer's Body* thus leads the teenagers to fend for themselves, and to try to protect each other the way their parents could not. They represent complex characters whose age bound them to the state of victims in the horror tradition, but whose singularity made them survive—or not—the purgatory that adolescence can be.

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<sup>188</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, *op. cit.*, 80.

<sup>189</sup> Megan Fox to Peter Travers, 'Popcorn with Peter Travers – Megan Fox on "Jennifer's Body" and Michael Bay', *ABC News*, 2009, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcSj\\_t1HhJ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcSj_t1HhJ4) (last accessed 7 May 2021)

<sup>190</sup> Jack McKillip, Anthony DiMiceli and Jerry Luebke, 'Group Salience and Stereotyping', *Social Behavior and Personality*, 5:1, 1977, 81-85, 82.

<sup>191</sup> See for example Layne Wilson (2009), Chase (2009), Vencheri (2009).

<sup>192</sup> A. Boutang and C. Sauvage, *Les Teen Movies*, *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>193</sup> Robert Cumbow, *Order in the Universe: The Films of John Carpenter*, Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000, 54.

<sup>194</sup> D. Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s*, *op. cit.*, 72.

Cody and Kusama picture adolescence as a passageway between a lost childhood and an adult life full of responsibilities in which adolescent characters must experience emotional trials.<sup>195</sup> In the horror genre, puberty is often represented as a path to monstrosity. The pre-pubescent girl is innocent but as she enters adulthood, she ‘mutate[s] into a dreaded powerful woman and become[s] (sexually) dangerous.’<sup>196</sup> However, in *Jennifer’s Body*, Jennifer is a dreaded powerful and sexually dangerous woman even before her transformation. The succubus curse merely turns her from ‘high school evil’ to ‘actually evil’ [1:12:00], hence, heightening her dangerousness from adolescent mankind to mankind as a whole. This dichotomy between males and adolescents can be seen as two sides of the same coin. On one side, teenage boys are innocent victims in Jennifer’s hands, who does not feel lust but hunger towards them.<sup>197</sup> While, on the other side, the adult males, in the figures of Low Shoulder’s members, represent the origins of the monstrosity that invades Devil’s Kettle.

In this chapter I would like to focus first on the figure of the monster, established by Wood and discussed in depth, when it comes to the female monster, by Barbara Creed,<sup>198</sup> in order to understand how the emblematic figure of the horror film was turned on its head in *Jennifer’s Body* and how its filmmakers through cinematic structures and their characters’ personality traits adopted a feminist position. I will then analyse the monster direct antonym: the hero(ine), with the figure of Needy as Final Girl, victim hero and Killer Girl Hero who, by becoming a monster with the highest body count of the film, also becomes the most positive female character and a figure of postfeminism. Finally, I am going to expand on the male victims who, while not rare in horror films, tend to represent new forms of male figures going from the innocent teenage boys who were not deserving punishment—at least in the film, as it could be seen differently in Rick Spears’s eponymous graphic novel—to the pathetic killers who are single-handedly turned into victims by a ‘Jan Brady’<sup>199</sup> figure.

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<sup>195</sup> Diablo Cody to E. Levy, *Emanuellevy*, *op. cit.*

<sup>196</sup> Shannon Walsh, ‘Sympathy for the She-Devils: Alice Sweet Alice and 70s Female Killers’, *Grim*, 2, 2018, 10-12, 12, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/grim-no2-mascara-machetes-digital.pdf> (last accessed 24 March 2021)

<sup>197</sup> As Colin suggests in Rick Spears’s graphic novel when he says ‘She looks at me like I’ve never been looked at before. It’s not lust. It’s more like **hunger**.’ (‘Chapter Two’, *Jennifer’s Body*, BOOM! Studios, 2009, n.p., his bold).

<sup>198</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, *op. cit.*

<sup>199</sup> Dirk to Nikolai Wolf in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*

Jan Brady is a fictional character from *The Brady Bunch* (Sherwood Schwartz, 1969-1974) a 1970s TV show. She is less beautiful and less popular than her sister Marcia whom she envies as she has everything Jan dreams of: popularity, beauty and a boyfriend.

## I. Of Monsters and Patriarchy: Masculinity, Femininity and their Consequences on Men and Women

Often with horror film comes the assumption that the killer is an adult male, who is at least 6'5 feet tall and either overly muscly (e.g., Jason Vorhees in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*) or heavily armed (e.g., Freddy Kruger [Robert Englund] in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* [Wes Craven, 1984]). The victim, on the other hand, is more often than not a fragile and weak woman who either survives despite of herself (e.g., Laurie Strode in *Halloween*) or because she went through a mental makeover (e.g., Jennifer Hills [Camille Keaton] in *I Spit on Your Grave*). *Jennifer's Body* totally turns these stereotypes on their heads as the plot is very much about a female killer whose monstrosity did not emerge from the violence she was victim of, but was heightened and amplified by it as she went from a figurative man-eater to a literal cannibal whose diet consists exclusively of teenage males. Hence, 'the botched satanic ritual [...] subsequently transformed Jennifer into a demonic monster whose voracious sexuality is sublimed into the desire to literally devour young men.'<sup>200</sup>

What is more, is that although Jennifer's literal monstrosity has been brought by males, those males' representations are far from the stereotypical serial killers as they are neither potent, nor manly—Officer Roman Duda (Chris Pratt) calls them 'a bunch of faygos'<sup>201</sup> [0:11:03]—nor powerful, but rather pathetic and childish. It thus seems that Cody and Kusama chose a strictly codified genre with highly recognizable monster figures and twist them enough to subvert the genre and reverse the trend—as Christopher Landon did in 2020 with *Freaky* in which an ill-at-ease teenager (Kathryn Newton) and a serial killer called The Butcher (Vince Vaughn) switch bodies for a day. Jennifer, through her complex character, thus represents both the monster and the victim of *Jennifer's Body*'s narrative, as she is 'less a teenager girl turned monster than an exploration of the monster that lurks inside every teenage girl,'<sup>202</sup> and might be brought to life by an act of dreadful violence.

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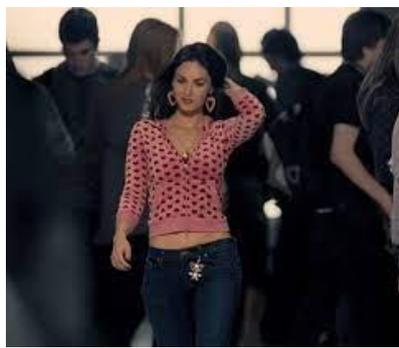
<sup>200</sup> M. Fradley, *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, 214.

<sup>201</sup> Roman Duda in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 21.

<sup>202</sup> Dana Stevens, 'Jennifer's Body', *Slate*, 2009, <https://slate.com/culture/2009/09/jennifer-s-body-is-impossible-to-stop-watching.html> (last accessed 2 April 2021)

### A. Jennifer: A Multi-Dimensional *Monstrous Feminine* Figure

Jennifer Check, whose name says it all, is explicitly represented as the high school mean girl. She is the Regina George (Rachel McAdams in *Mean Girls*) of Devil's Kettle, as a frame of her, strolling through the high school hallway as if she owned the place [0:39:35] reminds the knowledgeable spectators of *Mean Girls* North Shore's very own 'Plastics' [0:44:01] (*Figures 1* and 2). Seyfried played Regina's brainless minion, Karen Smith, who pretends she can predict the weather with her bosom in *Mean Girls*. In *Jennifer's Body*, she is Jennifer's one and only minion, the nerdy Anita 'Needy' Lesnicki who represents Jennifer's alter-ego as she embodies genuine kindness.



*Figure 1:* Jennifer walking through Devil's Kettle High corridor in slow motion. She is thriving.

*Figure 2:* Regina George and her minions (the Plastics) walking through North Shore High School corridor as if they owned the place. (from *Mean Girls*)

Jennifer is high school evil, she openly belittles her fellow male classmates, stating about a boy named Craig (Jeremy Schetze) that, 'He thinks he's cute enough for [her].' adding 'No wonder he's in retard math'<sup>203</sup> [0:10:08]. Or, later on, claiming that her 'dick his bigger than [Colin's]'<sup>204</sup> [0:44:00]. Thus, although she is not a monstrous killer yet, Jennifer, right from the beginning, embodies the female bully who appears to mainly target boys and the gender norms which defines them and their masculinity.

Jennifer's maliciousness is increased tenfold through the sacrifice as she does not verbalise her hatred but demonstrates it by killing men whom she considers to be at the same time weak men, but who are still brave enough to objectify her. Moreover, Jennifer's killing spree is not unmotivated, she is re-enacting the same scheme she experienced with Low Shoulder members, who belittled her and genuinely did not care about her other than to serve their own purposes. It thus seems that Jennifer is reversing the misogyny she was victim of.

<sup>203</sup> Jennifer Check in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 20.

<sup>204</sup> Jennifer Check in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

### 1. *It Is a Case of the Biter Bit*

In 2009, when asked about her character, Fox argues, ‘Jennifer Check, she’s that narcissistic, selfish, self-obsessed girl that everyone knows in high school. She goes through a lot of transformation, and she becomes at one point in her life a victim and then she becomes a predator of sorts and things get crazy.’<sup>205</sup> Jennifer, ‘the kind of girl who attracts hangers-on and feeds off of their blind devotion, abusing them to feed her ego,’<sup>206</sup> fell foul of her own trap when Low Shoulder did exactly the same to her, only pushing the abuse even further. The band butchered her with the sole objective to gain fame and fortune. Jennifer’s moral victimization, on the other hand, comes from a larger institution as it comes from society’s idealization of Jennifer’s body and its objectification which both empowers her, when she is in control, and serves her badly when she is decaying.

The two faces of this victimization are openly presented in a ‘scene where Jennifer’s sitting alone smearing make-up on her face [Figure 3] [1:15:58]. [Cody] always thought that was such a sad image. She’s so vulnerable. [Cody doesn’t] know any woman who hasn’t had a moment sitting in front of the mirror and thinking, “Help me, I want to be somebody else.”’<sup>207</sup> The fact that, in this very moment, Jennifer’s mirror is surrounded by pictures of herself demonstrates that she does not want to be somebody else, but she wants to be the picture-perfect image people have of her—flawless, stunning and sexy. Jennifer is vulnerable at some point in the film, but she becomes so because, at a crucial moment, her outrageous self-confidence led her in the wrong direction and turned against her.



Figure 3: Representation of Jennifer’s curse: trapped between herself and the image she projects onto others.

<sup>205</sup> Megan Fox to *ET Live*, ‘Megan Fox Talks to ET About Kissing Amanda Seyfried and Behind the Scenes of “Jennifer’s Body”’, *ET LIVE*, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tpr8LRdS3QU> (last accessed 24 March 2021)

<sup>206</sup> S. Bunch, *Washington Times*, *op. cit.*

<sup>207</sup> Diablo Cody to Jennifer Kwan, ‘Cody Exorcises Demons from “Jennifer’s Body”’, *Reuters*, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-toronto-cody-idUSTRE58C0ZI20090914> (last accessed 24 March 2021)

Clover established that ‘female killers are few and their reasons for killing are significantly different from men.’<sup>208</sup> According to Clover, female killers do not suffer gender confusion, their motive is not overtly psychosexual, and they happen to kill because they ‘have been abandoned or cheated on by men.’<sup>209</sup> When it comes to Jennifer, these reasons become more complex as it is a fact that Jennifer does not suffer gender confusion and her killing spree finds its origins in men who cheated on her in a way by abusing her credulity and her inhibited state. However, Jennifer’s motive is overtly psychosexual. Jennifer is victim of a symbolical rape, ‘one of the most traumatic events and [one that] produces rates of [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD)] higher than that produced by other events’<sup>210</sup> and ‘it would appear that monsters, most specifically the undead monsters such as vampires, zombies and Frankenstein, are merely hyperbolic representation of human post-traumatic symptoms.’<sup>211</sup> Jennifer’s Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders manifest themselves in her demonisation which involves a cannibalistic sexual appetite that re-enacts the sexual violence she endured with Low Shoulder. Jennifer was castrated by Low Shoulder in the way Creed describes women’s literal castrations in horror films as ‘her body is repeatedly knifed until it resembles a bleeding wound.’<sup>212</sup> Jennifer’s bleeding wound is pictured by Kusama when Jennifer appears for the first time after her abduction in Needy’s kitchen (*Figure 4*) [0:22:36]. Indeed, when Jennifer retells the sacrifice story to Needy, the stabbing is filmed through a swish pan shot (*Figure 5*) thus blurring the action [1:03:43-1:03:57]. The swish pan effect emphasizes the idea that, either the act is so atrocious that it cannot be displayed on screen, or that Jennifer refuses to revive the trauma of being symbolically raped in the flashback. What is more is that, by not presenting Jennifer’s castration during Low Shoulder’s butchering of her body, Cody and Kusama highlight the disregard Nikolai and his fellow musicians have for Jennifer’s body and the fact that they merely punish her sexual displaying for their own gain.

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<sup>208</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, *op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Lynn S. Arnault, ‘Cruelty, Horror and the Will to Redemption’, *Hyptia, Inc.*, 18:2, 2003, 155-188, 160.

<sup>211</sup> Sarah Bell, ‘Monster as Victim, Victim as Monster: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Redemptive Suffering and the “Undead”’, *Monsters & the Monstrous*, 1:2, 2011, 29-37, 29.

<sup>212</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, *op. cit.*, 122.



Figure 4: Jennifer as bleeding wound. The close-up on a blood-dripping bosom, and bloodstained jacket materialises her metaphorical castration.

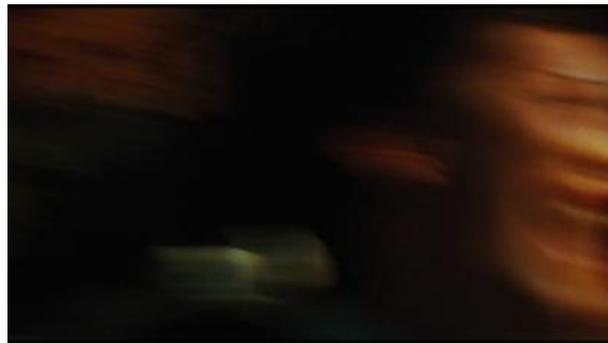


Figure 5: Swish pan shot of Jennifer's distorted screaming face as she is repeatedly getting stabbed by Nikolai. 'While [Jennifer's] character in earlier scenes [such as the sacrifice scene] can be compared to the unfortunate women in slasher films who are invariably punished for their similar approach to sexuality, the feminist twist in Jennifer's Body is that Jennifer's sexuality ends up being a major source of power for her.'<sup>213</sup> Jennifer by becoming a succubus, becomes one of Creed's representations of the *monstrous-feminine*. She becomes a woman as castrator, an avenger of her own castration. Thus, Jennifer's monstrous femininity enables her to exploit her full potential as feminist figure who wants to show men 'the real deal,'<sup>214</sup> (Figure 6).

<sup>213</sup> Valeska Griffiths, 'In Defence of that Kiss: Queer Love Story at the Heart of *Jennifer's Body*', *Grim*, 2, 2018, 15-18, 15, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/grim-no2-mascara-machetes-digital.pdf> (last accessed 24 March 2021)

<sup>214</sup> R. Spears, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, n.p., his underlining.



Figure 6: Jennifer's monstrous face reflecting in the mirror was she calls it 'the real deal.'

## 2. Monstrous-Feminine: Femme Castratrice or Vagina Dentata?

Jennifer Check, through her transformation becomes an embodiment of Creed's *monstrous-feminine*. She is the monstrous womb created by Nikolai's stabbing, the bloodthirsty vampire, the possessed monster whose sex drive is proven deadly, the witch who flies and eats flesh. But above all, Jennifer is the representation of Creed's primary influence, as she is the portrayal of Julia Kristeva's abjection.<sup>215</sup> Indeed, Jennifer presents every single trait of the feminine abjection: 'a fang-filled maw (variation of the *vagina dentata*), an explosive sex drive, hybridity and ignorance of demarcations (bisexuality and fusion of the human and the animal), sympathy for vile substances and body fluids (blood, vomit, stagnant water—in the abandoned swimming pool scene).'<sup>216</sup> Jennifer's abjection transforms her into a literal woman as castrator represented through two of the three forms of woman as castrator described by Creed.

Jennifer is first and foremost a *femme castratrice*<sup>217</sup> and she was so even before she was turned into a succubus as she verbally castrates her male peers with her biting remarks. But when Jennifer trades remarks for literal castration her monstrosity is visually revealed. The visual representation of Jennifer's castrating power is portrayed through Jennifer as *vagina dentata*.<sup>218</sup> It seems that both Kusama and the makeup department of the film decided that Jennifer's body

<sup>215</sup> J. Kristeva, *Power of Horror*, *op. cit.*

<sup>216</sup> P. Françaix, *Teen Horror*, *op. cit.*, 233.

<sup>217</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

The third form of the image of woman as castrator in the castrating mother, which is not represented in *Jennifer's Body*.

was to stay luscious even when she reveals her succubus nature. It is solely Jennifer's face that morphs into this teathed vagina. This visual and metaphorical effect seems to go back to Cody's script as 'she stated in interviews that she wrote it with Barbara Creed's study of the *vagina dentata* in mind.'<sup>219</sup> Hence, Jennifer's character is both verbally and visually sexual, but it is so in a monstrous way that empowers her.

Jennifer's monstrosity, her representation as *femme castratrice* and *vagina dentata*, is intricately connected to Isabel Pinedo's definition of the uncanny—she refers here to Sigmund Freud's theory—, that is the blurred 'distinction between imagination and reality.'<sup>220</sup> Indeed, in Kusama's *Jennifer's Body*, the imagination takes up an important place. While Jennifer's monstrous face is shown—see *Figures 1* and *2* of '[Possession Film](#)' in Chapter 1—, the murders she commits are almost never presented on-screen (except for Chip's death); they are only referred to as the spectators hear Jonas's desperate scream [0:33:08] and see the shadow of Jennifer devouring Colin [0:53:19], who is then described as 'lasagne with teeth'<sup>221</sup> [1:08:51]. Kusama thus plays with the effect of 'recreational terror': 'the tension and fear provoked by the disorienting, figurative castrations of body horror, a highly conventional spectacle of violence that blurs the distinction between reality and imagination through the interplay of seeing and not-seeing the wet death.'<sup>222</sup> In Spears's graphic novel, the recreational terror effect is totally absent as the artists, in each chapter, depict Jennifer's victims' dismemberment and disembowelment. Jonas's death is even pictured through a full page displaying his gruesome decapitation (*Figure 7*).

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<sup>219</sup> C. Maury and D. Roche, *Women Who Kill*, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>220</sup> Isabel Pinedo, 'The Wet and the Uncanny', *Paradoxa*, 3:3-4, 1997, 407-416, 408.

<sup>221</sup> Colin's mother, Jill Gray (Gabrielle Rose), in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>222</sup> I. Pinedo, *Paradoxa*, *op. cit.*, 415.

Pinedo defines 'the wet death' as a transgression of 'bodily boundaries by devouring, penetrating or spilling the contents of the body through carnage.' (408) Both Jennifer and Nikolai Wolf perform wet deaths on their victims.



Figure 7: Jonas being decapitated and disembowelled by Jennifer's monstrous and toothed shadow.

Berlatsky might have provided an explanation of Kusama's purpose using recreational terror. Indeed, he states, 'In a world where men see women solely in terms of their outer skin, it seems only fair that women should show men the skin men want, the better to devour the lookers.'<sup>223</sup> Thus, Kusama uses off-screen killing to intensify Jennifer's power in these situations: she is beautiful, she is dangerous—as her eyes turning from a soft blue to a demonic white injected with blood (Figure 8) [0:52:13]. However, the spectator never knows the full extent of her power and dangerousness. Jennifer, thus, uses her status as *vagina dentata* and *femme castratrice* to overcome her victim status and to possess the men who try to possess her by objectifying her.



Figure 8: Jennifer revealing her true nature as both beautiful and dangerous.

<sup>223</sup> N. Berlatsky, *Fecund Horror*, *op. cit.*, 107.

### 3. *Reversing the Male Gaze and Female Objectification*

Shohini Chaudhuri, referring to Creed, states that '[a]lthough this by itself does not make her a "feminist" or "liberated" figure, the revelation of the woman as castrator does challenge the patriarchal views that woman is essentially a victim.'<sup>224</sup> But Jennifer differs slightly from Chaudhuri's interpretation of Creed's theory because, while Jennifer is a woman, the woman figure presented in front of the camera does not signify a woman, but a succubus or a 'demonic version of man's desire.'<sup>225</sup> As a result, the curse and transformation of Jennifer into a succubus represent the issues of a patriarchal society, that is, the objectification of women's bodies. Jennifer's rampage on the other hand, represents her way to cope with these issues, to play with her objectification and to gain power from her sex drive which Low Shoulder try to repress.

One setting, used twice by Kusama, highlights the power Jennifer acquires through her manipulated objectification, that is the representation of Jennifer as a neo-noir *femme fatale*. Jade Bitomsky explains, 'The contemporary femme fatale found in neo noir is a powerful seductive intellectual with a malevolent streak a much greater agency than her forebearers—transformed from a mere visual object to a central driver of the plot, a main protagonist; at times the objectifier, not the objectified.'<sup>226</sup> Although Jennifer cannot be described as an intellectual, Bitomsky's definition of the neo noir *femme fatale* does suit her character rather well. The established figure of the *femme fatale*, as described by Cristelle Maury and David Roche, in reference to multiple authors and specialists, corresponds even more to Jennifer's character. Indeed, Maury and Roche argues that 'Authors Christine Gledhill, Sylvia Harvey, Janey Place, Pam Cook, E. Ann Kaplan, Richard Dyer, and Claire Johnston took the figure of the lethal *femme fatale* as a stepping-stone to denounce women's subjection to male dominance and challenge patriarchal order.'<sup>227</sup> Jennifer, by asserting her dominion over Colin and Ahmet completely challenges the order.

Kusama's establishing shots in the style of traditional neo-noir films, 'with [their] unusual lighting (the constant opposition of light and shadow) [...] and [their] off-center scene

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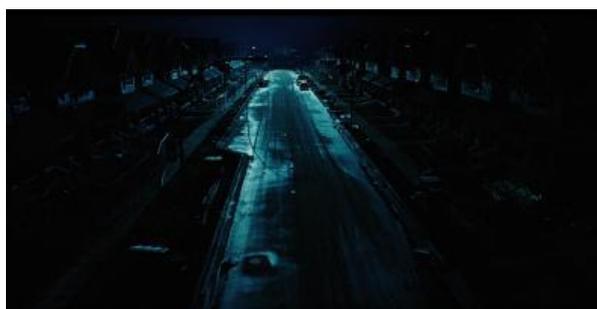
<sup>224</sup> Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists – Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*, London, Routledge Critical Thinkers, 2006, 95.

<sup>225</sup> Laura G. Escibano, 'You're Killing People! No, I'm Killing Boys' *Jennifer's Body and the Monstrous-Feminine*, Work presented at Solent University, 2019, 4.

<sup>226</sup> Jade Bitomsky, *Subversion of the Male Gaze: The Empowered Femme Fatale Within Neo-Noir*, Thesis presented at the University of Victoria, 2014, 2.

<sup>227</sup> C. Maury and D. Roche, *Women Who Kill*, op. cit., 5.

compositions,<sup>228</sup> hint at Jennifer's nature as *femme fatale*. The first establishing shot of the sort is of Colin, leaving his car in the middle of a deserted, dark street lit solely by the moonlight (*Figure 9*) [0:47:39]. The middle of the road is lit, while the houses are plunged into darkness and both Colin and his car are placed on the right-hand side of the shot. This shot coupled with the shift from an intradiegetic playful cover of 'I Can See Clearly Now' by Screeching Weasel, to an extradiegetic eerie music enhances the gloomy atmosphere and the impression of danger. A similar establishing shot is presented later [1:06:03] as Jennifer retells Needy how she fed for the first time, off of Ahmet innards, in the middle of the forest (*Figure 10*) [1:06:06].



*Figures 9 and 10: Colin and Ahmet are respectively presented in neo-noir tableaux which hint on Jennifer's nature as femme fatale.*

The fact that these events occur while Colin is to meet Jennifer, and while Ahmet randomly stumbles upon Jennifer in the middle of the road reflects upon Jennifer's nature and the multi-dimension of her character as *femme castratrice*, *vagina dentata* and *femme fatale*. While Low Shoulder's aim was to annihilate Jennifer's body, they actually give it height and dimension as, although Jennifer is a victim of her own curse of pursuing female's perfection, she uses male objectification as it pleases her. Hence, Cody and Kusama's text does not 'portra[y] femininity as monstrous. [It] portray[s] obsession with appearance and manipulation to conform to the idealized notion of perfection as monstrous.'<sup>229</sup>

'Although she is a monstrous and evil character, Jennifer Check is also a *tragic figure*. She represents the monstrosity of the obsession with female perfection and does not get the chance to break free of it.'<sup>230</sup> Jennifer's tragic figure is emphasised even more by the fact that while her monstrosity *is* male created, this monstrosity is both irrelevant to its male originators and is unaffecting them as they do not get punished for their own atrocities and monstrosities performed on Jennifer's body. Consequently, while 'Jennifer gets to be the monster [Nikolai

<sup>228</sup> Mark T. Conrad, 'Introduction', in Mark T. Conrad, ed., *The Philosophy of Neo Noir*, Kentucky UP, 2007, 1-4, 1.

<sup>229</sup> C. Egan, 'Hell Is a Teenage Girl', *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 56, my emphasis.

Wolf] gets to be the villain.’<sup>231</sup> Nikolai does not, however, embody the on-screen representation of the male gaze, but stands as a comment on postfeminism and its relation to the woman’s film.

In the ‘Epilogue’ of the graphic novel, *Jennifer’s Body*, Jennifer states in the captions ‘Not one of them [her victims] saw me for who I was. They only saw this... Jennifer’s Body,’<sup>232</sup> while her blood-stained and torn white dress is presented to the reader, leaving her face unrevealed (*Figure 11*). The obsession with (women) physique, that Jennifer is deploring, is ‘[o]ne of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture.’<sup>233</sup>



*Figure 11:* Jennifer concluding on the way men identified her, neglecting her power by focusing merely on her beauty/body.

Rosalind Gill argues that,

in today’s media it is possession of a “sexy body” that is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness.<sup>234</sup>

Cody and Kusama, through this postfeminist notion comment on Jennifer’s agency, which is linked to another major notions of postfeminism, ‘the shift from objectification to subjectification.’<sup>235</sup> Jennifer is ‘presented as [an] active, desiring sexual subject[] who choose[s] to present [her]self in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits [her] liberated

<sup>231</sup> Meredith Woerner, ‘The Real Horror of Jennifer’s Body: Toxic Friends’, *IO9*, 2009, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/the-real-horror-of-jennifers-body-toxic-friends-5361181> (last accessed 26 March 2021)

<sup>232</sup> R. Spears, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*, n.p., his underlining.

<sup>233</sup> R. Gill, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *op. cit.*, 149.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, her underlining.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

interests to do so (Goldman, 1992).<sup>236</sup> But this subjectivity operates throughout the film, hence the spectator—and more specifically the female spectator—is ‘invited to witness her own commodification and, furthermore, to buy an image of herself insofar as the female star is proposed as the ideal feminine beauty.’<sup>237</sup> Hence, through Jennifer’s transformation, the spectator witnesses a shift from men’s agency over the female body—which is not sexualising but purely self-centred as it is used for men’s gain—to women’s agency with Jennifer’s willingness to be sexualised and objectified to achieve her aims and thus reversing the gaze. *Jennifer’s Body*’s filmmakers here, again, seem to adhere to traditional objectification of the woman’s body in the horror genre, only to better turn it upside-down to condemn the patriarchy and its demeaning vision of women and to empower women and their agency concerning their bodies. In sum, Jennifer’s transformation ‘represents a shift in the way that power operates: a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self policing narcissistic gaze.’<sup>238</sup>

## B. The Patriarchal Hegemony as Villain Through the Indie Band Low Shoulder

Nikolai and his musicians, or rather his minions, make their first appearance at Melody Lane, Devil’s Kettle local (and only) roadhouse [0:10:50-0:19:01]. In her script, Cody, describes Nikolai as a mysterious and seemingly dangerous character, ‘the LEAD SINGER has intense, spooky eyes, nearly obscured by a shock of hair.’<sup>239</sup> Kusama, in the DVD extras, comments on Nikolai and his band’s enigmatic figures as she says, ‘they have power, this unspeakable power,’<sup>240</sup> which seems to work especially well on Jennifer who is literally hypnotised by Nikolai’s gaze (*Figure 12*) [0:17:00].

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Desire to Desire’, in Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 1987, 1-37, 24.

Doane argues that ‘commodification presupposes that acutely self-conscious relation to the body which is attributed to femininity.’ (32) In *Jennifer’s Body* this relation is two-fold, it first as to do with beauty, but, through the transformation, the elements of strength, power and in sum agency are added.

<sup>238</sup> R. Gill, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *op. cit.*, 152-153.

<sup>239</sup> D. Cody, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*, 21.

<sup>240</sup> Karyn Kusama in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*



Figure 12: Jennifer's eyes are locked on Nikolai's figure; she is totally blind to the brazing around her.

Nikolai and Low Shoulder are a representation of the patriarchal hegemony, they are the mirror that reflects society's vision of sexism, its dichotomisation of gender power and consideration of social categories. But while this mirror does not depict a positive image of society, it does not make it monstrous either. Hence, the same way Fausto Fasulo asks, 'How to jolt a man enough to justify the future murder he is going to commit?',<sup>241</sup> one can wonder what pushes Nikolai and his band to kill an innocent girl whose mistake was to be naive enough to think that her high school Queen Bee status would work with grown men? The answer is as shallow as Jennifer's obsession with appearance is: fame, fortune and glory.

### 1. Male Sadism and Their Satisfied Desires

Jennifer's sacrifice scene has been dealt with in [Chapter 1](#), through the inscription of Jennifer's Body in the rape/revenge subgenre. However, what has not been addressed in depth yet is Low Shoulder's motive for this sacrifice. This scene, not only depicts a symbolical rape, but highlights the true evil forces of the film and thus illustrates quite clearly who the real monster of *Jennifer's Body* is: the antipathic and unsympathetic 'group of powerful men sacrificing a girl's body on the altar of their own professional advancement.'<sup>242</sup>

In a recent episode of the TV series *American Horror Story, 1984* (Ryan Murphy, 2019) one of the characters states, 'I don't believe in evil. I believe that while the ability to do violence exist in all people, the need to kill, to hurt over and over needs to be activated by outside

<sup>241</sup> Fausto Fasulo in Mélanie Boissonneau, Fausto Fasulo and Christophe Lemaire, 'Slashers', *Le Bistro de L'Horreur*, episode 103, FilmoTV 2020, my translation.

<sup>242</sup> Constance Grady, 'How *Jennifer's Body* Went from a Flop in 2009 to a Feminist Cult Classic Today: The Critical Reevaluation of *Jennifer's Body* explained', *Vox*, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/10/31/18037996/jennifers-body-flop-cult-classic-feminist-horror> (last accessed 19 March 2021)

circumstances.’<sup>243</sup> When it comes to Low Shoulder, the circumstances are both selfish and shallow. Nikolai even summarises the situation. To do the sacrifice or not to do the sacrifice will determine them being ‘rich and awesome like that guy from Maroon 5’ or ‘work at Moose Hoof Coffee Forever’<sup>244</sup> [1:01:17]—or even worse ‘be a huge suicidal loser.’<sup>245</sup> While Nikolai’s line in Cody’s script sounds a little desperate with the use of ‘suicidal,’ Adam Brody’s Nikolai in Kusama’s film is definitely pathetic, shallow and selfish to the extreme as he is willing to take an innocent’s life in exchange of becoming supposedly ‘rich and awesome.’ Furthermore, the consequences of the ritual will prove to be individualistic and ephemeral for Low Shoulder, while they will have consequences on the community at large with Jennifer’s transformation.

Nikolai’s sadism is underlined in this scene. Low Shoulder’s lead singer goes as far as to joyfully sing ‘867-5309/Jennifer’ by Tommy Tutone right before he repeatedly stabs Jennifer to death (or at least it seems) [1:03:20-1:03:55]. Nikolai’s malice, openly and even hyperbolically depicted, appears to be closely related to modern feminism. Indeed, ‘identifying male sadism, especially towards women, and holding men at least theoretically culpable for such acts as rape, wife beating, and child abuse are major achievements of modern feminism.’<sup>246</sup> Cody and Kusama, thus use the horror film and its codes and tropes to address a societal issue, an issue that will be increasingly addressed with the #MeToo and the Time’s Up movements.

Cody in her script—describing Nikolai literally mauling Jennifer—, Kusama with her camera handling—with her close-up on a proud and satisfied Nikolai (*Figure 13*) [0:14:27]—and Brody in his impersonation of Nikolai in the film all amplify the antipathic, self-centred and egocentric personality of Low Shoulder’s lead singer. However, in a figurative sense, they also hold a mirror that appears to reflect the way society sometimes acts towards women.

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<sup>243</sup> Donna Chambers (Angelica Ross) in Mary Wigmore, *American Horror Story: 1984*, 20<sup>th</sup> century Fox, episode 3, 2019.

<sup>244</sup> Nikolai Wolf in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>245</sup> Nikolai Wolf in D. Cody, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*, 72.

<sup>246</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, *op. cit.*, 226.



Figure 13: Nikolai hypnotising Jennifer with his vampire-like intense gaze as to satiate his narcissistic personality.

## 2. Asserting Masculinity and Possessing the Female Body

‘The trope of the sacrificial virgin, whose death offers some sort of transition, offering or exchange’<sup>247</sup> is not new in the cinema field, it even is a classic trope. However, most of these sacrifices are meant to have a great impact, to save lives or to prevent a disaster. Jennifer’s sacrifice will not save lives, nor will it prevent a catastrophe, it will simply allow selfish men to achieve their selfish goals: to become rich and famous. Instead of doing so by working themselves through celebrity, they would rather violate and wound a teenage girl’s body, thus asserting their dominion.

The horror films of the 1970s, according to Roche, ‘underline the fact that masculinity is a cultural construct grounded in the possession of female bodies, with protection and violation being two sides of the same coin.’<sup>248</sup> Several scholars and critics agreed on the idea that *Jennifer’s Body* can be read as a horror pastiche of 1970s and 1980s films.<sup>249</sup> However, *Jennifer’s Body* does not seem to comment on the protection side of the coin, but solely on the violation one. Hence, once again, the sacrifice is not about Jennifer for Low Shoulder, it is about themselves. The selfishness that Jennifer represents, in her embodiment of the high school mean girl, is magnified in Low Shoulder’s characters as they moved from bullies to literal murderers in the name of their own personal gain and thus the assertion of their dominion by becoming ‘rock stars.’

When it comes to Low Shoulder’s future, it seems paradoxical that in a film which claims to be feminist, men who sacrifice a woman on the altar of their success do not get any repercussions from their abominable act of violence. It is even more salient in Spears’s graphic

<sup>247</sup> E. Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*, op. cit., 46.

<sup>248</sup> D. Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s*, op. cit., 91.

<sup>249</sup> See for example Casali (2013) or Caillet (2009).

novel as Jennifer's adolescent victims' wounded bodies are graphically depicted, while Nikolai and Low Shoulder only appear once at Melody Lane's concert and are not depicted as agent of the devil but as actual musicians comforting Ahmet with their music.<sup>250</sup> However, the consequences of the sacrifice are more pernicious than they seem to be.

### 3. *How to (Almost) Get Away with Murder*

In 2020, Megan Arnall asks, 'Why doesn't [the sacrifice] impact them [Low Shoulder] at all?'<sup>251</sup> The sacrifice, in fact, impacts them, but not the way the spectators would expect it. Five men were meant to sacrifice a virgin, which Jennifer was not, the sacrifice goes wrong, and Jennifer ends up being possessed by a literal man-eating demon, hence 'she gets the repercussions, and they don't.'<sup>252</sup> Or put differently, she bears all the negative consequences of the wrongfully perpetrated sacrifice while Low Shoulder reaps all the positive effects: money, fame, hysterical fans—who ironically are about Jennifer's age and present similar traits (beauty, youth, and a fascination for the band) (*Figure 14*) [1:37:10].



*Figure 14:* Nikolai and his band surrounded by teenage girls who could have been another Jennifer Check.

One can, and many critics and moviegoers—such as Arnall—did, wonder where Cody and Kusama wanted to go with the antagonists getting off the situation lightly. This whole plot needs to be read as a satire of society. '[I]n short, the systemic sexism of heteronormative patriarchy is the monster.'<sup>253</sup> The fact that Low Shoulder members do not get punished, until the very end of the film and by the hand of Needy, onto which it becomes incumbent to

<sup>250</sup> R. Spears, 'Chapter 4', *Jennifer's Body*, Los Angeles, BOOM! Studios, 2009, n.p.

<sup>251</sup> Megan Arnall in Mark Hofmeyer, John Leavengood and Megan Arnall 'Jennifer's Body', *Movies, Films and Flix*, episode 259, 2020, for this quote and the following one.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> C. Egan, 'Hell Is a Teenage Girl', *op. cit.*, 42.

establish the rightful ‘world’ in which killers must be punished, shows what reality can be for women.

In 2009, Fox gave an interview in which she drew a parallel between fiction—with the sacrifice—and reality as she states, ‘That scene represented my relationship with the movie studios at the time and the studios executers and just Hollywood in general, because on almost a daily basis, I felt like I was being sacrificed for their gain with almost no concern for my physical well-being. Fuck your mental or emotional well-being.’<sup>254</sup> The very idea of sacrificing women for men’s gain with no regard for these women’s well-being is causally linked to the #MeToo movement and in the case of Fox in particular the Time’s Up movement as it has to do with Hollywood and the cinema industry. It is even more related to the cinema industry as some allegations had consequences on women who spoke up, but not on the men who had been accused.<sup>255</sup>

One of the aspects that surprised the critics and the spectators the most is the fact that Jennifer never turns on her assailants but chooses to punish the male-centred society at large. Hence, leaving another female figure to avenge her (first) death: Needy. Needy is an ambiguous character, ‘she’s a heroine, she’s a protagonist and yet she’s not glamorous or totally figured out [...] but she’s also realistic’<sup>256</sup> says Seyfried (Needy Lesnicki impersonator) in an interview. What is more to her character is that the ‘ambiguity at the start of the film indicates that [she] will also experience a monstrous downfall, which is ultimately caused by her obsession with Jennifer.’<sup>257</sup> Needy’s ambiguity thus resides in the fact that she is the heroine of the film, she is a Final Girl, but she also is the character in which Jennifer’s monstrosity keeps living.<sup>258</sup> Needy is, in short, a survivor, who fights and kills because she is the only one left who can do so.

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<sup>254</sup> Megan Fox to J. Crucchiola, *Vulture*, *op. cit.*

<sup>255</sup> See for example Adèle Haenel’s insurgence when Roman Polanski received an award for his film, *J’accuse* (2019) at the 2020 Cannes Festival, while they had been allegations of sexual harassment on his behalf.

<sup>256</sup> Amanda Seyfried to *ET Live*, ‘Megan Fox Talks to ET About Kissing Amanda Seyfried and Behind the Scenes of “Jennifer’s Body”’, *op. cit.*

<sup>257</sup> C. Egan, ‘*Hell Is a Teenage Girl*’, *op. cit.*, 47.

<sup>258</sup> Laura Ivins, ‘Friendships & Sisterhood for Girl Monsters: Ginger Snaps and Jennifer’s Body’, *IUCinema*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyUEqYHe30g> (last accessed 27 March 2021)

## II. The *New Heroine*:<sup>259</sup> Needy – The Positive Female Figure with a Hint of Monstrosity

In 2009, the mismarketing of *Jennifer's Body* evolved around the misinterpretation of the intentions of the film, its plot, but also the misinterpretation of its characters. Megan Fox was put in the spotlight, while it is Seyfried's character, Anita 'Needy' Lesnicki, who is the actual heroine, main protagonist, narrator and the character with the highest screen time.<sup>260</sup> While the film is branded with the name of Jennifer Check, it is through Needy's voice-over that the spectators experience the film.<sup>261</sup> In fact, Cody and Kusama use 'specifically cinematic structures of subjectivity—primarily the voice-over, point-of-view shots, and the marking of certain sequences as [...], hallucinations or flashbacks—memories—in relation to a female character:'<sup>262</sup> Needy, hence making two statements. First, Needy is the focal point of the film. Second, the film, by engaging in female subjectivity through cinematic structures, aligns itself with the women's film. Furthermore, the role of the heroine is incumbent upon Needy for one specific reason, because Needy and no other character in the film has 'sparks of independence and defiance that allow[s] [her] to break free of patriarchal oppression,'<sup>263</sup> and to right whom she judges have been wronged. Thus, establishing her character in a feminist discourse.

Needy is probably the most multi-dimensional character of the film: 'she begins the movie insecure and unsure of herself, content to follow the lead of a pretty and popular girl,'<sup>264</sup> she is a 'smart girl,' and smart girls are often depreciated in films. But *Jennifer's Body*, which has less to do with Jennifer's actual body than with Needy's mental health, sees Needy 'transform[] from wallflower girl to power-kicking badass.'<sup>265</sup> Indeed, her coming-of-(r)age story is one of

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<sup>259</sup> I chose the term *New Heroine* as a reference to the figure of the New Woman that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The New Woman 'was [...] a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement.' (Sally Ledger, *The New Woman; Fiction and Feminism at the fin-de siècle*, Manchester UP, 1997, 1). In some ways, Needy is a fictional construct who shakes patriarchal norms to serve feminist purposes of more recent eras. Furthermore, the term *New Heroine* echoes the New Hero who Chip represents in some ways.

<sup>260</sup> Needy's screen time exceeds 85 minutes out of the 107 minutes of the film, while Jennifer's screen time, for example, is about 70 minutes.

<sup>261</sup> K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>262</sup> M. A. Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, *op. cit.*, 34-35.

<sup>263</sup> Jessica Parant, 'Thrilling Eve – Becoming "Dangerous Women"', *Grim*, 7, 2020, 10-12, 10, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/grim-no7-teenage-wasteland-digital.pdf> (last accessed 27 March 2021)

<sup>264</sup> Megan Fox in Michael Williams, 'Teenage Fury: The Modern Drama Queen's Coming-of-Age', *Grim*, 7, 2020, 43-45, 43, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/grim-no7-teenage-wasteland-digital.pdf> (last accessed 17 May 2021)

<sup>265</sup> Katey Rich, 'Jennifer's Body', *Cinema Blend*, 2009, <https://www.cinemablend.com/reviews/Jennifer-s-Body-4182.html> (last accessed 2 April 2021)

the major narrative arcs of the film, as she aims at ‘staunch[ing] the flow of blood started by evil men and monsters to make the world safer for all.’<sup>266</sup>

Needy is the one who lives and saves the day, thus personifying Clover’s Final Girl. But Needy is also a tormented heroine, bullied by her own best friend who ‘psychologically victimizes [Needy] for an extended amount of time by forcing her into an uncontrollable stage of paranoia [and] horror.’<sup>267</sup> While Sarah Ball claims, in 2009, that the film ‘is not genre-subverting so much as genre-reinforcing: it annihilates the symbolically feminine (emotion, intuition, sensitivity) in one big ketchup splatter, all for the gain of the symbolically male (physical violence, sexual aggression),’<sup>268</sup> I argue that Needy’s character breaks this dichotomy down as Needy is both a sensible, feminine and intuitive character and a Killer Girl Hero who is not afraid to be brave and fight.

### A. The Representation of the Final Girl

‘Every horror movie has a final girl, the one who survives it all and lives to tell the tale.’<sup>269</sup> The term ‘Final Girl’ was coined by Clover in 1992. It describes the female character in horror films who encounters the dead bodies, who is chased and cornered; she is watchful and sees signs of danger that no one else sees.<sup>270</sup> Laurie Strode from *Halloween*, Sydney Prescott (Neve Campbell) from *Scream* and the paradoxically female killer, Mandy Lane (Amber Heard) in the eponymous film all present characteristics of the Final Girl. Needy also appears to fit that description as she encounters Jennifer’s corpse in her kitchen [0:22:28] and Chip’s body in the abandoned swimming pool [1:29:13]. She is chased and cornered by Jennifer through her intrusion into Needy’s house [0:24:17]. She definitely sees signs of danger that no one else sees through the hallucinations she has when she has sex with Chip (*Figure 1*) [0:52:46-0:53:51] or when she imagines Jennifer’s all bloodied in the high school hallway (*Figure 2*) [1:11:03]. But what is more is that Needy takes part in the new generation of Final Girls, freer and more feminist than those of the 1970s and 1980s.

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<sup>266</sup> M. Williams, *Grim*, *op. cit.*, 45.

<sup>267</sup> Chad Brewer, *The Stereotypic Portrayal of Women in Slasher Films: Then Versus Now*, a Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2009, 31.

<sup>268</sup> Sarah Ball, “‘Jennifer’s Body’: Why Hollywood Apparently Can’t Make a Feminist Slasher Movie”, *Newsweek*, 2009, <https://www.newsweek.com/jennifers-body-why-hollywood-apparently-cant-make-feminist-slasher-movie-220742> (last accessed 27 March 2021)

<sup>269</sup> Donna Chambers to Brooke Thompson (Emma Roberts) in G. Horder-Payton, *American Horror Story: 1984*, *op. cit.*

<sup>270</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, *op. cit.*, 35-44.



*Figure 1:* Needy hallucinating and seeing Jennifer as a monstrous creature on dead Jonas's shoulder, as a premonition of Jennifer's nature revealed to Needy in a following scene.



*Figure 2:* Needy hallucinating and seeing Jennifer for what she really is, a voracious creature who is hungry for both admiration and blood.

Kyle Christensen argues that 'the Final Girl can be a feminist character if altered slightly.'<sup>271</sup> I believe that Needy fits the characteristic of the feminist Final Girl. Indeed, as she runs through the park to try and save Chip [1:22:57], it is '[I]like in a fairy tale, Needy runs through a forest with her ridiculous feminine pink princess prom dress but with a distinctive twist: she is now the proverbial prince charming, and her boyfriend is the proverbial damsel in distress.'<sup>272</sup> For that matter, the vision of reverse damsel in distress is even more emphasised in the graphic novel as Chip verbalises his position as helpless victim and Needy's as ultimate, yet feminine, saviour (*Figure 3*). Hence, Cody's inversion of roles provides a new dimension to Needy's character, she is feminine and almost childish in her 1980s puffy pink dress, and later in her bunny slippers [1:35:27], but she is also a strong character, a K.I.C.K.E.R who swears and fights. What is more is that, while '[s]he is brave, intelligent, and of course, the survivor at the end of the movie' just like the Final Girl is supposed to be, 'there is one very important exception to the archetype. She engages in sex.'<sup>273</sup>

<sup>271</sup> Kyle Christensen, 'The Final Girl versus Wes Craven's "A Nightmare on Elm Street": Proposing a Stronger Model of Feminism in Slasher Horror Cinema', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 34:1, 2011, 23-47, 27.

<sup>272</sup> L. Escribano, "You are Killing People! No, I'm Killing Boys", *op. cit.*, 5-6.

<sup>273</sup> R. Schmitz, *The Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts*, *op. cit.*, 35.



Figure 3: Chip describing Needy as feminine, girly, but also strong and assertive when she tries to save him.

Sydney Prescott in the first *Scream* in 1996 paved the way to new representations of the Final Girl. Indeed, Sydney is the ultimate Final Girl, but she becomes so after she engages in sex with her boyfriend and soon to be discovered assailant, Billy Loomis (Skeet Ulrich). While it was almost unprecedented in 1996, Françaix claims that in the twenty-first century the heroine's virginity became incidental, as it seems more likely that a teenage girl such as Needy would be involved in sex rather than being a virgin.<sup>274</sup> But Needy goes further than simply defying the virginity of the Final Girl as she shakes the heteronormativity of the Final Girl up by being deeply in love with her best friend, with whom the relationship is both deeper, more intense and more dangerous than it is with Chip (as it will be discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). Cody and Kusama's aim was therefore to create a "real" independent woman,<sup>275</sup> who does not constrain herself to the expectations of society, but emancipates herself from them, by choice and by force.

Needy Lesnicki was never a conformist, she did not chase society's approval, however, she was not a lawbreaker or a troublemaker either. At one point in the film, she 'takes the matter into her own hands because Jennifer is dead, and this zombie is very much alive, and that zombie is a stranger to Needy and nobody believes her and Needy is the only person that's really seeing this.'<sup>276</sup> Needy thence appears to become a Final Girl by choice, because she wants to avenge the death of her best friend—and secret love interest—but she also wants to avenge the death of her boyfriend, friends and classmates, and because she wants to punish the males who wronged a female body. However, she also becomes a Final Girl by force because no one else sees and knows what she sees and knows and because no one wants to believe her.

<sup>274</sup> P. Françaix, *Teen Horror*, *op. cit.*, 147.

<sup>275</sup> R. Schmitz, *The Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts*, *op. cit.*, 37-38.

<sup>276</sup> Amanda Seyfried to *ET LIVE*, 'Megan Fox Talks to ET About Kissing Amanda Seyfried and Behind the Scenes of "Jennifer's Body"', *op. cit.*

Her role as Final Girl is therefore paradoxical because she becomes one both deliberately and in spite of herself, thus linking her to the figure of the victim hero.

## B. Becoming a Hero through Victimization

Needy, like Jennifer, undergoes a transformation. But while Jennifer goes from prom queen to sacrificial victim to succubus, Needy on the other hand goes from plain Jane to second-hand victim to survivor and finally aggressor. Her transformation, although radically different from Jennifer's is no less impressive and plot related, because she goes from victim to hero to actual monster. While in many horror films, and slasher films in particular, '[w]e love to watch [the Final Girl] go from timid and inexperienced to being able to confront her assailant to the bloody death,'<sup>277</sup> when it comes to Needy, the transformation is even more salient and remarkable.

As discussed in the previous [subchapter](#), *Jennifer's Body* presents two monsters, Jennifer as literal monster and the patriarchal hegemony as symbolical monster embodied by Low Shoulder's members. However, Needy is not a traditional victim of either of those monsters, she has no real interaction with Low Shoulder and although she is mentally and physically tormented by Jennifer, she is not a victim in the same way Jonas, Ahmet, Colin and even Chip are. Needy's victimization comes from her role as investigator and as protector of her fellow classmates and most importantly of Jennifer's body, which has become a vessel of women suffering at the hands of male power.

The victimization of Needy is latent but visible. Jennifer pushes her around, literally (*Figure 4*) [0:09:05] and figuratively, she mocks her and minimises Needy's paranoia so as to invalidate her—she goes as far as to call her 'tardy' and 'a sped'<sup>278</sup> [0:58:49]. Although Needy does not end up looking like lasagne with teeth or being drunk from like a Fountain of Youth, she is one of Jennifer's victims. By the end of the film Needy 'finds her freedom and autonomy by defeating Jennifer, who inhibited her personal growth,' and subsequently 'by destroying the

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<sup>277</sup> Mari Ramsawakh, 'From Victim to Survivor: A Critical Analysis', *Grim*, 4, 2019, 21-22, 21, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/grim-no-4-our-bodies-our-hells-digital-2.pdf> (last accessed 28 March 2021)

<sup>278</sup> 'Tardy' is a contraction of the word retarded and is thus used '[t]o express retardedness.' ('Tardy', *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tardy> [last accessed 11 February 2021]) 'Sped' is '[a]n insult used when someone does something stupid.' ('Sped' *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Sped> [last accessed 11 February 2021])

patriarchal ties that bind her to the good girl archetype'<sup>279</sup> she becomes an emblematic figure of the postfeminist horror film culture.



Figure 4: Jennifer joyfully pushing Needy around to establish her dominion.

Fradley explains that, '[T]he exhausted female victim-hero, tearful, bloodied and psychologically traumatized [...] holds a dark social mirror to the consumerist pleasures valorized by postfeminist culture.'<sup>280</sup> Needy's exhaustion, bloodied figure, traumatized body and mind are clearly visible at a breaking point in the film (Figure 5) [1:29:35] that marks the beginning of her makeover and consequential transformation into the ultimate hero. During this intense moment of silence and martyrdom, one can almost hear Riot Grrrl Sara Marcus's complaint: 'I felt powerless not because I was weak but because I lived in a society that drained girls of power [...], because I suspect, people didn't know how to treat the lives of teenage girls as if they mattered.'<sup>281</sup> Needy at this very moment is torn, powerless and drained from her power. No one believes her, no one considers that she matters. But this powerlessness brings on one important aspect in Needy's life: anger. Anger, Marcus argues, is at the roots of female empowerment: 'Riot Grrrl, by encouraging girls to turn their anger outward, taught a crucial lesson: Always ask, Is there something wrong not with me but with the world at large? It also forced us to confront a second question: Once we've found our rage, where do we go from there?'<sup>282</sup> Needy seems to have found her answer, she is going to right what has been wronged and will turn her anger towards the ones at the origins of her persecutions: *Jennifer's Body's* monsters and villains.

<sup>279</sup> J. Casali, *Terrors of Girlhood*, op. cit., 55 for this quote and the previous one.

<sup>280</sup> M. Fradley, *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, op. cit., 205

<sup>281</sup> S. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, op. cit., 11-12.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.



Figure 5: Needy, as a martyr on her bed, about to transform into the film's heroine.

The makeover, a classic trope of teen movies and especially 'chick flicks',<sup>283</sup> and one of the constituents of postfeminist media culture,<sup>284</sup> marks the beginning of Needy's new life as avenger and her transition from victim to hero. Needy's makeover almost resembles a makeunder. Indeed, she trades her girly pink dress and bright make-up for an all-black outfit, tied hair and fingerless gloves [1:30:18-1:30:30]. It also symbolises a rupture between innocence and experience, and ultimately between childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, the makeover epitomises 'a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment',<sup>285</sup> as Needy does not conform to the traditional makeover, which would imply her to 'transform[] [herself] by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practising appropriately modified consumption habits.'<sup>286</sup> Needy reverses this paradigm by transforming herself into what society would not celebrate, she morphs herself to stay unnoticed, to become an invisible righter of wronged, using sartorial codes at her advantage by being fully aware of society's treatment towards women's dress code. It is no coincidence if Needy wears nearly the same outfit when she goes after Jennifer (*Figure 6*) [0:05:04] and when she ends her quests of righting what has been wronged in Low Shoulder's hotel suite (*Figure 7*) [1:39:04].

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<sup>283</sup> Joel Gwynne wrote extensively on the question of the makeover paradigm in the fourth chapter of *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, titled 'The Girls of Zeta: Sororities, Ideal Femininity and the Makeover Paradigm in *The House Bunny*' (in Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, eds., *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 60-77)

<sup>284</sup> R. Gill, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *op. cit.*, 159.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*



Figures 6 and 7: Needy wearing the same outfit and the same expression on her face as she is about to kill Jennifer (on the left) and after she killed Low Shoulder's members (on the right).

Needy's heroism, though portrayed as positive, is not entirely representative of fictional heroes. Indeed, Needy's freedom is acquired and not inherent. Needy is a double victim, a victim of Jennifer's monstrosity, but also a victim of her own attachment to Jennifer. It is this attachment and the unbreakable bond between the two girls that enables Needy to acquire some of Jennifer's power, and subsequently some of her monstrosity, thus becoming more than a victim, more than a hero, more than a monster; she becomes a Killer Girl Hero.

### C. Fighting Back, Refusing the Victim Status and not Subordinating to Objectivity – How Needy Became a Killer Girl Hero

The figure of the Final Girl, as well as the figure of the monster(s), is subverted in *Jennifer's Body* as the main monster is female in the figure of Jennifer (and male through Low Shoulder) and in the sense that Needy voluntarily becomes a killer by the end of the film and does not save herself despite her victim status as it is commonly the case for Final Girls.<sup>287</sup> Hence, Needy, through her status seems to fit Claire Berlyn's definition of the Killer Girl Hero who 'combine[s] violence, cunning, victimisation, and moral fallibility together in a way rarely seen in earlier films.'<sup>288</sup>

In her dissertation, Berlyn establishes nine traits that can often be observed in outsider or tough characters who embody the Killer Girl Hero. These nine traits are: intelligence, opinionatedness, self-sufficiency, sexual confidence, loneliness, deceptiveness, violence, angeriness and proneness to mental illness. They seem to be organised from the most positively connoted trait to the most negatively connoted one. Throughout the film, Needy presents every

<sup>287</sup> Meagan Navarro, 'Hell Is a Teenage Girl: "Jennifer's Body" Deserves a Cult Classic Status', *Bloody Disgusting*, 2018, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3516475/hell-teenage-girl-jennifers-body-cult-classic-making/> (last accessed 28 March 2021)

<sup>288</sup> C. Berlyn, *Teen Angst with a Body Count*, *op. cit.*, 11.

single one of them. She goes from intelligent, opinionated, self-sufficient and sexually confident at the beginning of the film, when her life, although dictated by Jennifer, was rather balanced, to lonely, deceptive, violent and ultimately disturbed as she ends up in a mental institution. It is thanks to these traits and to the shift in her personality that Needy finds her inner Killer Girl Hero dimension.

Another important element of the Killer Girl Hero, which is particularly striking in *Jennifer's Body*, is that the 'monster pursue[s] [her] not to annihilate [her] but to possess [her].'<sup>289</sup> In one of the most controversial scenes of the film—whose controversy has to do with either or not the scene is warranted, and either it serves a feminist purpose or a more traditional male pleasure—Jennifer and Needy are passionately kissing on Needy's bed [0:57:42-0:58:39]. While Needy seems to be asserting her dominion, Jennifer embraces her (*Figure 8*) [0:58:29], hence trying to counterbalance the power struggle. Needy then stops kissing Jennifer and gets off-screen, leaving Jennifer as focal point, and shouts 'What the fuck is happening?' [0:58:39] At this point Needy gives her dominion up, leaving Jennifer in power. This fracture marks the beginning of Needy feeling 'loose around the edge'<sup>290</sup> [0:03:08]. It is the struggle between an imposed and seemingly healthy heteronormativity and a dangerous and manipulated homosexuality that awakes Needy to her vengeful destiny and to her monstrous acts. Hence, when the patriarchy destroys the body and mind of the girl Needy loves in the name of men's gain, she has to become a Killer Girl Hero and to avenge the one(s) she loves.



*Figure 8:* Jennifer embracing Needy with her limbs, refusing to let go of the power she has had over Needy since the beginning of their friendship.

Jennifer has been called a tragic figure in this thesis, but Needy could also be described as such. Needy fits the model of the heroine who thrives to tell the tale precisely because she goes through multiple tragedies. She loses her friend Colin, her boyfriend dies before her eyes, and

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>290</sup> Needy Lesnicki's voice-over in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 4.

her best friend is abducted, symbolically raped, literally stabbed to death and yet comes back from the dead and torments her to her breaking point. It is the slow and steady loss of her high school male classmates, alongside her gain in independence from Jennifer, the patriarchal hegemony and the normative worldview that turn Needy into the film heroine. Nevertheless, Jonas, Colin, Ahmet and Chip are not collateral damage and Low Shoulder are not simply pathetic and amoral opportunists, but they are all part of Cody's spectrum of male victims and their echoes in society.

### III. A Spectrum of Male Victims and the Varying Degrees of Punishment

Cody, through her characters and their fate, goes against the classic horror film codes which states that, '[W]omen make the best victims'<sup>291</sup> as most of the victims, in her script, are boys/men. They are, for the most part innocent, and still make perfectly adequate victims, both for the plot and for the subtext of the film. Constance Grady, in her 2018 article claims that, 'The men in this movie are really beside the point. Some of them are victims other are antagonists, but none of them are as important as Needy and Jennifer—either to each other or to the audience.'<sup>292</sup> It is a fact that Jennifer and Needy are the protagonists, but Kusama and Cody chose the secondary characters, and most importantly those teenage girls' victims, carefully. It is 'all part of the film's program,' for Cody and Kusama, 'to render unto men the violence the slasher [and other horror subgenres] traditionally inflicts on women.'<sup>293</sup>

Gloria Cowan and Margaret O'Brien, in an empirical study conducted in 1990,<sup>294</sup> 'found that [slasher] films portrayed male and female victims equally in frequency.'<sup>295</sup> However, 'women seemed to be brutalized during violent or death scenes more often than do the men characters.'<sup>296</sup> *Jennifer's Body's* feminist director and scriptwriter wanted to change the trend and to render onto men the violence they perform onto women and the violent deaths women often endure in horror films. Hence, Cody resumes to create complex male characters, some

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<sup>291</sup> Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44:4, 1991, 2-13, 5.

<sup>292</sup> C. Grady, *Vox*, *op. cit.*

<sup>293</sup> David Roche, 'Remaking Horror According to the Feminists or How to Have Your Cake and Eat It, Too', *Représentations: La Revue Électronique du CEMRA, Centre d'Études sur les Modes de la Représentation Anglophone*, 2017, 10-16, 15.

<sup>294</sup> Gloria Cowan and Margaret O'Brien, 'Gender and Survival vs. Death in Slasher Films: A Content Analysis', *Sex Roles*, 23:3/4, 1990, 187-196.

<sup>295</sup> C. Brewer, *The Stereotyping Portrayal of Women in Slasher Films*, *op. cit.*, 15, referring to Cowan and O'Brien's findings.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

innocent, some villains, some almost heroic, but all eventually meeting a mortal fate in the hands of empowered young women. Jonas, Ahmet, Colin and Chip are naive adolescents who are simply blinded by what society expects of them, which leads them to their demise. On the other hand, Low Shoulder are aware of their position and willingly affirm their dominion, which also results their fatal fate. We are thus witnessing a comment on the male-based society at large.

### A. Chip: The New Hero and the Tragic Figure of the Genuine Nice Guy

In 2013, Amy Burns spoke at length about the figure of the New Hero. Based on John Beynon's 'new man,'<sup>297</sup> the new hero is both a nurturing and a narcissist. The nurturer nature of Chip is clearly visible in the film as he is always available for Needy and barely complains when she cancels plans with him to spend time with Jennifer. Although his narcissistic personality does not come up until late in the film when Needy refuses to go to the dance with him and makes him promise that he will not go at all (a promise that he breaks), Chip can still be read as narcissistic. Indeed, he still goes to the dance and is seduced by Jennifer apparently as payback for Needy who broke up with him. Chip's narcissistic nature is emphasised even more in the graphic novel, as he confesses to his male friend that although he loves Needy, she drives him crazy by not giving him what he wants. Chip, in Spears's, even has an erotic daydream about Needy and Jennifer both wanting to have sex with him, at the same time.<sup>298</sup>

What is more to the nurturing and narcissistic nature of the new hero, 'the most important facet of the New Hero—one that is compulsory for all—is that he is shown to be in love with the heroine and wholly devoted to her if not at the beginning of the text, certainly at the end.'<sup>299</sup> This dimension is probably the most relevant of Chip's character in his relationship with Needy. Both, in the film and in the graphic novel, the confrontation scene between Needy and Jennifer, by the pool, emphasises Chip's devotion to Needy. In the film, while he is seemingly dying in the water and later as he lies on the floor, Chip regains his strength to try to save Needy from Jennifer's monstrosity by stabbing Jennifer with a pool skimmer (*Figure 1*) [1:27:03],

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<sup>297</sup> John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture*, Buckingham, Open UP, 2002.

<sup>298</sup> R. Spears, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, n.p.

<sup>299</sup> Amy Burns, 'The Chick's "New Hero": (Re)Constructing Masculinity in the Postfeminist "Chick Flick"', in Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, eds., *Postfeminism and Cotemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 131-148, 140.

hence trying to ‘rescue the chick heroine of the film,’<sup>300</sup> as the New Hero is supposed to. This moment is almost a triumph for Chip<sup>301</sup> who, unlike the other male victims, has managed to do enough harm to Jennifer to keep her from killing again. Nevertheless, Chip dies and Jennifer does not, thus highlighting his victim status and Jennifer’s power over her male victims.



Figure 1: Jennifer getting stabbed by Chip as she was about to attack Needy.

The subversion of the New Hero figure, as Chip ends up being a tragic victim of his own naivety, reflects upon the slasher genre. Indeed, as Clover states ‘if the traditional horror plot gave the male spectator a last-minute hero with whom to identify [...] the slasher eliminator attenuated that role beyond any such function; would be rescuers are not unfrequently blown away for their trouble, leaving the girl to fight her own fight.’<sup>302</sup> *Jennifer’s Body* makes no exception, Chip, who was deeply in love with Needy cannot help but let her fight Devil’s Kettle’s monster(s) on her own. The A-Team made of the New Hero and the *New Heroine* did not make the cut as in *Jennifer’s Body* no man, who at one point or another objectifies the female body, can live to tell the tale.

## B. Jonas, Ahmet and Colin: The Innocent Victims, Guilty of Living in a Woman-Objectifying Society

In many horror films, males are most of the time disposed of quickly and painlessly,<sup>303</sup> which is not the case in *Jennifer’s Body* as boys scream, cry, whine and beg, just the way Jennifer did when she was sacrificed by Low Shoulder. Clover argues that boys in horror films ‘die, in short, not because they are boys, but because they make mistakes.’<sup>304</sup> When it comes

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>301</sup> Edward Raube-Wilson in Orlando Segarra and Edward Raube-Wilson, ‘S1E30 - Jennifer’s Body’, *Gratuitous Sex and Violence*, season 1, episode 30, 2020.

<sup>302</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, *op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>303</sup> Mélanie Boissonneau in Mélanie Boissonneau, Erwan Chaffiot and Christophe Lemaire, ‘Scream Queens’, *Le Bistro de L’Horreur*, episode 95, FilmoTV, 2020.

<sup>304</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, *op. cit.*, 34.

to Jennifer's victims, there appears to be a paradox. Jonas, Ahmet and Colin make the mistake of objectifying Jennifer (*Figure 2* provides an example of Jonas openly objectifying Jennifer in the graphic novel).<sup>305</sup> But it also seems that Jennifer kills them precisely because they were boys as a cut scene from the film hints: 'You're killing people' explains Needy, 'No, I'm killing boys'<sup>306</sup> retorts Jennifer. Hence, Cody seems to have written a precise scheme in terms of victimhood.



*Figure 2:* Jonas objectifying Jennifer by calling her a 'thing.'

The bond between Jennifer and Needy and the fact that Jennifer chases Needy around and intrudes her house on several occasions, while she solely lures and kills boys appear to play a role in Jennifer's rampage. '[Boys] are literally side pieces or pawns in Jennifer's overall and surprisingly human plan of not hurting Needy.'<sup>307</sup> This interpretation of Jennifer's motive to kill once again alludes to the subtext of the film. As Grady stated, boys are beside the point, they are as important to Jennifer as she was to Low Shoulder. That is why she must see her victims hopeless and frightened, so she would not see Needy in this condition and she would get her revenge on society for what it makes girls go through. The importance of man in the film is simultaneously reduced and stressed. Males are pawns to Jennifer, but they are also at the origins of her suffering, and in order for her to try (and fail) to free herself from the hold of society, she tries to objectify males the same way they objectify her.

<sup>305</sup> The captions enable the readers to see what the characters' thoughts are, which is not possible in the film as the only voice-over is Needy's and she is not omniscient to the action.

<sup>306</sup> These quotes do not have a timing because they come from a deleted scene which has been added to the DVD extras (K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*).

<sup>307</sup> Fallon Gannon, 'Hell Is a Teenage Girl[ Why Jennifer's Body Is Severely Underrated!]', *Wicked Horror*, 2019, <https://wickedhorror.com/features/retrospectives/hell-is-a-teenage-girl-why-jennifers-body-is-severely-underrated/> (last accessed 20 March 2021)

In 2020, Françaix states in an interview, ‘[F]ilms which develop a feminist discourse often give the paradoxical image of males as not threatening anymore but as insignificant, dumb or absent.’<sup>308</sup> Teenage males in *Jennifer’s Body* are particularly insignificant and have sometimes been qualified as ‘dumbed by lust’<sup>309</sup> for their choices of following Jennifer in the forest or agreeing to meet her in an under-construction house in an abandoned neighbourhood, or even to follow her to an abandoned and filthy swimming pool that looks nothing like a dating area. What is more to that is that those boys are not ‘deserving of punishment. They’re just clueless.’<sup>310</sup> All these elements together, put men in both a powerless position and in a position of weakness and inferiority, which is a position that the male spectator does not want to be put into. Thus, Cody and Kusama offer two choices to the male spectator—which are not exclusive—he can choose to identify with the Final Girl, an unapologetic feminine figure, and/or recognize that the male characters did not deserve to die, the same way Jennifer did not deserve to be sacrificed for men’s gain.

In sum, in *Jennifer’s Body*, ‘[n]one of the men [...] have enough presence for the audience members to project themselves onto.’<sup>311</sup> Indeed, as Creed stated, by putting males on screen in a powerless situation, the male spectators who identify with these males, are put in the same position, which they would not accept. In this way, Kusama and Cody subvert the classic horror film by giving credit to women. Men are weak and bound to die, in contrast, women are strong, powerful and dangerous characters. *Jennifer’s Body*’s filmmakers thus prove that women in horror films can be multi-dimensional and can stand and fend for themselves, fight back and even, if push to their very limits, become the monster. The empowerment of women becomes even more prominent when they turn back to the original villain with their very own weapon as it is the case for Needy and Low Shoulder.

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<sup>308</sup> Pascal Françaix to Jean-Sébastien Massart, ‘Teen Horror – Rencontre avec Pascal Françaix’, *Critikat*, 2020, <https://www.critikat.com/panorama/entretien/teen-horror-rencontre-avec-pascal-francaix/> (last accessed 30 March 2021), my translation.

<sup>309</sup> Nick Antosca, ‘Jennifer’s Body’, *Film Threat*, 2009, <https://filmthreat.com/uncategorized/jennifers-body/> (last accessed 2 April 2021)

<sup>310</sup> Karyn Kusama to D. Cody, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>311</sup> C. Grady, *Vox*, *op. cit.*

### C. The Psychopaths Vanquished: Low Shoulder, the Pathetic Villains Who End Up as Victims

By the end of *Jennifer's Body*, one can wonder if Low Shoulder will get away with murder and abuse of naivety the same way Bridget Gregory (Linda Fiorentino) does in the *noir* film *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994). In fact, they did, in the first test screenings. However, because moviegoers demanded closure concerning the band,<sup>312</sup> Kusama added this conclusion to the film in the form of photographs enacting what happened to Low Shoulder after Needy escaped from the mental institution—the same way Todd Philips used photographs in the end credits of *The Hangover* (2009) to reveal what had happened during the ‘pack’s’ blackout.

During the last scene of the film [1:35:58-1:37:01], before the big reveal with the end credits, Needy is hitchhiking to ‘follow[...] this rock band.’<sup>313</sup> ‘The act of hitchhiking is a trope of storytelling that not only marks the beginning of an adventure, but also epitomizes fearlessness and reckless abandon.’<sup>314</sup> Needy is thus determined to achieve vengeance, and she does, as the end credits and the photographs of Low Shoulder’s members suggest [1:37:02-1:38:59]. These photographs create a new way of presenting deaths, whereby the deaths themselves are not emphasised. Indeed, the emphasis seems to be on the methods of investigation and the pursuit of the perpetrator(s) (*Figures 4 and 5*). This emphasis on the perpetrator(s) raises the idea that Needy, through her makeover and through Jennifer’s bite, has become a ‘psychotic monster’ who kills because she was ‘symbolically castrated, that is, she feels that she has been robbed unjustly of her rightful destiny.’<sup>315</sup> The destiny refers here to her high school years with her boyfriend Chip on the one hand and with her best friend/love interest Jennifer on the other. Thus, Needy—as her name suggests—needed to take revenge on those who had deprived her of it, namely Low Shoulder. By becoming an avenger and by targeting Nikolai and his band, Needy turns them into preys—the same way they had made Jennifer a prey—and soon enough into victims of brutal murders.

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<sup>312</sup> Karyn Kusama in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>313</sup> Needy Lesnicki in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 113.

<sup>314</sup> J. Casali, *Terror of Girlhood*, *op. cit.*, 52.

In Cody’s script and a deleted scene called ‘Cash, Gas or Grass,’ (K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*) Needy’s reckless abandon is even more emphasised as she chooses to pay ‘the old man’ who accepts to give her a ride in ‘ass’ when the latter states ‘I’m gonna ask you to pay me in cash, gas or grass’ (D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.* 113).

<sup>315</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, *op. cit.*, 122 for this quotation and the previous one.



Figures 4 and 5: The forensic investigators focusing their research on the perpetrator of the murders, relegating Low Shoulder to the background.

Due to the tone of the film, the unfair sacrifice of Jennifer and the equally unfair deaths of teenage boys, *Jennifer's Body's* spectators wanted Nikolai and his 'accomplices' to suffer. Kusama delivers closure to the viewers as Needy, through the violence presented in the end-credits photographs, renders onto Low Shoulder the suffering they inflicted on Jennifer. Indeed, while most of the violence was inflicted on teenage boys by Jennifer, this violence was initiated by the butchery orchestrated by Low Shoulder and perpetrated on Jennifer. The completion of this series of massacres is incumbent upon Needy, who becomes a sort of *Femina Furiosa*,<sup>316</sup> a free spirit who goes wherever she wants and does whatever she wants, a strong woman in sum<sup>317</sup>—the figure of the *Femina Furiosa* is remarkably personified in Charlize Theron's *Imperator Furiosa* in George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

Hilary Neroni highlights the idea that a woman who takes upon her to become violent is threatening because as she does so, the woman 'breaks up this symbolic relationship between violence and masculinity.'<sup>318</sup> Although Jennifer kills men and is a violent woman, she cannot be compared to the *Femina Furiosa* or the violent woman in the same way Needy can. Needy kills and becomes violent to, first, take revenge, but she also does so to protect other women and girls from Low Shoulder's evilness while Jennifer does it for personal purposes and because she 'had' to in order to 'survive.'<sup>319</sup> Needy is a *Femina Furiosa*, a strong girl, a 'female

<sup>316</sup> *Femina Furiosa* is a term used to describe a female gladiator of the Ancient Roman era.

<sup>317</sup> Fausto Fasulo used these terms of 'electron libre' and 'femme vraiment forte' when he talked about the representation of the *Femina Furiosa* in *Natasha* (Jag Mundhra, 2007) in *Le Bistro de L'Horreur* (François Cognard, Fausto Fasulo and Christophe Lemaire, 'Femina Furiosa', *Le Bistro de l'Horreur*, episode 52, FilmoTV, 2016.)

<sup>318</sup> Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*, Albany, State University of New York, 2005, 45.

<sup>319</sup> The inverted commas here illustrate that the meaning of these words must not be taken literally as Jennifer's survival as a succubus was solely based on physical appearances and the archetypal idea of woman's ideal body based on patriarchal values.

avenger,' a 'triumphant feminist hero'<sup>320</sup> and a 'woman who can take back the knife,'<sup>321</sup> but she only uses it to bring things full circle with the murders. Thus, Nikolai 'had his fella returned to him,'<sup>322</sup> (as can be seen in *Figure 5* [1:38:56]) and Jennifer and the boys she killed are avenged.

When Low Shoulder 'get everything:' fame, fortune, and glory—as suggested by the song 'Violet' interpreted by the Hole in the background—they actually collect all the wrong cards. Indeed, as they express wrath, pride, envy, and an underlying lust when they sacrifice Jennifer, they complete these sins with greed, gluttony, and sloth in this final scene, thus representing all seven deadly sins. Needy, as an avenger 'takes everything' when she killed them, therefore bringing their dominion to an end and punishing them for their shallowness, their selfishness, and the deadly sins they dare to publicly display. As the last seconds of the film focus on Needy's face [1:39:05-1:39:11], Low Shoulder's deaths are once again made insignificant. The camera zooms in onto Needy and the freeze frame focuses on her face for six long seconds as statics crackle in the background. The focus is not on the monster's defeat, but on the Final Girl's ultimate emancipation. The determination in Needy's eyes shows that she is not finished, she will continue to challenge the patriarchy and she will not let herself be victimised again.

Kusama and Cody, through the characters, their personality, their multi-dimensions, and multi-purposes, subvert horror film codes and tropes concerning characters as to shake norms, rewrite them and renew them to inscribe them in a new era. This new era being more feminist and empowering for women as it condemns acts, values and thoughts which could be read as misogynistic. The subtext which is linked both to the film genre and to its characters is what enables *Jennifer's Body* to be seen as a feminist film, as a film that inscribes itself in the 'woman's film' and 'women's cinema' categories. Indeed, what *Jennifer's Body* does is that it 'insure[s] that what woman is sold is a certain image of femininity.'<sup>323</sup> The image of femininity here is one that is asserted, unapologetic, empowering and 'subjectified.' However, *Jennifer's Body's* labelling as a (post)feminist film has been largely commented, criticised and even mocked after its release in 2009. Tim Grierson, for example, states in his critique for *Screen*

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<sup>320</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, *op. cit.*, x.

<sup>321</sup> Michelle Orange, 'Taking Back the Knife: Girls Gone Gory', *New York Times*, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/movies/06oran.html> (last accessed 4 April 2021)

<sup>322</sup> K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>323</sup> M. A. Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, *op. cit.*, 30.

*Daily*, '[D]irector Karyn Kusama and star Megan Fox seem uncertain if they're satirising the conventions of teen gore-fests or simply catering to their core audience expectations.'<sup>324</sup>

Since 2018, the discourse has changed, and critics, for the most part, consider the film to be accurately depicting the reality of a sexist and still gender-dichotomizing society.<sup>325</sup> It took society ten years, controversial issues regarding gender relations, and a global media coverage of these issues to fully grasp the subtext of *Jennifer's Body*. One explanation could be that the subtext of the film is complex, both to understand and to interpret. Because it requires knowledge in the horror genre, but also and most substantially in feminist theory. Different genres involve different hypertexts and different understandings of codes and tropes.

The horror genre relies heavily on genealogic hypertextuality because original models (e.g., *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960], *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, *Night of the Living Dead* [George A. Romero, 1968]) shape both their sequels, prequels, remakes, reboots,<sup>326</sup> but also their legacy-films labelled under the same genre/subgenre. Because '[t]he woman's film undoubtedly does not constitute a genre in the technical sense of the term'<sup>327</sup> but 'is frequently combined with other genres—the film noir and the gothic or the *horror film*,'<sup>328</sup> and because it 'attempts to engage female *subjectivity*,'<sup>329</sup> *Jennifer's Body* requires more than genealogic hypertextuality to understand its ins and outs. Indeed, analogic hypertextuality both in the cinematic field and in the academic field are required in order to fully grasp the way *Jennifer's Body*, through its establishment of violent women in the horror genre, falls within an approach of (post)feminism. The film provides an intricate and seemingly paradoxical look on young women's experience in a heteronormative, male-made and male-governed society which shapes women and provides them with a model from which they apparently cannot escape, until they become monstrous.

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<sup>324</sup> Tim Grierson, 'Jennifer's Body', *Screen Daily*, 2009, <https://www.screendaily.com/jennifers-body/5005498.article> (last accessed 4 April 2021)

<sup>325</sup> See for example Blichert (2018).

<sup>326</sup> See Roche (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017) for example.

<sup>327</sup> M. A. Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, *op. cit.*, 34.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

## Chapter 3: The Two-Fold Feminist Subtext and Its Dissonant Interpretations – An Intricate Look at Female Experience in a Patriarchal Society

*Jennifer's Body's* renaissance came about for two reasons, the first being that '[a]ny group of films may at any time be generically redefined by contemporary critics.'<sup>330</sup> Hence, while Kusama's film had been called 'a campy pastiche of horror and high-school movie clichés,'<sup>331</sup> to which it seems to correspond, it has recently been called a 'dark comedy with allegorical qualities about the possessiveness, jealousy, and insecurities that arise during adolescence.'<sup>332</sup> While searching for deeper meanings behind the film, critics such as Matt Cipolla, who writes for *Film Monthly*—a film-centred website—, addressed the second reason that allowed the 'resurrection' of *Jennifer's Body*. Because people who see films 'as potentially contributing positively to society [...], propose a holistic view of the film-going experience and believe that the entire narrative story might teach moral lessons about individual responsibility and agency.'<sup>333</sup>

Nonetheless, some online critics,<sup>334</sup> for the most part specialised in media and cinema, such as Peitzman, finds it hard to understand why *Jennifer's Body* would be better suited for the current era, while the topics and controversial subjects addressed by Kusama and Cody had, according to him, echoes back in 2009, when the text and subtext of the film was strongly rejected.<sup>335</sup> 'Horror very often reflects the sociopolitical anxieties of its age; fears do not exist in a void and the way we represent them in fiction is a strong reflexion of ourselves as a society.'<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> R. Altman, *Film/Genre, op. cit.*, 81.

<sup>331</sup> Kirk Honeycutt, "'Jennifer's Body' Will Disappoint Diablo Cody's Fans', *Reuters*, 2009, <https://mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUKTRE58A08J20090911?edition-redirect=in> (last accessed 14 March 2021)

<sup>332</sup> Matt Cipolla, 'The Heart and Soul of Jennifer's Body', *Film Monthly*, 2018, <http://www.filmmonthly.com/film/video-and-dvd/the-heart-and-soul-of-jennifers-body> (last accessed 14 March 2021)

<sup>333</sup> Janet Staiger, 'Social Scientific Theories', in Janet Staiger, ed., *Media Reception Studies*, New York and London, New York UP, 2005, 17-60, 21.

<sup>334</sup> As most of the reviews used in this thesis were retrieved from *Rotten Tomatoes* the majority of them are from online newspapers and magazines. However, some of the reviews come from online podcasts and YouTube video.

<sup>335</sup> L. Peitzman, *Buzzfeed News, op. cit.*

<sup>336</sup> Cecilia Abate, 'Sexual Violence in American Horror Story: "Murder House" through "Coven"', *Grim*, 4, 2019, 43-44, 44, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/grim-no-4-our-bodies-our-hells-digital-2.pdf> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

Hence, it is surprising that the comments made by *Jennifer's Body's* filmmakers did not find their public back in 2009 as demonstrated by the following reviews.

Back in 2009, the consensus concerning *Jennifer's Body's* themes of abuse, gender-division and (same and different) gender-hatred seems to be at the same time acknowledged but misread and unimportant to society. In 2009, Matt Goldberg, who writes for *Collider*—a movie news website—, raised all the issues at stake in Cody and Kusama's film—the physical and mental aftermath of a rape, the threat that female sexual empowerment may represent, the fragility of women's friendship, the commentary on gender-roles. He then judged that the film actually addresses none of them.<sup>337</sup> James Berardinelli, still in 2009, made a similar comment on *Reel Views*—a website specialised in movie reviews—, but instead of considering the film as non-subversive, he called it 'neither original, nor interesting.'<sup>338</sup> Thus, in 2009, these critics did not review the film as being subversive or critically reflecting on society or the horror genre on specialised websites, but rather, they reviewed it as trying to, and miserably failing at it.

However, there were a few exceptions, and some critics did make a parallel between the issues dealt with in the 1970s and their reflection upon society, and the fact that *Jennifer's Body* is a pastiche of those films, both in term of codes and tropes and in terms of the issues it addresses. Rene Rodriguez for example, stated in 2009, in a daily newspaper called *Miami Herald*, 'Not since Brian De Palma's *Carrie* has a horror movie so effectively exploited the genre as a metaphor for adolescent angst, female sexuality and the strange, sometimes corrosive bonds between girls who claim to be best friends.'<sup>339</sup> Carrie Rickey even went as far as to call *Jennifer's Body* a minor classic, back in the late 2000s, in the national newspaper *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and understood *Jennifer's Body* 'as a comic allegory of what it's like to be an adolescent girl who comes into sexual and social power that she doesn't know what the heck to do with.'<sup>340</sup> Because, what really matters in society 'what changes things is power. Who has it and how you use it.'<sup>341</sup> While both Needy and *Jennifer's Body* needed some time to realise the power they had, they did change things both on-screen and off-screen.

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<sup>337</sup> Matt Goldberg, 'JENNIFER'S BODY Review', *Collider*, 2009, <https://collider.com/jennifers-body-review/> (last accessed 19 March 2021)

<sup>338</sup> J. Berardinelli, *Reel Views*, *op. cit.*

<sup>339</sup> Rene Rodriguez, 'Jennifer's Body (R)', *Miami Herald*, 2009, <https://www.miamiherald.com/miami-things-to-do/article225806870.html> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>340</sup> Carrie Rickey, 'Horror-Comedy with Feminist Bite', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2009, [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/movies/20090918\\_Horror-comedy\\_with\\_feminist\\_bite.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/movies/20090918_Horror-comedy_with_feminist_bite.html) (last accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>341</sup> Alicia 'Plum' Kettle (Joy Nash) in Helen Shaver, 'Rad Fatties', *Dietland*, season 1, episode 8, AMC, 2018.

Since 2018 (and even for some reviews a year or two before), the consensus has drastically changed and the subtexts of *Jennifer's Body* seem, not only to be acknowledged, but to be celebrated and praised in the genre, in cinema and in society, while they have not changed since the film's first release. In 2018, Sarah Fonseca summed up the messages that *Jennifer's Body* intends to convey as she wrote on *them.*—a LGBTQ+<sup>342</sup> community platform,

Women should always aim to support one another; patriarchy makes friendships between women terribly difficult, and sex with men a bore; survivors are omnipotent; the reckless abandon of teen girls does not justify assault; no one asked to be made into a monster, but no one should be surprised when the monster of their creation invites herself over for dinner.<sup>343</sup>

The themes listed on *them.* are not different from those on *Collider*, however, *them.* seems to have shed a new light on these themes as it acknowledges both their relevance and their legitimacy. Em Canon, in her 2019 academic paper presented at New York City Tish School of the Arts, aimed at explaining these new views of the film. She states, 'In the MeToo era, female audiences began to rediscover *Jennifer's Body* as a cathartic film, one in which the female victim of abuse is turned into a revenge machine, seeking justice on those who represent the patriarchy.'<sup>344</sup> Therefore, it seems important to acknowledge the role that the social and political environment plays in the understanding of the core issues of the film and the way it wants to convey them. In other words, as Jack Wilhelmi, claims on *Morbidly beautiful*—a website that focus on the horror genre—, 'Though panned upon its release a decade ago, "Jennifer's Body" can now be appreciated as the smart and subversive feminist horror it really is.'<sup>345</sup>

It appears that *Jennifer's Body*, along with Jennifer Check, fell victim to a curse. Indeed, it seems that critics and moviegoers in 2009 were not eager to hear or to understand the statements the film wanted to make. However, films and in particular horror films have always reflected upon societal issues. In this light, it can be understood that Kusama and Cody, and even Fox, considered women's experience of a patriarchal society as part of the sociopolitical anxieties of the 2000s, although many critics did not.

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<sup>342</sup> The term LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. The '+' stands for the other terms within the Queer Community (e.g., Pansexual, Transsexual, Asexual, Gender Queer, etc.)

<sup>343</sup> Sarah Fonseca, 'Too Little, Too Late: The Queer Cult Status of *Jennifer's Body* Is Bittersweet', *them.*, 2018, <https://www.them.us/story/jennifers-body-film-cult-status> (last accessed 19 March 2021)

<sup>344</sup> Em Canon, 'She's a Maneater', *How Jennifer's Body Went from Box Office Flunk to Cult Classic*, Paper presented at the New York City Tish School of the Arts, 2019, 4.

<sup>345</sup> Jack Wilhelmi, 'In Defense of: Jennifer's Body (2009)', *Morbidly Beautiful*, 2019, <https://morbidlybeautiful.com/in-defense-of-jennifers-body/> (last accessed 8 March 2021)

In the last decades, more and more horror films which deal with the issue of adolescence and present teenage girls as monstrous came out<sup>346</sup>—*Teeth*, *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*, *Excision* (Richard Bates Jr., 2012), *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005), *Deadgirl* (Marcel Sarmiento, 2008) to name but a few. This representation of powerful, strong and assertive girl on screen and in the horror genre was made possible thanks to the fact that ‘chick culture has become a dominant force because women are now recognized as an autonomous group within contemporary culture—due in large part to the success of second-wave feminism—and so can be addressed as consumers and subjects in their own right.’<sup>347</sup> Even Clover, in her seminal book *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, explains that women became a topic largely dealt with in horror ‘because for at least two decades [the 1970s and 1980s], the readiest supplier of the scenarios and rhetoric of self-righteous victimization in which horror trades has been [...] the women’s movement.’<sup>348</sup>

In this chapter I am thus going to focus first on the feminist dimension of the film and the way it was dealt with through the figure of the teenage girl and the metaphor of adolescence as purgatory. I will then discuss the misogyny and the patriarchal hegemony condemned by Kusama and Cody by the way of a seemingly ‘scandalous’ scene, extravagant personalities and a twisted vision of sex. Finally, I will deal with the wrongly called misandrist aspect of the film and its link to the rape culture in America, the way the female victim is sometimes blamed and demonized and the idea of ‘principled revenge.’ Each of the subchapter will aim at explaining how the issues raised by the film echo differently in the pre-#MeToo era and in the post-#MeToo era.

## I. A Feminist narrative? Adolescent Girls as the Embodied Medium for Women’s Empowerment

As explained in the [first chapter](#), which analysed *Jennifer’s Body* inscription in the horror genre through key elements targeted in specific subgenres, Kusama and Cody chose to set their satire on society in a high school narrative. This choice is not trivial, but rather gives credibility to a fantasy scenario. Christy Lemire, in 2009, wrote a negative review of *Jennifer’s Body* for *Opelika Auburn News*—a local daily newspaper—, however, she admitted that ‘when [Cody’s] characters talk about regular stuff like *toxic female friendships*, *awkward adolescent*

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<sup>346</sup> L. Ivins, *IU Cinema*, *op. cit.*

<sup>347</sup> A. Burns, *Postfeminism and Cotemporary Hollywood Cinema*, *op. cit.*, 131.

<sup>348</sup> C. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, *op. cit.*, 231.

*sex and high-school dances*, it's funny and resonant.<sup>349</sup> Hence, although Lemire did not like *Jennifer's Body*, she acknowledged the relevance of the theme of high school friendships, and the reliability and validity that it gives to the themes that are addressed by its feminist filmmakers.

When asked about the meaning of the film, scriptwriter Cody states, 'We are trying to say stuff about body image and sexuality, about female friendships, about relationships.'<sup>350</sup> Hence, the film is very much about gender, the power struggle between them and even within them. Some critics recall—even back in 2009—that 'Jennifer's Body has more to say about the dynamics of teenage female friendships, sexual power games and the trials of adolescence than many a more self-consciously worthy film.'<sup>351</sup> Consequently, just like *Heathers* and *Carrie* did some years prior, *Jennifer's Body*, in its use of high school troubles 'flirts on being a piece of social commentary on the phenomenon of female bullying,<sup>352</sup> on the hypersexualisation of female adolescents and on the behaviours based on gender which come out of this hypersexualisation.<sup>353</sup> The way these social and political issues are dealt with in *Jennifer's Body* is directly linked to postfeminism which 'has been read as offering liberating possibilities to women as a discourse indicative of a post-traditional era characterized by dramatic changes in social relationships and conception of agency.'<sup>354</sup>

#### A. High School Girls and Adolescence as Purgatories, from Childhood to Adulthood

In an interview she gave in 2009, Kusama critiqued the weight society puts on women's shoulders and particularly on teenager girls' shoulders as she claimed that 'our society is creating this framework for girls to adhere to an unattainable physical ideal and its damaging

<sup>349</sup> Christy Lemire, "'Jennifer's Body' Is a Little Too Full of Wit", *Opelika Auburn News*, 2009, [https://oanow.com/archives/jennifers-body-is-a-little-too-full-of-wit/article\\_e7d34ed2-bdcf-58fc-b86a-0192ab18df6d.html](https://oanow.com/archives/jennifers-body-is-a-little-too-full-of-wit/article_e7d34ed2-bdcf-58fc-b86a-0192ab18df6d.html) (last accessed 21 April 2021), my emphasis.

<sup>350</sup> Diablo Cody to Nicole Powers, 'Diablo Cody: Jennifer's Body', *Suicide Girls*, 2009, [https://www.suicidegirls.com/members/nicole\\_powers/blog/2680164/diablo-cody-jennifers-body/](https://www.suicidegirls.com/members/nicole_powers/blog/2680164/diablo-cody-jennifers-body/) (last accessed 9 April 2021)

<sup>351</sup> Catherine Bray, 'Jennifer's Body', *Film4*, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091117202138/http://www.channel4.com/film/reviews/film.jsp?id=174705&section=review> (last accessed 19 March 2021)

<sup>352</sup> Josh Larsen, 'Jennifer's Body', *LarsenonFilm*, 2009, <https://www.larsenonfilm.com/jennifers-body> (last accessed 9 April 2021)

<sup>353</sup> P. Françaix, *Teen Horror*, *op. cit.*, 145.

<sup>354</sup> J. Gwynne and N. Muller, *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, *op. cit.*, 2.

on so many levels for so many people.<sup>355</sup> This obsession with the female body<sup>356</sup> and the way ‘women are subject to a level of scrutiny, and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent’<sup>357</sup> is at the centre of Gill’s postfeminist sensibility. Many teen flicks address these issues of blaming girls for not adhering to society’s physical ideal such as *The Duff* (Ari Sandel, 2015) or *Sierra Burgess Is a Loser* (Ian Samuels, 2018). However, Cody and Kusama add a key element to the plot as they transform social bullying and peer pressure into physical monstrosity and monstrous acts. ‘The monstrosity [in *Jennifer’s Body*] critiques the social pressure that adolescent girls face to adhere to an unattainable physical “ideal”, image, or reputation,<sup>358</sup> but the same monstrosity also represents a way out for those teenage girls, a way to finally free themselves from their invisible but all too present ties that bind them to society’s gaze and judgment. Hence, for Cody, *Jennifer’s Body* ‘[i]s about how teenage girls are objectified, it [i]s about [...] the female sexual appetites, it [i]s a classic trope about puberty, which [she] know[s] we’ve seen in movies before, and the idea of puberty being a transformative thing using a sort of monstrous transformation as a way of talking about that.’<sup>359</sup>

Jennifer’s monstrosity, the curse she is a victim of, appears thus to be tightly linked with the fact that Jennifer is a teenage girl, leaving her childhood behind her and entering adulthood and the consequences that it represents for the human body. However, Jennifer does not perceive her monstrosity as a curse as a deleted scene—although partly visible in the film trailer—hints. In this scene, called ‘Needy confronts Jennifer’ in the DVD extras,<sup>360</sup> Needy comes to meet Jennifer in a locker room with the will to convince her that ‘maybe there is a way to reverse the curse’ and ‘to save [Jennifer].’<sup>361</sup> Jennifer’s answer is surprising, to say the least, and ultimately revealing of her shallowness as she claims that being on your period is a curse, the same way having oddly shaped breasts is a curse, hence reflecting on the monitoring of women’s bodies. What is even more striking is that Jennifer then continues by saying that what she is doing—eating boys to stay beautiful—is *not* a curse in comparison. The fact that Jennifer states those words as she is more beautiful than ever with a halo of light illuminating her (*Figure 1*), emphasises the idea that part of Jennifer’s monstrosity was present before her

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<sup>355</sup> Karyn Kusama to R. Turek, *Coming Soon*, *op. cit.*

<sup>356</sup> R. Gill, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *op. cit.*, 149.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>358</sup> C. Egan, “*Hell is a Teenage Girl*”, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>359</sup> Diablo Cody to Eli Roth, ‘4. Diablo Cody’, *Eli Roth’s History of Horror: Uncut*, episode 4, 2019, <https://podtail.com/fr/podcast/eli-roth-s-history-of-horror-uncut/4-diablo-cody/> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>360</sup> This scene was added to the film as there is no mention of it in Cody’s original script.

As stated in the editorial note, this scene is not timed as it was not part of the theatrical version nor was it part of the extended version.

<sup>361</sup> Needy Lesnicki in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*

transformation and that it is closely linked to Jennifer's idea of society's ideal of teenage girls' bodies.



*Figure 1: Jennifer looking almost angelic with a halo of light forming around her.*

The hypothesis that monstrosity, appearance and expectation are closely linked in Jennifer's interpretation of her curse seems to be proved in the final verbal confrontation between Jennifer and Needy by the abandoned pool [1:25:50-1:27:52]. This confrontation culminates in a quarrel between Needy and Jennifer. This argument is fuelled by girl-on-girl hatred and is made tense by the successive medium close-ups of Jennifer and reverse shots of Needy [1:26:15, 1:26:17, 1:26:20, 1:26:23, 1:26:26, etc.]. The argument starts with Needy calling Jennifer a 'jerk', which, according to *Urban Dictionary*, is '[a]n idiot or stupid person. An insensitive, selfish, ignorant, cocky person who is inconsiderate and does stupid things.'<sup>362</sup> The characterisation of Jennifer as selfish—she is constantly looking at her reflection [0:06:53, 0:37:21, 1:15:56]—, ignorant—when she states that Jesus invented the calendar [0:37:27]—and insensitive—when she mocks and belittles her peers [0:10:09, 0:43:59, 0:58:50]—has been perceptible since the very beginning, but Needy gives it a new meaning as she explains to Jennifer and to the spectators—as she speaks facing the camera—that Jennifer is not purposefully a jerk, but she became one because she wants to fit the standards of what society expects from her. Egan encapsulated this idea in her thesis when she says, '[T]he systemic sexism of heteronormative patriarchy is the monster and the character type of the "mean girl" symbolizes and satirizes this social mechanism.'<sup>363</sup> However, the establishment of Jennifer's meanness by Needy goes back to childhood, as Needy states that Jennifer has never been a good friend [1:26:05], and thus is prior to Jennifer's transformation into a succubus.

<sup>362</sup> 'Jerk', *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=jerk> (last accessed 7 December 2020)

<sup>363</sup> C. Egan, *Hell is a Teenage Girl*, *op. cit.*, 42.

Jennifer's insecurity is the focus of this dialogue. Needy, in a medium close-up, states: 'Why do you need him? You could have anybody that you want, Jennifer. So... Why Chip? Is it just to tick me off? Or is it because you're just *really insecure*?'<sup>364</sup> [1:26:17-1:26:30] To which Jennifer answers 'I am not insecure, Needy. God, that's a joke. How could *I* ever be insecure? I was the Snowflake Queen'<sup>365</sup> [1:26:32-1:26:39]. This very sentence is the essence of the problem raised by Needy as Jennifer's validity and confidence lie in the award she won based on her physical appearance and thus on the validity she gets from a patriarchal view of women's beauty and relevance turned into a competition. This argument is particularly striking and heavily contrasting with the appearance of Jennifer in this scene: weary, soiled, bloodied (*Figure 2*) [1:26:26] and all because of her own actions linked to the desperate need to maintain her status.



*Figure 2:* Jennifer's figure soiled and spoiled by her own (and her victim's) body fluids: blood and vomit.

Jennifer's social relevance then is directly addressed by both Needy and Jennifer as Needy stated that Jennifer used to be 'socially relevant', to which Jennifer answers, in a scream: 'I AM STILL SOCIALLY RELEVANT'<sup>366</sup> [1:26:43]. Jennifer's monstrosity is what makes her both relevant and insecure, as she 'seduces and kills boys from her school in order to literally feed on the expectations and maintain her own representation of the ideal,'<sup>367</sup> which is biased by society's framework of self-worth lying in physical appearance.<sup>368</sup> The scene even visually comments on Jennifer's social relevance as the intercutting between Jennifer and Needy shows a contrast in their soiled bodies. Jennifer's mouth is dripping with blood, and her dress is stained with black gunk, nonetheless her make up is not smudged and her hair is perfectly combed [1:26:26]. Needy, on the other hand, looks physically wrecked, her hair is totally tangled, and her face is covered with sludge [1:26:05]. Thus, even at her worst Jennifer makes it a point of

<sup>364</sup> Needy Lesnicki in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, my emphasis.

<sup>365</sup> Jennifer Check in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, my emphasis.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> R. Schmitz, *The Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts*, *op. cit.*, 37.

<sup>368</sup> Karyn Kusama to R. Tarek, *ComingSoon*, *op. cit.*

honour to stay socially relevant exclusively through her physique. In this light, Needy is not actually being critical of Jennifer's social relevance, but of her social relevance according to a patriarchal society. According to Lyn Mikel Brown:

Girls can be excruciatingly tough on other girls. They can talk behind each other's backs, tease and torture one another, police each other's clothing and body size... and can promote a strict conformity to the norms and rules of idealized femininity, threaten rejection and exclusion, and reinforce gender and racial stereotypes.<sup>369</sup>

It is not the case in this instance. Needy is not being tough on Jennifer, but she is showing her that Jennifer's own severity towards her worthiness is based on that girl-on-girl excruciating toughness, which is itself due to patriarchal norms. Indeed, a striking example of this self-inflicted toughness which had been created by the pervasive diet-culture of the patriarchal society is verbalised by Needy. The latter states that Jennifer, a thin teenager whose body enters a transitional period, voluntarily takes laxative to 'stay skinny' [1:26:46]. Thus, as stated in the website *Humans Echoes*, *Jennifer's Body's* 'greatest strength probably lies in how it portrays teen issues: jealousy, sex, the intensity of teen girls' relationships.'<sup>370</sup>

## B. A Commentary on Female Friendships

'Over the past couple of decades, an increasing number of film feature teen-girl monsters within a larger social context, with sisters or friends who go along with them on their journey of monstrous transformation.'<sup>371</sup> *Ginger Snaps* is a prime example of these films. In *Jennifer's Body*, the main transformation concerns Jennifer, but she does not go through it on her own, Needy is always by her side and is willing to do anything in her power to help Jennifer the same way Brigitte did with Ginger. Needy witnesses Jennifer's transformation, first helplessly, then openly keen to help save her, and finally determined to end the situation.

In a way, *Jennifer's Body* is a '[c]ommentary on the complicated relationships between adolescent girls.'<sup>372</sup> The evolution of the complicated relationship between Jennifer and Needy can be seen by the contrast between a scene such as the final confrontation by the pool, which occurs rather late in the film, and the scene of strong bonding between Jennifer and Needy—on

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<sup>369</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown, *Girlfight: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls*, New York UP, 2005, 5.

<sup>370</sup> 'Jennifer's Body (2009) - Five Facts', *Human Echoes*, 2017, <http://humanechoes.com/jennifers-body-five-facts/> (last accessed 11 April 2021)

<sup>371</sup> L. Ivins, *IUCinema*, *op. cit.*

<sup>372</sup> T. Grierson, *Screen Daily*, *op. cit.*

Needy's side at least—at Melody Lane [0:15:31-0:15:41], or the slow-motion scene of intense gazing and hands waving at the pep rally [0:06:09-0:06:24].

As stated by Rodriguez in his review, 'One of the themes Kusama and Cody explore in *Jennifer's Body* is the love-hate nature at the center of friendships between girls as they edge into adolescence—the unspoken rivalry and jealousies that become interwoven into their relationships.'<sup>373</sup> Hence, while the visual horror of the film consecutively involves Low Shoulder and Jennifer, Jennifer and her male victims, Needy and Jennifer, and Needy and Low Shoulder, 'The film centers not on Jennifer and her male oppressors/victims but on Jennifer and her BFF, Anita, or "Needy,"'<sup>374</sup> and on the complexity of their relationship. The complexity resides in the fact that their friendship is incongruous, unbelievable and above all highly toxic. 'Sandbox friendships, opines Needy in her voice-over narration, are the truest. Not necessarily the most healthy ones, not necessarily the ones that establish heterosexual credibility, but the ones that [are] rock solid.'<sup>375</sup> It is rare, in teen movies, to see united female communities, but Jennifer and Needy's relationship is at the same time different and gives a 'realistic look at how some friendships actually are for women. They have one of those passive-aggressive, intense and codependent friendships that young women often experience.'<sup>376</sup> Jennifer represents everything for Needy, and the episode at Melody Lane, before and during the fire illustrates it perfectly.

The scene, a short one as it only lasts one minute and thirty-four seconds [0:14:23-0:15:57], is intense. It is so because the whole message is transmitted without dialogues between the protagonists, but is created through camera frames and shots, as 'each image is much more than a sign; it is a sentence.'<sup>377</sup> These sentences are spoken through the use of open and close forms, through contrasts in lightings and colours, and through the intra-diegetic lyrics of Low Shoulder's song 'Through the Trees.' Kusama, here, highlights the idea that 'Needy is always watching Jennifer, it's not really the other way around. Because it's always about Jennifer for Needy.'<sup>378</sup> She also emphasises the fact that 'Needy [...] doesn't have anyone to consistently lean on as she tries to find her identity as a person separated from [Jennifer].'<sup>379</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>373</sup> R. Rodriguez, *Miami Herald*, *op. cit.*

<sup>374</sup> N. Berlatsky, *Chicago Reader*, *op. cit.*

<sup>375</sup> A. Chase, *Killer Movie Reviews*, *op. cit.*

<sup>376</sup> F. Gannon, *Wicked Horror*, *op. cit.*

<sup>377</sup> J. Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, *op. cit.*, 63.

<sup>378</sup> Karyn Kusama in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

<sup>379</sup> Nina Nesseth, 'Leave Those Kids Alone – Identity & Conformity in High School Horror', *Grim*, 7, 2020, 5-6, <https://anatomyofascream.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/grim-no7-teenage-wasteland-digital.pdf> (last accessed 20 February 2021)

Jennifer does not show any interest in Needy other than making herself feel more beautiful as she is ‘so self-absorbed she has a picture of herself on her dressing table, [and she] likes having Needy around for the attention and the lack of competition’<sup>380</sup> and thus, to feel more special than the ‘normal’ girls both in the eyes of Low Shoulder and of the male sex at large. She goes as far as to introduce Needy to Nikolai as ‘[her] friend’ [0:11:46], whose name is not even worth mentioning, while Needy emphasises the fact that she is her *best friend* when she defends Jennifer [0:13:30] after Nikolai and Dirk discussed her virginity [0:12:50-0:13:28].

At one point in this scene, a close-form two-shot presents Jennifer and Needy sharing an intense moment of friendship. Jennifer first looks at Needy—while she has been solely looking at Nikolai since the beginning of this scene—with a wide smile and her eyes filled with tears of joy (*Figure 3*) [0:15:34]. This expression is troubling as it is the first, and the last time of the film that Jennifer will be shown with the truly human nature of a teenage girl and not with her high school evil nature that has been shown before this moment or the monstrous face that will be shown after. As Needy then looks at Jennifer, she is puzzled but pleased that Jennifer is looking at her with those eyes [0:15:35].



*Figure 3:* Jennifer’s human nature revealed as she shares genuine feelings with Needy to receive recognition from her.

This moment is almost romantic<sup>381</sup> but the lyrics, intra-diegetically added to the scene, complexify the relationship as Nikolai sings ‘the ruins left inside you’ [0:15:32]. As a result, one may wonder if these ruins refer to the underlying homosexual feelings Needy has for Jennifer or to Jennifer’s homosocial feelings towards Needy. As Needy’s face, then, turns into a wide smile as she stares at Jennifer (*Figure 4*) [0:15:41], it seems that ‘Needy les[bian]’<sup>382</sup>

<sup>380</sup> Moira MacDonald, ‘Nerdy and Needy Are Neat in “Jennifer’s Body”’, *Seattle Times*, 2009, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/movies/nerdy-and-needy-are-neat-in-jennifers-body/> (last accessed 28 February 2021)

<sup>381</sup> L. Ivins, *IU Cinema*, *op. cit.*

<sup>382</sup> S. Fonseca, *them., op. cit.*, the modifications in Needy’s name were made by the author.

Almost 10 years prior to Fonseca’s article Christopher Smith, in his review “‘Jennifer’s Body”, ‘Paranormal Activity’ Top Week’s Releases’ commented on the consonance of Anita’s last name as he stated ‘Needy Lesnicki

finally got the attention she had always wanted from her best friend. Nevertheless, this intense bonding between the women is short-lived as Jennifer's gaze goes back to Nikolai and never comes back to Needy, whose smile is frozen for a second as the camera executes a deep focus on Needy's face, blurring Jennifer who has no interest in Needy anymore [0:15:46].



Figure 4: Needy's smile is about to fade as she realises that Jennifer is actually not interested in her, but only wants Needy to acknowledge her relevance in Low Shoulder's members' eyes.

It is this loss of interest that will slowly but steadily weigh on Needy, until the confrontation by the pool, in which, through a long point of view shot of Jennifer, from Needy's perspective, the latter states that Jennifer 'never [was] a good friend. Even when [they] were little, [She] used to steal [Needy's] toys and pour lemonade on [her] bed [...]'<sup>383</sup> [1:26:04-1:26:11]. To which Jennifer answers, 'And now I'm eating your boyfriend! [the camera operates a medium close-up of Jennifer] See? At least I'm consistent'<sup>384</sup> [1:26:12-1:26:16]. Hence, the toxic relationship between Jennifer and Needy is being made explicit here, but her monstrosity is added to show that Jennifer's insecurities shifted to a different level. The evolution of Jennifer and Needy's friendship from almost amorous glances to deep cutting into each other's egos illustrates the idea that *Jennifer's Body* is 'one of those movies where the movie and the horror grow out of the female relationships.'<sup>385</sup> As it is the close link between Jennifer's rampage, her targeted victims and their bonds with Needy<sup>386</sup> which first tarnishes the two women's relationship and leads to Needy's dismay and Jennifer's death.

Jennifer and Needy's relationship is more than an odd friendship between two antipodal teenage girls in a small-town high school. The depth of their relationship, which subsequently

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(Amanda Seyfried) whose name sounds something like "lesbian" (*Bangor Daily News*, 2010, <https://bangordailynews.com/2010/01/01/living/jennifers-body-paranormal-activity-top-weeks-releases/> [last accessed 18 May 2021]).

<sup>383</sup> Needy Lesnicki in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 102.

<sup>384</sup> Jennifer Check in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 102.

<sup>385</sup> M. Woerner, *IO9*, *op. cit.*

<sup>386</sup> A diagram of Jennifer's victims and their degree of relationship with Needy is presented in [Annex 2](#) to illustrate Jennifer's killing scheme.

influences the depth of the horror of the film, is the ‘enormous surplus of sexual energy’ between the girl ‘that will have to be repressed.’<sup>387</sup> However, ‘what is repressed must always strive to return.’<sup>388</sup> Hence, ‘[w]hat *Jennifer’s Body* is really telling us is that patriarchy is making young girls fight each other and that women are constantly punished and sexualised by the masculine media.’<sup>389</sup> But it is also telling us that the punishment and oversexualisation is outdated and that girls’ sexuality, bisexuality and teen sex will return, thrive and become normalised in society.

### C. Teen Sex and the Demystification of Teenage Girls’ Sexuality

Jennifer has been read as a monster, a victim and a tragic figure throughout this thesis, but she is also a pathetic character. She is incapable of having an honest friendship or relationship; everything about Jennifer is fake, but she desperately needs Needy’s approval to feel that she genuinely means something—not solely because Needy is her best friend, but also because she seems to be her only and thus most precious friend. The film comments on society’s shallowness and superficiality when it comes to women’s appearance and women’s value. What is more is that Jennifer seeks beauty and strength in her male victims and through the voyeurism that is attached to first society and second the omnipresent male gaze in horror film. But she actually gains power through Needy’s love. There is a power imbalance in this relationship as it often is the case in high school girls’ relationships and this imbalance, according to Kusama and Cody, needed to be addressed. *Jennifer’s Body* is thus about ‘the horror of abusive female friendships instead of the more common female sexuality angle.’<sup>390</sup> The abuse here is about Jennifer’s manipulating Needy’s feelings to quench her own thirst for recognition and love. Nonetheless, Kusama and Cody used this element to, once again, turn one of the most recognizable classic horror tropes on its head. That is, the sexuality of teenage girls.

‘In the 21<sup>st</sup> century horror film, the heroine is finally able to have a sex life without repercussion, albeit safety and within the confines of heteronormative and monogamous relationship.’<sup>391</sup> That is precisely what Kusama and Cody are commenting on when they

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<sup>387</sup> R. Wood, *The Monster Theory Ready*, *op. cit.*, 118.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> L. Escribano, ‘You’re Killing People! No, I’m Killing Boys’, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>390</sup> Vic Holtreman, ‘Jennifer’s Body Review’, *Screen Rant*, 2009, <https://screenrant.com/jennifers-body-reviews/> (last accessed 11 April 2021)

<sup>391</sup> J. Casali, *Terrors of Girlhood*, *op. cit.*, 33.

address teen sexuality in *Jennifer's Body*. The *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* franchise throughout its twelve films (1980, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1993, 2002, 2003 and 2009) makes it a point of honour to not only condemn but punish teen sex by death. Kusama and Cody on the other hand, make it a point of honour not to condemn any form of teen sex, either it is part of the heteronormative and monogamous frame created by society or part of a larger spectrum of sexuality that has been so often repressed in the cinematic field and in society at large. The filmmakers thus reflect on the 'recent feminist interventions into the question of virginity' which 'have focused not only on the way in which it functions as an oppressive framework which works to control and define women by their sexuality, but also on questioning the nature of virginity itself.'<sup>392</sup> Because 'virginity is not personal but social, not private but public, not natural but constructed, and not obvious but invisible.'<sup>393</sup> That is specifically for these reasons that the way *Jennifer's Body* plays with Jennifer's virginity or non-virginity as well as with Needy's unapologetic sexual activity are innovative when it comes to the horror genre.

Needy, the Final Girl who has been represented as asexual in classic slashers, 'has a nerdy boyfriend, Chip, whom she sleeps with sans guilt, but she seemingly can't resist any request from her best female friend.'<sup>394</sup> The fact that, the same night Needy is amorously involved with both her boyfriend and her female best friend creates a new way of understanding teen sexuality. First, '[t]he sexualisation of the Final Girl goes hand in hand with a banalization of female sexuality in general, that debunks traditional patriarchal opposition between "good" and "bad" women, mothers and prostitutes.'<sup>395</sup> Second, the sapphic undertone of the film highlights the idea that Cody 'doesn't punish teens for having sex [...] There's not judgment about its appropriateness, just acceptance that it will happen.'<sup>396</sup> The fact that Needy's sex scene with Chip begins in a joyful way (*Figure 5*) [0:51:20] and ends up in a tragic hallucinatory experience (*Figure 6*) [0:53:37], the same way her love experience with Jennifer starts as an innocent and playful game (*Figure 7*) [0:58:18] and ends in a fight (*Figure 8*) [1:07:04], emphasises the idea that Cody and Kusama make no distinction between a heteronormative relationship and a homosexual relationship. However, they underline a distinction that society

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<sup>392</sup> Katherine Farrimond, 'The Slut That Wasn't: Virginity (Post)Feminism and Representation in Easy A', in Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, eds., *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 44-59, 47-48.

<sup>393</sup> Tamar J. McDonald, 'Introduction', in Tamar J. McDonald Virgin, ed., *Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, Detroit, Wayne State UP, 2010, 1-14, 2.

<sup>394</sup> K. Honeycutt, *Hollywood Reporter*, *op. cit.*

<sup>395</sup> D. Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s*, *op. cit.*, 111.

<sup>396</sup> Lisa Kennedy, 'Whatever Possessed Her? "Jennifer's Body" Has a Lot More Smart Than Your Average Screamer', *Denver Post*, 2009, <https://www.denverpost.com/2009/09/16/whatever-possessed-her-jennifers-body-has-a-lot-more-smarts-than-your-average-screamer/> (last accessed 11 April 2021)

makes in terms of sexuality: the distinction between men's displaying of their sexuality and women's.



Figures 5 and 6: Needy candidly enjoying sex with her boyfriend before it is ruined and turned traumatizing by hallucinations of Jennifer and her first victim, Jonas.



Figures 7 and 8: Needy's illusion followed by her disillusion on her and Jennifer's love story.

'*Jennifer's Body* critically engages with the sexual double standard and the enduring virgin/whore dichotomy.'<sup>397</sup> Indeed, Jennifer's exhibition of her sexuality and the way she performed her virginity—she either assumes her non-virgin status to please or pretend to be a virgin to try to save her life—are what caused her suffering, as female suffering in horror film is based on 'their exhibition of femininity and sexuality'<sup>398</sup> and 'reinforce[s] the idea that female sexuality is costly [...] for females.'<sup>399</sup> Hence, Kusama and Cody comment on several of the dichotomies made up by society. The one between accepted heterosexual relationships and repressed queer ones, and the one between accepted prudishly and shyly assumed sexuality and condemned, antagonized unapologetic and self-defined sexuality.

'Writer Diablo Cody intended for the film to confront misogyny in the horror genre by creating a story told from a female perspective.'<sup>400</sup> I would argue that more than confronting misogyny in the horror genre, Cody and Kusama, confront misogyny in the film industry (on-screen and

<sup>397</sup> M. Fradley, *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, *op. cit.*, 213.

<sup>398</sup> J. Casali, *Terror of Girlhood*, *op. cit.*, i.

<sup>399</sup> G. Cowan and M. O'Brien, *Sex Roles*, *op. cit.*, 195.

<sup>400</sup> Clare Moore, *Hell Is a Teenage Girl*, Paper Written for Mia Carter's E344C Class, 'Representation of Childhood and Adolescence in Literature and Film', University of Texas, 2016, 5.

off-screen) and society in general. As the film is told from a female perspective (on every level), the misogyny perceived in the film resonates differently from one critic to another and from one era to another. Thereupon, in 2009, when a woman treats men like ‘morsels’ [0:11:23] she is a monster who must be stopped, but when men treat a woman as sacrificial material [1:01:52], that makes them rock stars. In *Jennifer’s Body* this double standard seems to be first applied to the letter in the script only to be turned upside-down by the end credits [1:37:48-1:38:59].

## II. Misogyny, Patriarchy and the Hegemony of the Male Power Literally and Figuratively Annihilated

In his seminal chapter, ‘An Introduction to the American Horror Film’, Wood explains that the ‘Woman’ can be seen as the Other in horror film—the Other symbolises what is out of the norm and what is repressed by society—, as ‘the dominant images of women in our culture are entirely male-created and male-controlled.’<sup>401</sup> Cody and Kusama take an almost perverse pleasure in subverting this aspect, by seemingly adhering to it to the letter. However, this subversion has not always been interpreted in the expected way and the ironical tone in which Jennifer, quite literally, annihilates the misogynistic patriarchy by devouring young men’s innards echoes differently from one era to the other. Hence, and as Williams states in ‘When the Woman Looks’, ‘The monster is thus a particularly insidious form of the many mirrors patriarchal structures of seeing hold up to the woman.’<sup>402</sup> Seeing Jennifer in a feminist framework in 2009 was very different from the way she has been seen since 2018. In sum, *Jennifer’s Body*, in the character of Jennifer but also in the character of Needy, ‘presents revenge against toxic masculinity as its protagonists’ only viable solution.’<sup>403</sup>

### A. Defining and Redefining Women in a Patriarchal Society

Women in cinema have always had a place that they did not define themselves, but which was rather dictated by males: male actors, male directors, male producers and even male spectators.<sup>404</sup> It seems that the cinematic tradition wants women on screen to fulfil two

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<sup>401</sup> R. Wood, *American Nightmare*, *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>402</sup> L. Williams, *The Dread of Difference*, *op. cit.*, 24.

<sup>403</sup> S. Fonseca, *them.*, *op. cit.*

<sup>404</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), in Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory*, New York, Routledge; London, British Film Institute, 1988, 57-68.

functions: being erotic objects for the males on screen and being erotic objects for the male off screen.<sup>405</sup> It goes without saying that the horror film makes no exception to the rule and even emphasises the ‘sadistic-voyeuristic’ gaze, described by Laura Mulvey, in which ‘pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness.’<sup>406</sup> Kusama and Cody, in *Jennifer’s Body*, decided not to adhere to this gaze, or rather to play with it, comment on it and ultimately condemn it by ironically mocking it.

Women in society are assailed by images on-screen of what they should be, what they should look like, how they should act and what society expects from them. Because in a postfeminist media culture ‘it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than (say) a social structural or psychological one.’<sup>407</sup> But these constructs are made by a male-dominated society and perpetuated by both men and women—through every single media, ‘from talk shows to lad magazines, and from chick lit to advertising.’<sup>408</sup> The main perpetrators of these constructs, however, because of the physical, psychological and mental changes they have to go through during this period, are probably teenagers, and most specifically teenage *girls*. Indeed, for teenage girls, beauty and thus society’s approval of their body image ‘is [...] positioned as the mean to attain love and social acceptance,’<sup>409</sup> two key elements in *Jennifer’s Body*.

The most blatant scene, in *Jennifer’s Body*, which comments on ‘the social horror of high school for adolescent girls’<sup>410</sup> was not kept in the final editing of the film. However, this scene appears both in Cody’s script and in the DVD extras as a deleted scene called ‘Jennifer Check is Gross.’<sup>411</sup> As if the name of the scene was not sufficiently revealing, one of Colin’s friends, Chloe (Eve Harlow), takes Colin’s funeral as an opportunity to publicly critique Jennifer’s figure in society. In this scene, Chloe seems to settle a score with Colin’s parents as she demands to know whether Colin was with Jennifer the night he died. Colin’s parents first look shocked (*Figure 1*) at the inappropriateness of the question in such a time, but they soon appear

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<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>407</sup> R. Gill, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *op. cit.*, 148.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>409</sup> J. Gwynne, *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, *op. cit.*, 62.

<sup>410</sup> Kurt Loder, ‘“Jennifer’s Body”: Girl Trouble by Kurt Loder’, *MTV*, 2009, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1621700/jennifers-body-girl-trouble-by-kurt-loder/> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>411</sup> This scene, just as ‘Needy Confronts Jennifer’ is not timed as it was not feature in the theatrical or the extended version.

to be ashamed (*Figure 2*) after the depiction Chloe makes of Jennifer and their inability to deny that Colin was indeed with Jennifer that very night.

Chloe's tirade goes, 'Jennifer Check is gross. She thinks she's so special just because she's popular and is what society considers attractive. But she's just a generic giga bitch who listens to Fergie and shops at Hollister. Oh, also she has mouth herpes and other kinds.'<sup>412</sup> The way Chloe, a teenage girl, describes Jennifer, another teenage girl, by commenting on who she is as a woman illustrates the idea that 'women are encouraged to be competitive by the patriarchy because it helps us to stay suppressed.'<sup>413</sup> Cody, through Chloe's tirade linked feminism to the essence of the horror film: fear.<sup>414</sup> Indeed, Chloe expresses physical fear because Jennifer is 'considered attractive,' psychological fear because Jennifer's popularity belittles Chloe, sexual fear because Jennifer spent the night with Colin and social fear because while considers a 'giga bitch' by Chloe, Jennifer is still more socially relevant than a 'goth girl' like Chloe in the eyes of a patriarchal society.

As the camera moves onto Needy through the use of medium shots and medium close-ups. She does not step forward to defend Jennifer or to stop Chloe's speech. She remains silent because Chloe is right, Jennifer is all those things, but she is so because 'women on an everyday level, bombarded as they are with cultural fantasies of the "Woman" in media and advertising, [are] expected to live up to those images.'<sup>415</sup> The subversiveness here does not lie in Chloe's monologue, nor in Needy or even Colin's parents' reactions, but it lies in the fact that Cody, by verbalizing Jennifer's figure of 'social disease,' 'indict[s] a society that creates women like Jennifer'<sup>416</sup> and which causes female communities to be shameful, ashamed, torn apart and ultimately repressed, due to the good girl/bad girl dichotomy.

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<sup>412</sup> Chloe in K. Kusama, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*

Cody's script differs slightly as Chloe does not define Jennifer as gross, but as a 'social disease' which emphasises the idea that Jennifer's character is a product of society. (D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 80).

<sup>413</sup> Diablo Cody to N. Powers, *Suicide Girls*, *op. cit.*

<sup>414</sup> The four types of fear (physical psychological, sexual and social) described here were inspired by Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White's *The Film Experience: An Introduction*, Boston and New York, Bedford Books/St. Martin's, 2004, 309.

<sup>415</sup> S. Chaudhuri, *Feminist film Theorists*, *op. cit.*, 63.

<sup>416</sup> Diablo Cody to N. Powers, *Suicide Girls*, *op. cit.*



Figures 1 and 2: The faces of Colin's parents go from shock to shame as Chloe indirectly blames Colin for having gone on a date with a 'bitch'<sup>417</sup> like Jennifer.

Cody playfully manipulates this dichotomy throughout the film, making Jennifer a 'bad-girl-gone-really-bad'<sup>418</sup> and ironically establishing what is bad and what is worst when it comes to high schoolers' social life. Indeed, as the scene progresses, Kevin (Michael Brock), another goth friend of Colin's, reacts to Chloe's targeting Jennifer as he says, 'Maybe you should be mad at whomever murdered Colin, ok? 'Cause, all Jennifer Check did was to invite him over to watch *Aquamarine*.' To which Chloe answers, '[T]hat's even worst.' before collapsing onto Colin's coffin bawling (Figure 3). Cody's humour is sardonic and almost cynic here as Jennifer is Colin's murderer and represents the way '[t]he impact of puberty on a young high-schooler's mind and body is metaphorically realised as a demon transference.'<sup>419</sup> However, the only thing that matters to Chloe is that 'that bitch' invited Colin over to watch *Aquamarine* (Elizabeth Allen, 2006). Once again, shallowness is targeted here as Chloe seems to state that being a superficial bimbo and successfully manipulating a naive teenage boy is worse than being a murderer who turns pubescent males into Italian dishes with teeth.



Figure 3: Kevin and Chloe collapsing in tears at the thought that Colin's final instant was spent watching *Aquamarine* with Jennifer.

<sup>417</sup> Chloe in D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 80.

<sup>418</sup> Justin Chang, 'Jennifer's Body', *Variety*, 2009, <https://variety.com/2009/film/markets-festivals/jennifer-s-body-1200476311/> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>419</sup> Simon Foster, 'Jennifer's Body Review', *SBS Movies*, 2010, <https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/review/jennifers-body-review> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

Cody and Kusama, both in this scene and through the constant judgment of Jennifer's character as the 'Other Woman' in the film, aim at deconstructing society's dichotomisation of women. Indeed, they point fingers at the way women judge and blame other women based on accepted norms which are created, diffused and maintained by men, because '[b]laming "other women" means relationships with men are stabilized and privileged.'<sup>420</sup> But what would happen then if men were to be taken off the equation? That is what Kusama and Cody aimed at demonstrating by putting the emphasis of the film on Needy and Jennifer's relationship.

### B. Gratuitous Display of Lesbianism or A Displaying of Power Acquisition

In 2018, Cipolla, in his review of *Jennifer's Body* on *Film Monthly* states, 'The most pervasive and outward subtext of *Jennifer's Body*, though, is the homoerotic tension between Jennifer and Needy.'<sup>421</sup> While many critics, since 2018, agree with Cipolla,<sup>422</sup> in 2009, the homoerotic tension of the film was understood in a different and more perverse way. Stephanie Zacharek, and many others,<sup>423</sup> isolated Jennifer and Needy's intense amorous scene from the rest of the narrative to call it a 'gratuitous lesbo makeout session.'<sup>424</sup> While the kissing scene between Jennifer and Needy was indeed 'very sexy', its function goes further than a mere display of visual pleasure but tells a lot about Jennifer and Needy's relationship,<sup>425</sup> and inscribes itself in the bigger picture of the film.

The controversial scene, or rather the controversial shot is an extreme close-up of Needy's lips as Jennifer's are slowly approaching, followed by a twenty-three-second-long kiss between Jennifer and Needy [0:57:47-0:58:10]. The chosen frame emphasises the erotic dimension of the kiss,<sup>426</sup> but it also emphasises Jennifer's dangerousness. As she puts her tongue into Needy's mouth [0:58:04] Jennifer is (still) the one in 'power and so we're not sure where this

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<sup>420</sup> Angie Burns, 'IV. Power Between Women: The Constructed Otherness of "Other Women"', *Feminism & Psychology*, 9:4, 1999, 410-413, 411.

Burns here makes a direct reference to Rosalind Coward's work, *Our Treacherous Hearts*, London, Faber and Faber, 1992.

<sup>421</sup> M. Cipolla, *Film Monthly*, *op. cit.*

<sup>422</sup> See for example Fonseca (2018), and Griffiths (2018).

<sup>423</sup> See, for example, Lemire (2009), Baumgarten (2009) and Josh Bell (2009).

<sup>424</sup> Stephanie Zacharek, 'The Naked Opportunism of "Jennifer's Body"', *Salon*, 2009, [https://www.salon.com/2009/09/18/jennifers\\_body/](https://www.salon.com/2009/09/18/jennifers_body/) (last accessed 10 February 2021)

<sup>425</sup> E. Raube-Wilson and O. Segarra, *Gratuitous Sex and Violence*, *op. cit.*

For other articles reviewing the kissing scene as legitimate see for example Valeska Griffiths who wrote a lengthy article titled 'In Defence of That Kiss: Queer Love Story at the Heart of Jennifer's Body' (*Grim*, *op. cit.*)

<sup>426</sup> Karyn Kusama to J. Crucchiola, *Vulture*, *op. cit.*

is exactly going.’<sup>427</sup> From the moment Needy is shown from a medium close-up shot as she is looking at Jennifer with puzzlement and envy (*Figure 4*) [0:58:12] a shift of power occurs. Needy’s conflicted mind shows that ‘she’s certainly aware of the fact that Jennifer uses her for cover (Jennifer thinks she looks especially luscious when she’s standing next to Needy), but Needy still likes going on adventures otherwise above her station.’<sup>428</sup> Most importantly, what Needy likes is Jennifer herself as Cody states, ‘Needy is madly in love with Jennifer in that movie, there’s no objection to that.’<sup>429</sup> Thence, Needy uses Jennifer to quench her love thirst for her; while Jennifer uses Needy to, first, keep her quiet about who she really is and, second, because she ‘feeds off Needy’s admiration to fuel her own sense of self-worth.’<sup>430</sup>



*Figure 4:* Needy fighting her feelings for Jennifer, torn between envy and resistance.

The power then shifts as Needy’s is asserted then by her dominion over Jennifer in an establishing shot of the two on Needy’s bed. She is on top of Jennifer as she kisses her passionately (*Figure 5*) [0:58:28]. She here endorses powerful feminine sexuality which she did not assume with Chip (*Figure 6*) [0:52:42], but which Jennifer assumed with Colin (*Figure 7*) [0:53:08]—although in the case of Jennifer and Colin, violence has been substituted to sex. This dominion will be reproduced in the final confrontation between Needy and Jennifer (*Figure 8*) [1:31:38], but as was the case for Jennifer and Colin’s encounter, this time violence will be substituted to sexual tension. Anton Bidel comments on this power struggle or rather this progressive inversion of power as he states, ‘[I]t gradually becomes clear that the two girls’ roles are neatly reversing and that it is Anita who is truly becoming empowered by her own

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<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>428</sup> Jan Lisa Huttner, ‘Jennifer’s Body’, *Women Arts*, 2009, <https://www.womenarts.org/film-reviews/jennifersbody/> (last accessed 1 February 2021)

<sup>429</sup> Diablo Cody in Tim Timebomb, Trevor Shand, Lauren Shand, Rachel Tejada, Austin Wilkin and Leone D’Antonio, ‘Diablo Cody (Jennifer’s Body / Juno)’, *The Boo Crew*, episode 21, 2018, <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/the-boo-crew/e/55773895> (last accessed 7 February 2021)

<sup>430</sup> M. Navarro, *Bloody Disgusting*, *op. cit.*

teen metamorphosis.’<sup>431</sup> Needy thus gains control but is still conflicted between love and friendship, and her full metamorphosis will not happen until the very end of the film with her reverse makeover [1:30:18] which has been discussed in the [second chapter](#). Anita’s internal dissension is stressed by a close-up of the two adolescents kissing while her BFF necklace is dangling between them [0:57:05], thus highlighting Needy’s struggle: Do I want her, or do I want to be her? Jennifer, on the other hand, demonstrates vulnerability and highlights the fact that Needy’s gaze is more important than men’s gaze who are only pawns in her game of seduction.<sup>432</sup>



Figure 5: Needy establishing her power over Jennifer as she is on top of her leading the kiss.



Figure 6: Needy not even visible as she is physically dominated by Chip who is on top of her.  
Figure 7: Jennifer’s total dominion over Colin is obvious as he is lying on the floor helpless, and she is standing over him ready to eat his innards.

<sup>431</sup> Anton Bidel, ‘Horror All-Nighter a Halloween Treat’, *Eye for Film*, 2009, <https://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/feature/2009-11-04-frightfest-halloween-all-nighter-review-2009-feature-story-by-anton-bitel> (last accessed 4 March 2021)

<sup>432</sup> P. Françaix, *Teen Horror*, *op. cit.*, 138



Figure 8: Needy establishing her dominion over Jennifer as she is on top of her. This time violence has been substituted to sex.

The passive-aggressive physical fight peaks as a close-up of Needy and Jennifer kissing is coupled with tense extra-diegetic music building [0:58:23]. Needy then stops kissing Jennifer and gets off-screen, leaving Jennifer as focal point, and shouts ‘What the fuck is happening?’ [0:58:26]. At this point Needy gives her dominion up, leaving Jennifer in power. This fracture marks the beginning of Needy feeling ‘loose around the edge’<sup>433</sup> [0:03:08], as Jennifer states that she had never heard Needy swear like this before. Jennifer’s manipulation of Needy’s feelings is what made the latter certain that her torment is coming from Jennifer. Before that moment, Needy was not sure on where to place Jennifer on the Fear-Love spectrum,<sup>434</sup> Needy was as afraid of Jennifer as she wanted her, but Jennifer’s aggressive sexuality is what made her realise that it was not true love but manipulation and thus torment, which should be feared. Jennifer and Needy kissing scene thus acts as closure to Jennifer and Needy’s relationship, but it does not establish itself in isolation to the rest of the film. Indeed, Needy’s gaze at Jennifer throughout the film evolves. From the first flashback in which Needy seems to be proud of her friend in an almost romantic way (*Figure 9*) [0:05:47], to the terrified and worried way she looks at her in her kitchen the first night after Jennifer’s transformation (*Figure 10*) [0:22:41], to jealousy expressed towards Colin as he gets invited by Jennifer (*Figure 11*) [0:44:26], to outraged and determinedness to kill Jennifer in the final confrontation (*Figure 12*) [1:31:08]. Throughout the film, and through Needy’s gaze, ‘Kusama and Cody created a unique and honest depiction of a lesbian relationship; one filled with longing, resentment, joy and love,’<sup>435</sup> but which ultimately ended up with blood as it is one-sided.

<sup>433</sup> Needy Lesnicki’s voice-over in D. Cody, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>434</sup> The idea of the Fear-Love spectrum was taken from the film *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001). In this film, Kitty Farmer (Beth Grant) as she teaches Jim Cunningham’s (Patrick Swayze) ‘attitude lessons’ to her students, states that, ‘Fear and love are the deepest of human emotions’ [0:48:28]. These two emotions are exactly what Needy is simultaneously experiencing in this scene.

<sup>435</sup> M. Philips, *Re/visionist*, *op. cit.*



Figures 9 through 12: Needy's slow realization of the love and loss she feels about Jennifer.

In the first fifteen minutes of the film, Needy looks at Jennifer the same way she looks at Chip throughout the film (*Figures 13 and 14*) [0:45:03, 1:13:54], hence hinting at the idea of Needy's character as queer as she seems to be both out of the heterosexual spectrum and to be polyamorous—romantically involved with several individuals. Not once does she question her feelings toward one or another of her love interests. On the contrary, it is the discovery of the powerful love she can express and the loss of her love interests—and for one of them at the hands of the other—that empower her and enable her to become the avenger she is meant to be.



Figures 13 and 14: Needy feeling the same sense of love and loss with Chip, although in a completely different way.

Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich state, 'One therefore needs to be careful not to transfer one's own understandings of genre terms and their meanings back onto previous periods in which the terms and their meanings might have been very different.'<sup>436</sup> Thence, it is not

<sup>436</sup> Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich, *The Shifting Definition of Genre essays on labeling films, television shows and media*, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2008, 3.

because *Jennifer's Body* falls into the 'body horror'<sup>437</sup> and presents two women kissing in one scene of the film that this kiss is presented to display gratuitous lesbianism to satisfy the male gaze, men's erotic fantasy about woman-on-woman kisses or horror film's spectators' voyeuristic gaze. Grady, in her article on the renaissance of *Jennifer's Body* since 2017 phrases this idea perfectly when she states that 'the much-hyped kiss between Jennifer and Needy is less steamy girl-on-girl action served to the male gaze on a platter than it is an awkward, confused act of manipulation between two girls bound together equally by affection and ego-driven codependence.'<sup>438</sup> It is by freeing herself from this dependence that Needy finds her inner self and grows into Cody and Kusama's representation of the female ideal: an unapologetic female figure who frees herself from the heteronormative ties of the patriarchy and who fights to the death to make the world a safer and less judgmental place for every woman.

While Cipolla argues that 'an underlying sense of compulsive heterosexuality influenc[es] the characters' decisions,'<sup>439</sup> I would argue that Needy releases herself from such influence because, while she is a young woman under the influence of teenage hormones, she does not let herself get led by her sexuality. She learns to control it and does not use it to get her way with people the same way Jennifer does but empowers herself from within, while Jennifer *needs* outer forces to figuratively and quite literally feed her ego.

### C. Turning Tables: Sex as a Prelude to Murder

Before her transformation, Jennifer seems to fill the description of a 'vamp,' 'a woman who uses her charm or wiles to seduce and exploit men.'<sup>440</sup> This term is closely linked to the figure of the *femme fatale* as suggested by *Urban Dictionary*, '[A] woman who, while not necessarily attractive, has a certain allure (usually this striking, exotic, overtly sexy glamour), and is usually a *heartless, man-eating seductress*.'<sup>441</sup> The latter part of this definition, then, moves from figurative to literal with the transformation of Jennifer into a succubus.

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<sup>437</sup> L. Williams, *Film Quarterly*, *op. cit.*

'Body horror' is one of the three categories of 'genres of excess' with pornography and melodrama.

<sup>438</sup> C. Grady, *Vox*, *op. cit.*

<sup>439</sup> M. Cipolla, *Film Monthly*, *op. cit.*

<sup>440</sup> 'Vamp', *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vamp> (last accessed 13 April 2021)

<sup>441</sup> 'Vamp', *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=vamp> (last accessed 13 April 2021), my emphasis.

According to religious folklore a succubus is a sexual demon. She is a seductress, she seduces men in order to have sex with them. While this definition of a succubus does not appear to be life-threatening, according to religious beliefs ‘having repeated sexual activity with a succubus can lead to deterioration in both physical and mental health or can also lead to death.’<sup>442</sup> In the Jewish folklore succubi are also known to be ice cold and to have an uncanny relationship with body fluids.<sup>443</sup> While many of the elements aforementioned fit Jennifer’s representation as a succubus—as Jennifer seduces her victim, leads them to their death by the mean of sexual acts and has an unusual relation with body fluids—, none of them mentions any kind of need for the succubus to eat her victims’ flesh to acquire any form of strength or to become more beautiful. It thus seems that Cody, in her representation of the succubus, introduces a new element to the persona which is the element of deadly violence.

I would argue that Jennifer’s cannibalistic appetite adds complexity to her character and gives depth to the issue of the overrepresentation of violence in sexual relation. Hence, ‘Cody and Kusama disengage the male viewers by attempting to subvert their “gaze”, forcing them to watch *themselves* be violated and vulnerable in a horror film for a change.’<sup>444</sup> Jennifer kills boys from very different backgrounds with very different social status in the high school ‘food chain.’ However, her *modus operandi* does not change from one victim to another, she lures them, seduces them, seemingly initiates intercourse, but ultimately resumes to kill and devour these innocent boys whose naivety led to their fatal fate. The cannibalistic dimension almost acts as an allegory of Jennifer feeding her ego with her male victims’ voyeuristic nature. Hence, the power in *Jennifer’s Body* is definitely coded feminine, while the horror genre as a tendency to inscribe itself ‘within a male-dominated discourse where power is coded as masculine, even when embodied in biological females.’<sup>445</sup>

What *Jennifer’s Body* does is that it is ‘[t]urning adolescent sexual insecurity into the stuff of nightmares.’<sup>446</sup> But while most films do it in a way that often mirrors society, putting a young woman in a position of distress in which she is sexually abused by violent men (the most

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<sup>442</sup> Sandeep Grover, Aseem Mehra, and Devakshi Dua, ‘Unusual cases of succubus: A cultural phenomenon manifesting as part of psychopathology’, *Ind Psychiatry J.*, 27:1, 2018, 147–150, 148.

Grover, Mehar and Dua here make a direct reference to the work of Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*, The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>443</sup> Rosemary E. Guiley, *The Encyclopaedia of Witches, Witchcraft and Wicca* (3rd ed.), New York, Facts on File, 2008, 95.

<sup>444</sup> J. Casali, *Terrors of Girlhood*, *op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>445</sup> Isabel Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Viewing*, State University of New York, 1997, 81-82.

<sup>446</sup> Bryant Frazer, ‘Jennifer’s Body’, *Bryant Frazer’s Deep Focus*, 2009, [https://deep-focus.com/dfweblog/2010/01/jennifers\\_body.html](https://deep-focus.com/dfweblog/2010/01/jennifers_body.html) (last accessed 16 April 2021)

striking example of this type of narrative being the rape/revenge film), *Jennifer's Body* uses this nightmarish representation as starting point for its subversion of 'the power structures of patriarchal societies.'<sup>447</sup> Indeed, while Jennifer is the first victim in *Jennifer's Body* as she is symbolically raped by Low Shoulder and is then literally killed (*Figure 10*) [1:04:23], she becomes a survivor who then seeks to render onto patriarchal societies the suffering many women endure at the hands of controlling men (*Figure 11*) [0:54:16]. Thence, Cody, through her script, 'explores both the victimizing and predatory nature of female sexuality,'<sup>448</sup> and does it almost as an echo to Alana Prochuk lines, when she states, 'We can't interrupt the culture of violence unless we are willing to see it for what it is.'<sup>449</sup> It seems that, for Cody, the best way for society to finally see it is to twist the common plot of torturing women.



*Figures 10 and 11: Similarities between Jennifer's and Colin's wounded bodies in the hands of their aggressors who used seduction to abuse of their victims and gain something from them.*

Hence, and as shown in the [first chapter](#), violence against the opposite sex implies very different consequences. For some critics Jennifer's displays of violence against innocent male victims (as seen in [chapter 2](#)) have to do with the misandrist tone Cody and Kusama give to their narrative. The way Jennifer plays with innocent men coming from diverse social groups and the way she verbally and physically belittles them before literally tearing them apart has been understood by a few as hatred against the male sex at large and thus as conveying a misandrist message.

<sup>447</sup> S. Chaudhuri, *Feminist film Theorists, op. cit.*, 3-4.

<sup>448</sup> A. Chase, *Killer Movie Reviews, op. cit.*

<sup>449</sup> Alana Prochuk, 'Rape Culture Is Real-And Yes, We've Had Enough', *WAWAW Rape Crisis Centre*, 2013, <https://www.wavaw.ca/rape-culture-is-real-and-yes-weve-had-enough/> (last accessed 13 April 2021)

### III. Misandry or the Backlash of the Harmful Effect of Male Power

In 2009, Andrew Dowler, in his review of *Jennifer's Body* for *Now Toronto*, states, 'The funniest [narrative brought by Diablo Cody to her first feature *Juno*] involves the satanic rock band converting Jennifer to a creature of the night.'<sup>450</sup> In 2019, Canon wrote about the very same scene, '[T]he real horror in the film lies in the allusions of the assault of women.'<sup>451</sup> The drastic dichotomy of this scene, seen on one side of the spectrum as 'funny' and on the other side as 'horrific' illustrates the divergent interpretations of *Jennifer's Body* from the time it was released to the #MeToo era. This dyadic reception of one of the key scenes of the film, leads to divergent interpretations of Jennifer's demonic figure.

Lyanna Hindley tried to explain the reception of *Jennifer's Body* in 2009 and the misinterpretation of key scenes when she states in her article for *Obscure*—a website that focuses on popular culture—that 'the film was gutted and drawn by an overwhelmingly male critical landscape.'<sup>452</sup> While it is true that the majority of the negative reviews in 2009 were written by male critics,<sup>453</sup> some women critics also read the film as being 'mean-spirited' and 'a nasty piece of work,'<sup>454</sup> and some even claimed that 'Jennifer's Body is *pretty to look at*, but there's nothing of substance here.'<sup>455</sup> These two reviews, both published on *About.com*—a website that belongs to *The New York Times Company*—like many others, highlight two aspects of the reception of the film in 2009: society understood the film the way the marketing team wanted them to and both men and women criticized the feminist aspect of *Jennifer's Body*.

While in 2009, a few critics—whose articles have been indexed on *Rotten Tomatoes*—noticed, in their reviews, the way *Jennifer's Body* 'touches on society's fear of female,'<sup>456</sup> it has not been fully and extensively spoken about until more recently, when critics remarked that the film

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<sup>450</sup> Andrew Dowler, 'Jennifer's Body', *Now Toronto*, 2009, <https://nowtoronto.com/movies/jennifers-body> (last accessed 22 April 2021)

<sup>451</sup> E. Canon, '*She's a Maneater*', *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>452</sup> Lyanna Hindley, 'Jennifer's Body: Hell is a Mismarketed Masterpiece', *Obscure*, 2019, <http://obscuremagazine.co.uk/jennifers-body-hell-is-a-mismarketed-masterpiece/> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>453</sup> More than 60% of the total male reviews of *Jennifer's Body* on *Rotten Tomatoes* are negative reviews, while less than 40% of the total female reviews are.

<sup>454</sup> Marcy Dermansky, 'Jennifer's Body', *About.com*, inaccessible. Review retrieved from 'Jennifer's Body', *Rotten Tomatoes*, [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jennifers\\_body/reviews?type=&sort=&page=10](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jennifers_body/reviews?type=&sort=&page=10) (last accessed 13 April 2021)

<sup>455</sup> Rebecca Murray, 'Jennifer's Body', *About.com*, inaccessible. Review retrieved from 'Jennifer's Body', *Rotten Tomatoes*, [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jennifers\\_body/reviews?type=&sort=&page=7](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jennifers_body/reviews?type=&sort=&page=7) (last accessed 13 April 2021), my emphasis.

<sup>456</sup> J. Larsen, *LarsenonFilm*, *op. cit.*

‘plays with that kind of antagonistic relationship between men and women.’<sup>457</sup> Which could explain the misandrist backlash against the film, its filmmakers, its actors and its characters.

### A. American Society’s Connection to Rape Culture

In several interviews and retrospectives, Kusama, Cody and Fox commented on the complexity that filming the sacrifice scene represented, because it felt real, because it was resonant for these women and because it was triggering, from a societal point of view. Nevertheless, some critics failed to see the allegorical representation of a rape, and the pathetic and shallow motives *Low Shoulder* came for with this repeated penetration of Jennifer’s body as she is gagged and strapped to a stump in the middle of the forest under a waxing moon [1:03:36]. ‘Jennifer is a hero for the #MeToo movement,’<sup>458</sup> but Jennifer was sacrificed before the rise of the #MeToo movement and thus, the sacrifice resonated differently in the pre-#MeToo era.

The very fact that the title of the film, *Jennifer’s Body*, is named just as one of The Hole’s song which is about an isolated woman onto whom ‘violence is enacted [...] and she’s in pieces, and she’s powerless to stop it,’<sup>459</sup> should have given hints. The fact that Courtney Love–The Hole lead singer–has been referred to ‘as the riot grrrls’ “Saint Patron”<sup>460</sup> in the early years of the movement<sup>461</sup> should have provided some background. But neither the song, nor the singer’s political involvement did, or only partially. Indeed, American society was, and still is, anchored in what second-wave feminists coined as ‘rape culture,’

A complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Orlando Segarra in E. Raube-Wilson and O. Segarra, *Gratuitous Sex and Violence*, *op. cit.*

<sup>458</sup> T. Timebomb *et. al.*, *The Boo Crew*, *op. cit.*

<sup>459</sup> L. Ivins, *IUCinema*, *op. cit.*

<sup>460</sup> S. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>461</sup> It seems important to note here that Courtney Love publicly dissociated herself from the movement while still supporting its feminist political stance. (Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers, *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap*, New York, Cooper Square Press, 1999).

<sup>462</sup> Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher and Martha Roth, ‘Preamble’, in Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher and Martha Roth, eds., *Transforming a Rape Culture* (1992), Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 2005, i-xii, xi.

Thence, American society has ‘the pervasive tendency to blame a victim or to hold her responsible in some way for having been raped.’<sup>463</sup> That explains why many critics blamed Jennifer Check, and indirectly Fox, for being too assertive, too sexual, too ‘asking-for-it’ in a sense, thus putting the blame on Jennifer’s ‘mistakes.’ Her first mistake, in the eyes of society, was to follow the band in their van and the second to lie about her virginity to, in her mind, avoid being raped.

‘From the damsel in distress to the rape victim seeking revenge, women in horror films exist to be antagonized, and so often, their exhibition of femininity and sexuality determines the severity of their suffering.’<sup>464</sup> explains Casali in her thesis. Jennifer’s exhibition of femininity and the false signals she sends about her sexuality are what led Jennifer to be trapped by vile men, but it is those vile and narcissistic men who are at the origin of Jennifer’s suffering, not her over sexual figure. Wilhelmi even stated in 2019, ‘Jennifer Check was a victim. She was drunk and taken advantage of after her town’s primary watering hole burnt to the ground, then murdered as part of a ritual sacrifice to help some mediocre indie band achieve stardom.’<sup>465</sup> Cody turned that traditional horror trope of the sexually active female *victim* on its head when she comments on the gap between the ‘feminine (victim) and the feminist (avenger).’<sup>466</sup> Jennifer is ‘in a way, saved by her sexual experience, rising anew to wreak revenge on those who’ve wronged her,’<sup>467</sup> and thus rising against the American rape culture. In *Jennifer’s Body*, Jennifer survives precisely *because* she is not a virgin, it is her active sexuality that prevents her from dying, the same way non-virginity is associated to survival in the slasher *Cherry Falls* (Geoffrey Wright, 2000). It is Jennifer’s characterisation as ‘sexual object’ which enables her to empower herself and to keep thriving.<sup>468</sup>

‘Unlike the victims of other crimes, girls and women who have been raped are automatically assumed to have initiated the act in some way: wearing tight clothes, entering a date’s apartment, having a drink, smoking marijuana. Simply being physically attractive can be used against them.’<sup>469</sup> Jennifer wears tight clothes on a daily basis [0:06:15, 0:08:48, 0:39:35], she is sexually assertive [0:50:54] and drinks without shame [0:12:21] and that is why ‘had this

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<sup>463</sup> Merril D. Smith, *Encyclopedia of Rape*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2004, 26.

<sup>464</sup> J. Casali, *Terrors of Girlhood*, *op. cit.*, i.

<sup>465</sup> J. Wilhelmi, *Morbidly Beautiful*, *op. cit.*

<sup>466</sup> Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers. Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, Manchester UP, 2000, 4.

<sup>467</sup> A. Cohen, *Refinery29*, *op. cit.*

<sup>468</sup> E. Raube-Wilson and O. Segarra, *Gratuitous Sex and Violence*, *op. cit.*

<sup>469</sup> Leona Tanenbaum, *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation*, New York, Perennial, 2000, 117.

[demonic possession] not happened to her, other terrible things would have been done to her in the name of her beauty and wanting to possess it and wanting to dismiss her and wanting to belittle her.’<sup>470</sup> However, using the demonic possession as a trope enabled Cody and Kusama to heighten Jennifer’s feminist power by turning her into an unkillable supernatural entity the same way Jason and Freddy are. Because she does not represent a human being anymore, but one of society’s tenacious and well-anchored defectors that requires a global understanding and societal changes in order to be annihilated.

### B. Demonizing the Female Victim or the Succubus as the Avenger

‘Religions extol a divinely inspired division between Good and Evil and have rules to follow, and many horror films are about breaking those rules and the punishment that rains down from above such arrogantly transgressive behaviour.’<sup>471</sup> However, while Jennifer is ‘high school evil’ [1:12:00] she did not break any of the good vs. evil rules, whereas Low Shoulder did. First, they sacrificed Jennifer, which goes against the rules of doing good. However, they did sacrifice a non-virgin which goes against the rule of doing evil. They thus broke rules of both good and evil but got away with it while the punishment fell upon the character of Jennifer. One can thus wonder if Jennifer’s transformation bears symbolism at the level of horror film as well as at the societal level.

Jennifer kills at night [0:53:14, 1:06:04, 1:24:47], she kills in bright daylight [0:33:06], she kills in abandoned buildings [0:47:17, 1:21:30] or in the forest [0:31:37, 1:06:06], but she never truly tries to hide her crimes, because she knows better, and she is right. No one ever suspects Jennifer to be at the origin of such blood-soaked murders, because, first, ‘a teenager doesn’t do this’<sup>472</sup> and second, ‘No one ever thinks chicks do shit like this. A girl can only be a slut, a bitch, a tease, or the virgin next door.’<sup>473</sup> It is for these reasons specifically that Jonas’s father tirade, ‘I’ll kill *him* myself. I will! You hear me, you *bastard*? I’ll cut off your *nutsack* and nail it to my door! Like one of those lion doorknockers rich folks got! That’ll be your *balls!*,’<sup>474</sup> [0:35:35-0:35:55] is both resonant and ironic. Not only does Jonas’s father masculinise the killer, but he also aims at castrating him, which is exactly what Jennifer did to Jonas with her

<sup>470</sup> Karyn Kusama to L. Peitzman, *Buzzfeed News*, *op. cit.*, his modification.

<sup>471</sup> Alan Jones, *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies*, London and New York, Rough Guide, 2005, x.

<sup>472</sup> Jeff Kohlver (Patrick Wilson) in David Slade, *Hard Candy* (2005), Vulcan Productions, Launchpad Productions, 2006.

<sup>473</sup> Ginger Fitzgerald (Katharine Isabelle) in John Fawcett, *Ginger Snaps* (2000), Motion International, 2001.

<sup>474</sup> Jonas’s father in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*, my emphasis.

*vagina dentata*. Jennifer, then, becomes a literal representation of men's fear of castration by women, but no one believes her to be capable of such acts, except Needy.

In the classic high school film trope of the library stroll by the nerdy character [1:10:01-1:10:15], Needy finds out, thanks to the library's occult section, the origins and the ins and outs of Jennifer's curse. Needy's voice-over in a whispered tone recites the words presented on-screen through montages (*Figure 1*) [1:10:18]. She, then, when confident in her *paranormal* findings, goes to the only person she thinks would believe her, her boyfriend Chip. When she intimates to Chip that Jennifer is evil, Chip simply answers 'I know' in an unsurprised and unbothered way [1:11:56], thus hinting that Jennifer's nature was acknowledged way before it engaged a body count. However, when Needy comes up with her proof that Jennifer is 'actually evil, not high school evil' [1:11:57-1:12:01], the intercutting of Needy's and Chip's faces (framed through medium close-ups) shows that Chip is first puzzled, then concerned and finally disappointed as he states, 'Needy, I think you need help' [1:12:59]. Thus, not only is Chip not believing Needy, but he also blames her and put it on the account of paranoia—from which Needy suffers through her hallucinations [0:52:45-0:53:00, 1:11:03].



*Figure 1:* The editing creates a close link between Needy, the secret holder, and Jennifer's secrets as Needy is about to find out the truth about Jennifer's transformation.

While no one wants to believe Needy, not even her boyfriend,<sup>475</sup> whom she still tries to protect by breaking up with him, she is right, and her research, while creating a comical effect through the existence of an occult section in a small-town high school library, is accurate. Indeed, Low Shoulder did try to sacrifice Jennifer to Satan as the virgin that she was not; Jennifer does eat boys who make her glowy and pretty, and she actually becomes 'weak and cranky and ugly' for her when hungry [1:12:44-1:12:49]. But what Needy fails to explain, and what spectators

<sup>475</sup> It might be interesting to note that in this scene, in Kusama's *Jennifer's Body*, Needy is way more assertive than she is in Cody's script. Here, she does not give up on her ideas and her beliefs, while in the script she apologizes to Chip about her 'teenage paranoia' and blame it on her 'hormones and emotions.' (D. Cody, *Jennifer's Body*, *op. cit.*, 85). Hence, in just two years, Needy's character became more unapologetic and decisive than she originally was.

have to understand is that '[t]he persistent presence of violent trauma at the birth of the monster, as well as a violent death at his end, implies that these monsters [are] purposely created as a way to manage society, as examples of how not to act in the face of overwhelming personal catastrophe.'<sup>476</sup> Jennifer is a chimeric representation of how women could establish their revenge on the loss of power over their body, the objectification and manipulation of this latter and the inability to naturally fit in society's ideal of the female body. Hence, while 'a woman who kills for pleasure or in the grip of emotion is still hardly accepted in the horror film context in which survival instinct and revenge are sole excuses for unpunished female violence,'<sup>477</sup> Jennifer seems to fall between these two categories. She is torn between the pleasure to acquire beauty and attention from the boys she seduces and kills, as the multiple shots of her admiring herself in mirrors after her killings suggest (*Figure 2*) [0:36:51], and the will to take revenge upon any man who dares to treat her as an object of their own pleasure. Thence, these reflections symbolise the duplicity of the *femme fatale*—from seductress to murderer.



*Figure 2:* Jennifer admiring her newly acquired supernatural glow after devouring Jonas's innards.

Jonathan Markovitz notes in *Quarterly Reviews of Film & Video* that, 'To the extent that [horror] films encourage us to see female paranoia as a reasonable response to a world that is hostile to women, they can offer important critiques of existing power relationships.'<sup>478</sup> When one considers the difference between Jennifer's and Needy's use of their power, one can only realise that Needy's paranoia helped her achieve her principled revenge. Which is to go back to the origins of Jennifer's suffering and to render onto Low Shoulder the hostility they demonstrate towards Jennifer. By going back to the source of women's suffering, Needy thus targets the male-centred, women-degrading society that Low Shoulder embodies.

<sup>476</sup> S. Bell, *Monsters & the Monstrous*, *op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>477</sup> P. Françaix, *Teen Horror*, *op. cit.*, 224.

<sup>478</sup> Jonathan Markovitz, 'Female Paranoia as Survival Skill: Reason or Pathology in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*?' *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 17:3, 2000, 211-220, 219.

### C. Principled Revenge or Why It Is the Male Kind at Large that Is Targeted

In her book, *The Violent Woman*, Neroni notices that '[t]he 1970s films depict the woman's violence as something she must resort to as victim of horrible things that men do to women. Nonetheless, female violence remains in the 1970s, a response to victimization, and in this sense, it continues to fit the traditional image of femininity.'<sup>479</sup> In 2009, nearly forty years later, Jennifer resorts to woman's violence after she experienced traumatizing and horrible events at the hands of men. In a way, Cody and Kusama chose to make society face its flaws and the way it still has to go in terms of violence inflicted upon women. While they do so more or less subtly throughout the film, one scene in particular, which has already been partially discussed, verbally renders onto men this violence and establishes that being a succubus may not be a curse but could actually be a blessing for women.

In this deleted scene, after her paranormal research, Needy, still determined to help and save her best friend, meets Jennifer in a locker room to explain the way she envisions the future for Jennifer. The opening of this scene looks like an homage to Brian De Palma's *Carrie*, and thus to the theme of adolescence as horrific. The girls' showers framed with the fog and the display of nudity (*Figure 3*) creates just the same atmosphere it did in *Carrie* (*Figure 4*) [0:02:20]. If this scene had been preserved in the film, spectators could have grasped more easily the feminist subtext of the film and the depth of its themes. Indeed, this scene in itself exposes first, the pleasure Jennifer feels when she kills, but also the apparently unbreakable bond that exists between the two teenage girls and the toxicity of this bond.



Figures 3 and 4: Similarity of the staging and filming techniques (point of view shot) between *Jennifer's Body* (right) and *Carrie* (1976) (left).

Needy, after hearing Jennifer arguing that menstruation and sagging breasts are curses while devouring human's entrails to stay beautiful and strong is not, tries to reason her best friend by confronting her with the truth. 'You are killing people,' she argues, 'No, I'm killing boys,'

<sup>479</sup> H. Neroni, *The Violent Woman*, *op. cit.*, 33.

answers Jennifer, adding that boys ‘are just *placeholders*, they come and they go.’<sup>480</sup> As Jennifer pronounces this line, she rolls her eyes as if her words were just common sense. While this statement sounds astonishingly misandrist, this is Cody and Kusama cynically and sarcastically commenting on the way society views women and especially women in the context of rape culture. Hence, ‘Even if the whole movie is populated with jokes, *this* isn’t funny.’<sup>481</sup> Abusing a woman’s body is not funny, the same way killing boys on the account of them just coming and going is not funny, even if the film addresses these issues through a horror-comedy.

The camera then, as it has been presenting intercutting shots of the two friends arguing, focuses on Needy’s face through a medium close-up. She is baffled (*Figure 5*) but does not give up on Jennifer or on sisterhood just yet. She states, ‘You’re my *best friend* and I wanna help you,’ hence emphasising the idea that while she does not condone Jennifer’s acts, she is still willing to help her, because Jennifer’s monstrosity, according to Needy, is only a product of Low Shoulder’s evil project and she is not responsible for it. However, she adds ‘but I won’t let you kill *again*.’ She here hints that, while she can keep it to herself that Jennifer killed Jonas, Colin and Ahmet, she cannot let Jennifer kill more boys, which will prove to be wrong as Jennifer’s next victim will be Needy’s very own boyfriend, Chip.



*Figure 5:* Needy looking incredulously at Jennifer, who reduces men to placeholders the same way men reduce her to a sex object/a ritual sacrifice material.

Jennifer then brings one of the lines that will prove Needy that she cannot rely on Jennifer and that Jennifer is simply manipulating her and her feelings as she states, ‘That’s a lose lose. I lose *me* and you lose *me* and then, Needy, you have *nothing*.’<sup>482</sup> Jennifer through this line establishes both the idea that the only thing that matters to Jennifer is herself and that everything

<sup>480</sup> Jennifer Check in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*, my emphasis.

<sup>481</sup> Karyn Kusama to Mr. Beaks, ‘Karyn Kusama and Mr. Beaks Anatomize JENNIFER’S BODY!’, *Ain’t It Cool News?*, 2009, <http://legacy.aintitcool.com/node/42397> (last accessed 14 April 2021), her emphasis. Kusama was here commenting on Jennifer’s sacrifice.

<sup>482</sup> Jennifer Check in K. Kusama, *Jennifer’s Body*, *op. cit.*, my emphasis.

that matters to Needy is also Jennifer. While Needy refutes Jennifer's statement as she claims that she has Chip, neither Jennifer, nor Needy seem truly convinced by this argument. This distrust is precisely why Needy ends up going through principled revenge.

'[Needy] went from being a slightly nerdy high-school student to a violent patient at a mental hospital,'<sup>483</sup> because men destroyed Jennifer, because men created a figurative and literal monster embodied by her best friend and because by the time she found the truth out no men, not even her boyfriend would believe her but would blame her and her paranoia. Hence, while Cody and Kusama created innocent male non-survivors who are not deserving of suffering, they still represent male-created society as oppressive, controlling and dangerous for women. The only way Needy can turn back on this society is by turning their very own weapon against the killers and thus using the bowing knife Nikolai narcissistically used to admire himself in (*Figure 6*) [1:02:59] after using it to kill Jennifer, to put an end to this male supremacy. What is more is that the phallic representation of the knife thrust onto Nikolai's lower stomach bears a major significance to the vision Needy has of the patriarchy and the way she wants to fight it. Just as Jennifer Hills (Sarah Butler) fights her rapists back in *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) Needy seems to adopt the law of retaliation, 'Eye for an eye, Tooth for a tooth', violation and non-consensual penetration of a body for a violated and non-consensually penetrated body.



*Figure 6:* Nikolai narcissistically admiring his reflection after he killed Jennifer, the same way she admires herself after she killed Jonas.

'[P]atriarchy remains the norm in American culture and that what subverts the phallogentric order [...] is disturbing.'<sup>484</sup> Hence, addressing societal issues and commenting on the controversial topics through a horror-comedy might have surprised some moviegoers as well as critics back in 2009. But that is exactly what makes it possible for the film to be understood

<sup>483</sup> Steve Newton, 'Jennifer's Body', *Straight*, 2009, <https://www.straight.com/article-258140/jennifers-body> (last accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>484</sup> D. Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s*, *op. cit.*, 37.

as it is today, because people ‘have learned cultural codes to understand what is presented to them.’<sup>485</sup>

*Jennifer’s Body* presents issues related to female body treatments, the relevance of women in society and how women are treated in general. The way these issues were predominantly interpreted in 2009 when the film was released is radically different from the way they have been generally understood since 2018. The film plays with the antagonization of men and women at a societal level.<sup>486</sup> In some respects, it almost looks like Cody and Kusama ‘conflate feminism with violence,’ which ‘sounds very uninformed.’<sup>487</sup> However, the filmmakers use violence and the horror film only to give dimension to *Jennifer’s Body* and to give some depth to the messages they would like to convey on women’s agency and women’s place in society. Thus, people have learnt that *Jennifer’s Body* does not condone women’s violence against men, nor does it condone men’s violence against women, but it condones women who stand for what they judge to be right and stand against what they estimate to be against their agency.

The stance Cody and Kusama takes in *Jennifer’s Body*, a horror-comedy, is therefore fundamentally linked to feminism, its multiple waves and movements. They comment on the ideology of sex positivism which is at core of the third-wave feminism, on teenage girls’ anger which is one of the principles of the Riot Grrrl movement, on women’s agency an element at stake in postfeminism and on the empowerment of women which characterises the fourth-wave feminism.

Thus, and as Kusama stated in 2009:

There is certainly a long tradition of horror movies that depend on using a girl’s sexuality as a way to suggest her vulnerabilities. Whereas with this movie, I think it’s a little more complicated: the teeth are out. There were a lot of layers to the ideas in the script that functioned on that level for me. It just felt different. It felt like a really cool reversal.<sup>488</sup>

While this difference bothered many critics and moviegoers in the 2009, it has mostly been applauded and praised since 2018.

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<sup>485</sup> J. Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, op. cit., 63.

<sup>486</sup> E. Raube-Wilson and O. Segarra, *Gratuitous Sex and Violence*, op. cit.

<sup>487</sup> Marlowe Buchanan (Alanna Ubach) to Alicia ‘Plum’ Kettle in Michael Trim, ‘F... This’, *Dietland*, season 1, episode 4, AMC, 2018.

<sup>488</sup> Karyn Kusama to Mr. Beaks, *Ain’t It Cool News?*, op. cit.

## Conclusion: Trying to Give Closure to an Ongoing Issue

Sounds as if you've been brainwashed by the patriarchy.  
Your all self-worth isn't wrapped up in pleasing a man.  
(Trish in *The Love Witch*, Ana Biller, 2016)

In 2013, Casali commented on *Jennifer's Body's* paradoxical feminist agenda when she stated:

Though the intent of this role reversal in *Jennifer's Body* is to appropriate and invert the gender bias in the popular American horror genre, it is paradoxical to plug female characters into roles once written for men and then label them empowered.<sup>489</sup>

While this remark seems well-founded, Casali still made shortcuts on the film's genre and the film's aims as she states that Kusama and Cody only borrowed character's roles and inverted them to serve a feminist purpose. Instead of particularizing it in order to see it as an individual piece of work established in a transgeneric picture, she chose to 'identify [the film] with stable, monolithic and non-particularizing generic categories.'<sup>490</sup> I would argue that Casali's shortcut might be related to the general idea that horror codes are stringent and cannot be conceptualised outside of their given purpose.

When the (cinematic) world shallowly depicts women as weak, disposable and interchangeable,<sup>491</sup> especially in the horror genre—and most particularly in the slasher film—, that is when feminist filmmakers willingly attack the system by twisting it from the inside. In the recent years, it seems that more and more filmmakers, in the cinema industry at large—see [Annex 3](#) for an extensive representation of what 'cinema' means nowadays—address the issue of women's representation and women's voices in society. This globalisation of the issues and their representations has had an impact on the reception of *Jennifer's Body* and on its legitimacy in the field of feminist film studies.

### Feminist Horror or How Entertainment Mirrors Society in *Jennifer's Body*

'Research shows that stereotypes portrayed in horror films can affect the social perceptions of [their] viewers.'<sup>492</sup> states Brewer, and that could be the exact reason why Cody chose to address all the themes of girl-on-girl hatred, harmful relationship and toxic society for

<sup>489</sup> J. Casali, *Terror of Girlhood*, *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>490</sup> R. Altman, *Film/Genre*, *op. cit.*, 127.

<sup>491</sup> Kelli Weston, 'Feminist Cinema', in Pamela Hutchinson, ed., *30-Second Cinema*, Brighton, Ivy Press, 2019, 140.

<sup>492</sup> C. Brewer, *The Stereotypic Portrayal of Women in Slasher Films*, *op. cit.*, 14.

girls through a horror pastiche. Because *Jennifer's Body* is a horror film, it features tropes and elements of slasher film and other horror subgenres, but it subverts them. *Jennifer's Body* subverts the horror genre by changing it, changing its target, changing its persecutors, changing its victims and most of all changing the vision spectators have of horror films. It does so with a feminist purpose, because '[t]he general goal of feminist intervention is change,'<sup>493</sup> and while 'most [feminist horror films] are DIY shorts with high shock value, which aim to raise feminist and social issues while encouraging to take a stand,'<sup>494</sup> *Jennifer's Body* did exactly that but through one of Hollywood's biggest production companies—20<sup>th</sup> century Fox—as to reach out to a larger audience.

On top of that, Kusama's film also inscribes itself in 'women's cinema' and in the 'woman's film' because not only does it adopt a feminist agenda and address issues that concerns women by reinventing the tropes and codes of the horror film genre to serve a feminist purpose, but because it also asks its audience to question society and to connect *Jennifer's Body* to the horrific reality that it emphasises. de Lauretis, in 'Strategies of Coherence', states that,

[T]he phrase 'feminist cinema' is a notation for a process rather than an aesthetic or typological category: the notation for a process of reinterpretation and retextualisation of cultural images and narratives whose strategies of coherence engage the spectator's identification through narrative and visual pleasure and yet succeed in drawing 'the Real' into the film's texture.<sup>495</sup>

With this definition in mind, it seems only evident that, in 2009, Kusama and Cody, two feminist women, wanted to make a feminist film for women, for the purpose of denouncing and condemning the influence that the patriarchal hegemony has on men and women relationships, but also on women-to-women relationships. They wanted this film to resonate for women and to act as a trigger for misogynistic men who thought they would get a chance to see a naked Fox getting tortured. While Toril Moi argues that '[t]here is not, unfortunately, such a thing as an intrinsically feminist text: given the right historical and social context, all text can be recuperated by the ruling powers—or appropriated by the feminist opposition,'<sup>496</sup> it seems difficult to imagine *Jennifer's Body* being appropriated by anything but the feminist opposition.

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<sup>493</sup> Jackie Bryars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*, London, Routledge, 1991, 24.

<sup>494</sup> M. Michaud, *Offscreen*, *op. cit.*

<sup>495</sup> T. de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, *op. cit.*, 115.

<sup>496</sup> Toril Moi, 'Feminist Literary Criticism', in Ann Jefferson and David Robey, eds. *Modern Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1982), London, B. T. Batsford, 1986, 204-221, 220.

## Cultural Changes: When the Political Invites Itself in the Popular Culture

In 2018, ‘the culture may have changed, but *Jennifer's Body* hasn't.’<sup>497</sup> The culture mainly changed—regarding *Jennifer's Body*'s reception—due to one of the ‘effect[s] of the #MeToo movement [which] is that it has brought to the fore a broad range of feminist discourses,’<sup>498</sup> which were not as openly addressed back in 2009. The audience now better understands what was at stake in *Jennifer's Body*—the girl-on-girl hatred, the unpunished violence against women, the legitimacy of openly sexually active women—which was not portrayed in the trailer, or the posters, or the DVD covers, but which was at the heart of *Jennifer's Body* nonetheless. That distinction might come from the fact that,

[d]ependent on where the individual is positioned within the social structure, and how they are shaped by affiliations associated with class, gender, sexuality and/or ethnicity, reader/spectator response is determined either by aligning with, negotiating or even opposing the ‘preferred’ meanings at the moment of reception.<sup>499</sup>

Consequently, because the feminist political landscape was not, in 2009, the way it has been since 2018 and the 4<sup>th</sup> wave feminism, spectators’ response was not the same either.

What is more to the change in the reception of *Jennifer's Body*, and which might carry even more weight, is that:

There has been a shift in like who gets to criticise films. So, like back in 2009 it was like, you know, predominantly straight white males that were making more or less opinions, in online film forums. But now, I think we're getting to a place where this straight male gaze isn't seen as the end of it all. There are definitely more voices.<sup>500</sup>

Hence, the feminist dimension of the film and its queer elements have touched a larger audience than classic horror films are expected to. It is thus reaching for a public which might have been ostracized in the past but can finally relate to a film and its theme and openly comment about it.

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<sup>497</sup> L. Peitzman, *Buzzfeed News*, *op. cit.*

<sup>498</sup> Cristelle Maury and David Roche, ‘Afterword - Women Who Kill After #MeToo’, in Cristelle Maury and David Roche, eds., *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Film and Series of the Post-Feminist Era*, London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney, Bloomsbury Academics, 2020, 331-333, 331.

<sup>499</sup> J. McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies*, *op. cit.*, 40.

<sup>500</sup> Steffi in Steffi and Stefan, ‘Jennifer's Body (2009): Megan Fox’, *Diva Dailies*, season 1, episode 38, 2020, <https://divadailiespod.simplecast.com/episodes/jennifers-body-2009-megan-fox> (last accessed 15 April 2021)

Women's issues—e.g., abusive partners, harassment, assault—which have been kept rather quiet for a while but are being addressed massively on-screen today, whether it is through the horror genre, just as Cody and Kusama did with *Jennifer's Body*, and others with them, such as Leigh Whannell's *Invisible Man* (2020); or if directors choose to tackle the issues more extensively and lengthily—though not necessarily related to the horror genre—through TV Series, such as Jonathan Entwistle with *I Am Not Okay with This* (2020) based on the comic book of the same name by Charles Forsman (2017), Michaela Coel with *I May Destroy You* (2020) or Marti Noxon's *Dietland*<sup>501</sup> (2018); or even directors who choose to link reality and fiction through documentaries such as *Roll Red Roll* (Nancy Schwartzman, 2018) and *Team USA* (Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk, 2020). It seems now that misogyny, violence against women and unpunished men cannot be silenced issues anymore and that the cinematic field at large has decided to tackle this burden of society in an extensive way since the rise of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements.

As the fictional character Kitty Montgomery (Julianna Margulies) states in *Dietland*, 'Women have been angry for a long time, a long time. So, is it surprising that after all the abuse they've taken, they are finally fighting back with deadly force instead of words?'<sup>502</sup> *Jennifer's Body* seems to show that both words and actions are needed to create a reaction and to gain power. Jennifer was literally empowered through her violent acts and the film gained supporters as its narrative arcs were better understood and better anchored in society as time passed. This might explain why some critics now argue that *Jennifer's Body* 'is one of the films that gets better as time passes, especially as society becomes more critical of misogynistic reviews.'<sup>503</sup>

### As Above, So Below: Correspondence Between Fiction and Reality

In 2018, Valeska Griffiths stated, 'Jennifer's Body is a film that seems to polarize audiences, *whether or not they've actually seen the film.*'<sup>504</sup> I choose here to emphasise the idea that people commented and critiqued the film without even seeing it. This element is

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<sup>501</sup> Hannah Giorgis even made a connection between *Jennifer's Body* and *Dietland* when she states, 'Almost 10 years [after *Jennifer's Body*'s released], the pilot of the new show *Dietland* vibrates with a similarly illicit vengeance: A group of women operating under the blanket name Jennifer has begun to kill men accused of sexual assault and assorted misogynist misdeeds.' (Hannah Giorgis, 'Dietland Envisions a World of Female Revenge', *The Atlantic*, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/06/dietland-envisions-a-world-of-female-revenge/562088/> [last accessed 16 April 2021]).

<sup>502</sup> Kitty Montgomery in Amy York Rubin, 'Plum Tuckered', *Dietland*, season 1, episode 5, AMC, 2018.

<sup>503</sup> Oktariani, 'Male Gaze and Bad Marketing Make "Jennifer's Body" an Underrated Feminist Horror', *Magdalene*, 2019, <https://magdalene.co/story/jennifers-bodyunderrated-feminist-horror-film> (last accessed 9 February 2021)

<sup>504</sup> V. Griffiths, *Grim, op. cit.*, 15, my emphasis.

fundamental as ‘audiences are as important as authorship and representation, since consumers can play an active role in what characters are developed and what products are deemed commercially viable.’<sup>505</sup> Scriptwriter and director both knew, in 2009, that *Jennifer’s Body* ‘was a specific type of film that was gonna have a specific kind of audience.’<sup>506</sup> Admittedly, this specific kind of audience was made up of young girls and perhaps members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, through the years and through the lessening of the critiques reviewing *Jennifer’s Body* as sexist and misandrist, by the means of a less sexist and misogynistic society, Kusama’s film was able to touch a large public and to retrospectively comment on the evolution Kusama and Cody wanted to see in society with *Jennifer’s Body*.

‘The point here is that what is chosen from the archive to be retrieved and analysed is dependent on how well the filmmaker fits the feminist political world-view.’<sup>507</sup> It seems that the current era is the best suited to *Jennifer’s Body* in terms of Kusama and Cody’s feminist political worldview. People now praise *Jennifer’s Body*’s message because it gets along with what society now condemns legally and through the medium of fiction. For instance, the rape case of Steubenville has been silenced for six years until the documentary *Red Roll Red* came out and pointed out that men who collectively rape a woman, laugh about it through a video posted online and get covered by their school administration should not be accepted in society. Kusama and Cody denounced this very same system and conceptions in 2009, and once again, it had to wait almost a decade to find its voice in the political environment.

### The Show Must Go on Until No Battle Is Needed Anymore

‘Many people assume we are more “progressive” about gender issues now than we ever have been in the past, implying a linear view of history. However, as the backlashes against feminism show, societies have a tendency to move back as well as forward.’<sup>508</sup> Therefore, while *Jennifer’s Body* did find its seemingly rightful place in society after the backlash it

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<sup>505</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes, ‘Introduction: Gothic and Horror Heroism in the Age of Postfeminism’, *Revenant: Critical Stand Creative Studies of the Supernatural*, 2019, 8-21, 14, <http://www.revenantjournal.com/issues/gothic-feminisms-guest-editors-frances-kamm-and-tamar-jeffersmcdonald/> (last accessed 7 February 2021)

<sup>506</sup> Diablo Cody in *The Boo Crew*, *op. cit.*

<sup>507</sup> J. McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies*, *op. cit.*, 114.

<sup>508</sup> S. Chaudhuri, *Feminist film Theorists*, *op; cit.*, 127.

This remark is contemporaneous with something Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane noticed seventeen years prior to Chaudhuri when they said, ‘[It] is particularly tempting to write a history of feminist theory – precisely because it is feminist – which stresses or even implies “progress”. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that, even perhaps especially with feminism, there is the ever present potential of regression, uneven development, failure and disillusion, not to mention misunderstanding.’ (‘The Female Spectator: Contexts and Directions’, *Camera Obscura*, 20/21, 1989, 5-27, 15). It thus seems to be an ongoing process that might take another seventeen years to evolve.

experienced at the time of its release, it still fails to win unanimous support in 2021. In March 2021, Eve Tuchnet wrote a negative review of *Jennifer's Body* regretting the fact that '[t]here is something insistently heteronormative about the movie' and that Chip plays 'too big of a role,'<sup>509</sup> which was, according to her, unnecessary. Critiques thus evolved, and the different elements noted in those critiques evolved with them, but it seems that *Jennifer's Body* still has its detractors and that its feminist tone is still a subject of debate more than ten years after its release.

However, 'If there's any wisdom to be taken away from Jennifer's Body, it's that Rotten Tomatoes is often wrong and should be regarded with skepticism.'<sup>510</sup> Reviews are made by individuals who have their own beliefs, conceptions and knowledge, and thus their reviews should be understood as such. They simply are 'opinion[s], dressed in an agenda, couched in propaganda.'<sup>511</sup> It is the consensus of the film and its evolution—which has *not* been updated on *Rotten Tomatoes* since 2009, for example—that needs to be taken into account to truly reflect on the reception at large. Moreover, 'we must take films and fiction in general for what they are: representations.'<sup>512</sup> Films, and especially horror films, represent society through fiction. *Jennifer's Body* is not believable if read literally, but Cody and Kusama would not have resolved to create a film that comments on certain issues if these issues did not exist. 'Oftentimes, I think [horror] reveals something ugly about our world that is just too devastating to face in any sort of real way.'<sup>513</sup> confessed Kusama in 2009. When ugly means 'sexpot' Fox reduced to a gargoyle-like succubus, dripping with blood and other body fluids, it is even more devastating for the shallow and women-reducing patriarchal society of 2009 and still devastating for some who still seem unable to grasp *Jennifer's Body's* message.

### *Jennifer's Body* – Film Studies and the Apparition of the #MeToo Horror

*Jennifer's Body* was released in 2009, more than ten years ago. Nonetheless, analysing the film—its themes and subtexts, and its way to portray them—in 2021 not only allows to take a step back on the message the filmmakers wanted to convey, the marketing of the film and its reception in 2009, but also enables viewers and critics to reflect on social issues, the way they are dealt with in the horror genre and the way they evolve through time.

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<sup>509</sup> Eve Tuchnet, 'Pleathers: I watch "Jennifer's Body"', *Patheos*, 2021, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/evetushnet/2021/03/pleathers-i-watch-jennifers-body.html> (last accessed 15 April 2021)

<sup>510</sup> G. Simons, *The Screening Room*, *op. cit.*

<sup>511</sup> Alicia 'Plum' Kettle in M. Trim, *Dietland*, *op. cit.*

<sup>512</sup> D. Roche, *Représentations*, *op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>513</sup> Karyn Kusama to Mr. Beaks, *Ain't It Cool News?*, *op. cit.*

Roche worked extensively on the way women were portrayed in 1970s and 1980s slasher films and the way they are portrayed in their 2000s remakes.<sup>514</sup> He argues that women and especially heroines in the 2000s are more assertive, more resourceful and at the same time more feminine, and more sexualised than they were in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>515</sup>—his most striking example concerns Erin (Jessica Biel) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Marcus Nispel, 2003). *Jennifer's Body* goes along those lines of presenting strong and assertive female protagonist who fend for themselves—and who become women who kill after their victimisation.<sup>516</sup> However, another element which is at core in *Jennifer's Body* has its importance in its discussion in 2021.

In 2021, society is mark with the rise of social media (Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and other online platforms) which enables activists such as those of the fourth-wave feminism to convey their ideologies globally and instantly share them with the whole world, but which also enhance people's and more specifically teenagers' toughness against each other online. Hence, adolescence and the horror it might represent is once again targeted as a major theme in horror genre. *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014) for example exploit the impunity of filming someone (a teenage girl) in a vulnerable moment (drunk and passed out), posting it online and unapologetically shaming that person until it has non-reversible consequences. *Jennifer's Body* exploits the same themes of unapologetic meanness between teenagers and unpunished violence, but it also comments on the fact that these issues are not new and must be addressed because 'if a political idea is showing up in mass culture, that's because it's happening somewhere else in a more concentrated, grassroots way.'<sup>517</sup>

The inscription of *Jennifer's Body* in the late 2010s and early 2020s feminist and horror landscape thus act as a way to re-evaluate the film and to give it new meanings. It does not come as a surprise if thesis and dissertation concerning *Jennifer's Body* emerged in 2010s after the founding and more specifically after the explosion of the #MeToo movement in the United-States.<sup>518</sup> *Jennifer's Body* now acts as a classic teen horror film because it represents a milestone in the representation of women in the horror film and in the portrayal of victimisation, sexualisation, objectification of the female body and its reassertion,

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<sup>514</sup> See Roche (2013, 2014, 2015 and 2017 for example).

<sup>515</sup> David Roche, 'Revoir les Final Girls: *Massacre à la Tronçonneuse* (Marcus Nispel, 2003) et *Halloween* (Rob Zombie, 2007)', *Interfaces, INFORMS*, 35, 2013, 165-176.

<sup>516</sup> C. Maury and D. Roche, 'Introduction', *Women Who Kill*, *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>517</sup> S. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, *op. cit.*, 303.

<sup>518</sup> See Casali (2013) and more specifically Egan (2017) and Escribano (2019).

appropriation and celebration by women. Fourth-wave feminism and postfeminism make it a point of honour to prone women's empowerment and so did *Jennifer's Body*. The film and its filmmakers thus comment on how a woman is 'just as much of a human being as any man but [does not] always get treated like one,'<sup>519</sup> and the way it can be changed both in the horror film and in society.

Since 2009, multiple horror films followed the lines of *Jennifer's Body* in terms of representation of young female characters and their empowerment and acquired dangerousness through tragic events. *The Moth Diaries* (Mary Haron, 2011), *American Mary* (Jen and Sylvia Soska, 2012), *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *Unfriended* (Simon Verhoeven, 2014), *Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat, 2020), *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020) or *Becky* (Cary Murnion, 2020) are only few examples that illustrate how topical female adolescence, toxic relationships and violation of the female body and their consequences are in society and how they still have to be addressed and tackled.

Hell might be teenage girls, but '[i]n a society that's slowly waking up to the trauma of female adolescence—an experience often colored by unwanted sexual attention and objectification—it can be cathartic to see teen girls lose their shit on film.'<sup>520</sup> As Lena Wilson states, these #MeToo-horror films 'propose alternate universes in which some young women can escape their patriarchal confines by slicing their way out: Monster girls are more worried about how to get away with murder than they are about crossing their legs.'<sup>521</sup> Furthermore, and as concluding remarks, the discussions and research in film studies evolving around these films reveal that #MeToo horror films might have become a new category<sup>522</sup> where *Jennifer's Body* found its righteous place. In a sense, *Jennifer's Body* might have been a precursor in the #MeToo-related horror genre that has been flourishing ever since.

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<sup>519</sup> S. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, *op. cit.*, 17. Marcus here quotes '[a]n unsigned monologue glitters with rage' (17).

<sup>520</sup> Lena Wilson, 'In Horror Movie, It's the Age of the Monster Girl', *Slate*, 2018, <https://slate.com/culture/2018/06/metoo-produces-more-horror-movies-where-young-women-bite-back.html> (last accessed 17 May 2021)

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>522</sup> See Bordy (2019), Posada (2020) and Macaaron (2020) for example.

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<sup>523</sup> Some of the films may fall into different genres but they have been sorted here according to the way they have been treated in the thesis.

<sup>524</sup> 'Horror Films' here is to be understood as the horror genre at large and does not particularise the different genres that can be observed in [Annex 1](#).

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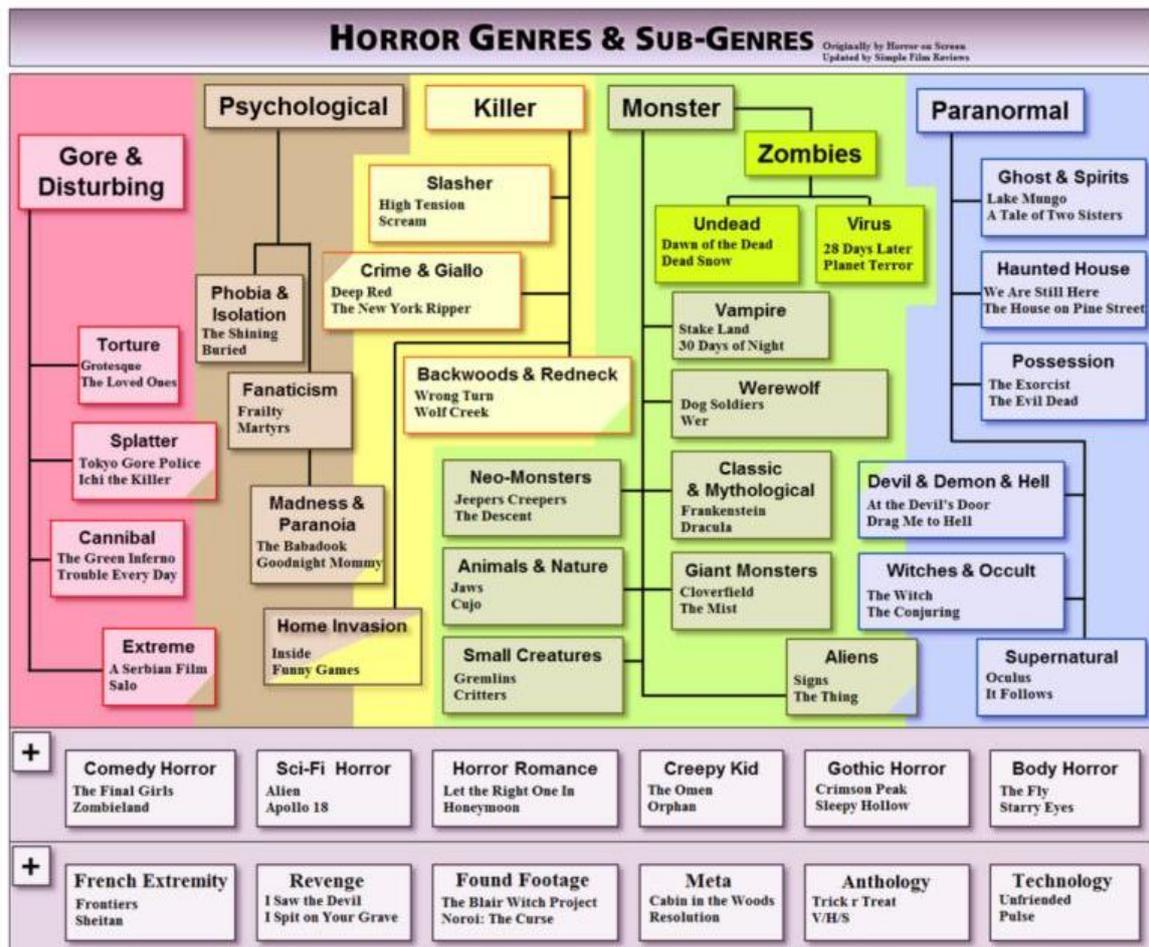
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## Annexes

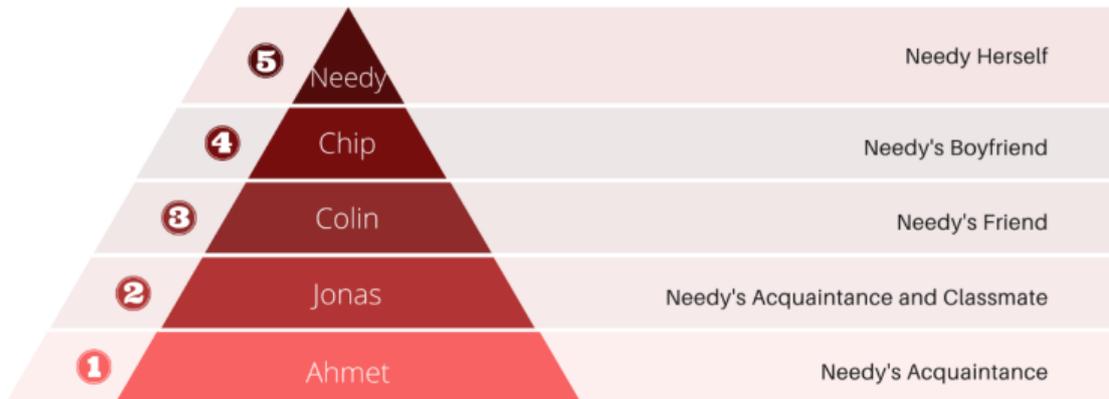
### Annex 1 – Horror Genres and Their Subgenres

This infographic was retrieved from ‘Horror Genres and Subgenres’ (Horror on Screen, *Popcorn Horror*, 2014, <https://popcornhorror.com/genres/> [last accessed 19 May 2021])



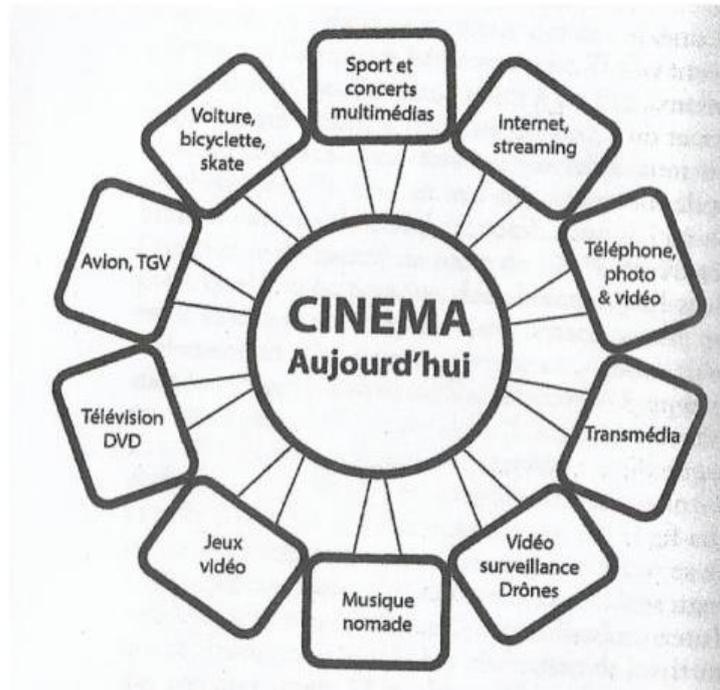
This infographic is not exhaustive but provides a general overview of the horror genres and their subgenres.

## Annex 2 – Hierarchy of Jennifer’s Victims and the Correlations with Needy’s Level of Affection Toward Them



### Annex 3 – What Cinema Means in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

This infographic was retrieved from *Une Brève Histoire du Cinéma (1895-2015)* (Laurent Jullier and Martin Barnier, Paris, Pluriel/Fayard, 2017, 394).



This infographic illustrates the concept that cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is multi-dimensional and is more than ever representative of the culture it evolves in – which is more connect and which heavily relies on technologies.