

Rhode Island College

## Digital Commons @ RIC

---

Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate  
Research and Major Papers Overview

Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate  
Research and Major Papers

---

2013

### Terrors of Girlhood

Julie Casali  
*Rhode Island College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/etd>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Casali, Julie, "Terrors of Girlhood" (2013). *Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers Overview*. 86.

<https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/etd/86>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers Overview by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@ric.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@ric.edu).

TERRORS OF GIRLHOOD: IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE

ADOLESCENT FEMALE IN *JENNIFER'S BODY*

by Julie Casali

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts  
in Art with Concentration in Media Studies

Department of Art

The School of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2013

## ABSTRACT

Since the birth of the genre, American horror filmmakers have posed female characters as prey and objects of sexual desire. Adolescent women in particular act as both the victim and as eye candy for viewers. 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. Moreover, though the popular horror film narrative tends to explore the fringes of human nature, few horror films openly deal with the fears and concerns of women outside of threats to their physical being.

In the past decade, the horror genre has produced a new crop of young female characters who challenge the tropes of traditional horror films by trading in their role of damsel in distress for the role of the antagonist and anti-hero. What's more, these films deal with themes relevant to young women, such as body image issues, tumultuous relationships, and sexual repression. In this thesis, I analyze the popular American horror film *Jennifer's Body* (2009), which features two violent female protagonists and explores the horrors of adolescent female friendships. In my analysis, I examine whether or not the re-imagined female characters in this film are a progressive reconstruction of gender, and identify ideological conventions of the horror genre that continue to denigrate femininity and female sexuality.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, firstly, to my advisor Dr. Bonnie MacDonald, whose experience, understanding, and instruction were invaluable to this thesis project, and whose insightfulness kept me motivated and inspired throughout the writing process. I would like to thank Dr. Russell Potter, Nancy Bockbrader, and Dr. Joan Dagle for the assistance they provided at all levels of this research project. A very special thanks goes out to Dr. Vincent Bohlinger, for it was in his classroom that I developed my love and aptitude for film theory and film criticism.

I would like to thank my friends and family for the extra support they have given me since I began this project so many months ago. I owe a debt of gratitude to my friend Amanda Casiano. Our philosophical discussions and exchanges of ideas helped elevate this project to a level of perceptiveness I could not have achieved on my own. I also could not have completed this project without the encouragement and weekly pep talks provided by my friend and colleague, Lelia Leite. Finally, I must thank my partner, Thomas DiGrazia, whose love and patience were repeatedly tested during this process, and whose capacity for such is seemingly endless.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction. Girl Meets Gore: A Volatile Love Story	1
Chapter 1. The Nature of the Beast: Reading Gender in the Horror Genre	8
Chapter 2. From Scared to Scary: The Evolution of the Leading Lady in Contemporary Popular American Horror Films	12
Chapter 3. Eating Boys and Terrorizing Girls: Analysis of <i>Jennifer's Body</i>	25
Chapter 4. Conclusions: The Reaping	54
Bibliography	58
Filmography	62

## INTRODUCTION

### Girl Meets Gore: A Volatile Love Story

Dancing through the minefield of the contemporary horror film, with its bloody display of the all-too-often female body in bits and pieces, is fraught with danger for women. But pleasure shares the field with danger.

- Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror*, p.69

Unlike many critics and theorists who write about horror film, my first few horror movie experiences did not incite an enduring love of all things scary and spooky. In fact, my initial exposure nearly turned me off of horror movies for good. My father was always a fan of the genre, having grown up with Hammer Film Productions and Roger Corman B-movies. His Saturday afternoons were typically spent on the couch watching marathons of his favorite campy horror flicks. One of these Saturday afternoons, when I was six, he let me sit with him while he watched the 1979 low-budget classic *Phantasm* (Don Coscarelli). By today's standards, the movie is about as fear-provoking as an unexpected breeze, but back then it scared the bejeebers out of me. I would lie awake at night imagining The Tall Man standing at the foot of my bed waiting to zombify my brain for one of his sentinel spheres. I wouldn't go into my own backyard alone for fear of being abducted by an alien undertaker and his hoard of evil mutant dwarves.

A few years after my first horror-movie-freakout, my Dad rented *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) for my sister's thirteenth birthday party. Being only nine and still pretty much afraid of my own shadow, I was not allowed to watch the movie, but without anyone knowing I snuck into the hallway leading to our living room to catch a glimpse of the forbidden film. I poked my head around the corner just as Regan spun her head backwards and puked green bile all over a priest. After a few minutes of watching, I ran out the front door of my house to escape the horrible sights and sounds that were coming out of our family TV. I sat on the front porch for over an hour waiting for the movie to end, never telling my parents that I had seen the unseeable. Something happened to me psychically when watching *The Exorcist* beyond the normal heebie-jeebies; it was the first time I had ever identified with a character in a horror film. Regan was not so dissimilar from myself at the time. She is a seemingly happy and healthy pre-teen living in a single-parent household. But after she is possessed by the ultimate evil, her body is desecrated and defiled from the inside out. I couldn't help but think that the same thing could happen to me, and as I lay in bed that night trying to fall asleep, the stomach-turning images of Regan's mutilated and contorted body repeated in my mind like a demented slide show. I was so anxious that I upchucked all over my Muppets bed sheets and told my parents that I had just eaten too much birthday cake. I didn't sleep well for months, and after the traumatic experience of watching *The Exorcist*, I swore I would never watch another scary movie again.

By age sixteen, I was starting to feel ashamed of my fear of horror movies (and of my own basement, for that matter). On Friday nights, my friends would go to the movie theaters to see the latest horror flicks, and you can only claim to be babysitting so many times before people become suspicious. So I decided I would actively break myself of my irrational fears. Along with forcing myself to walk around in the basement without the lights on, I began renting horror movies on my own. I re-introduced myself to the genre by watching “safe” movies that blended horror with humor, like the 1981 low-budget masterpiece *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi). Over time, however, I had to watch even the most gruesome horror movies in the dark with the front door unlocked to get any sort of scare out of them. I noticed early on in my ventures in popular horror film that the female characters were kind of predictable. They were usually clumsy and inept, often tripping over themselves, sobbing, and cowering in corners. And they only stood up against their attackers after being continuously and relentlessly tormented. I found myself asking, “Why do girls never fight back in these movies?” When I should have been asking, “Why do horror film writers never write girls that fight back?” Or write female antagonists, for that matter.

My relationship to horror films changed again when I began studying film in college and developed an interest in feminist theory. The more I scrutinized the gender politics in the horror genre, the more frustrated I became with the implication of my once favorite horror films, particularly the timeless correlation



between adolescent female characters' sexual activities and the severity of their suffering. I went on a quest to find horror films that featured complex and adept female characters whose expressions of sexuality weren't merely fuel for antagonists. A friend suggested *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000), a Canadian film about a teenage girl struggling with her transition into becoming a werewolf. The subtext of *Ginger Snaps* is transparent, using lycanthropy as a metaphor for female puberty, but more significantly, it deals with tumultuous adolescent relationships and the general malaise of being a teenage girl. It was the first time I had ever seen a mainstream horror movie featuring storylines that were representational of young women's true-life fears and experiences. To my delight, Hollywood was on a bender, producing a number of horror films within the decade that centered on gutsy, multi-dimensional, adolescent female characters. Films like *Ginger Snaps*, *May* (Lucky McGee, 2002), *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005), *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007), and *Jennifer's Body* (Karen Kusama, 2009) deal with the politics of being female, and feature young female characters who are repulsive, creepy, bestial, and destructive, the complete antitheses of the traditional damsel in distress.

The first time I watched *Jennifer's Body*, I was disappointed. A friend and I who were fans of the writer's first movie, *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), went to see it while it was still in theaters. We were expecting to watch a creepy horror film with a female monster, but the tone was more black-comedy than horror. *Jennifer's*

*Body* is comparable to the 1988 high school satire *Heathers* (Lehmann), only with the popular girl disemboweling her classmates instead of just bullying them. I had forgotten about the film until I came across it while channel surfing a few years later and decided to give it a second try. This time around, I was able to see past my expectations and find value in the story and its nuances. While not without its failures, *Jennifer's Body* is the filmmakers' attempt to address some of the less flattering characteristics of adolescent women in the horror movies of the last three decades. Moreover, the film features two female lead characters who have purpose beyond monster bait, and deals candidly with female sexuality, female violence, and toxic relationships.

The writers of these new horror films imagine women in roles beyond the antagonized, and use the violent and horrific themes to confront viewers with the frightening reality that the average teen girl faces during the difficult years of adolescence. Adolescence for a young woman is a period often fraught with bullying, pressure to conform, social rejection, negative body images, eating disorders, sexual discovery, and a multitude of other fearsome insecurities and anxieties that lend themselves to horror storytelling. As delighted as I was to discover these re-imagined female characters, I couldn't help but notice that the filmmakers relied on several horror movie clichés in their depiction of adolescent female sexuality. In the 1970s and 1980s, horror filmmakers exhausted the use of sexuality as a cautionary and exploitative plot device. For females during this

period of the genre, engaging in sexual acts invariably lead to a painful and horrible death. 30 years later I still find myself yelling at the movie screen, “No, no, no! You are so going to die now!” after a female character has sex in a horror movie.

The recurring theme of punishment for sexual behavior and the increase in female monsters in the horror genre led me on a search for an analysis of the type of roles allotted for young women in contemporary popular horror film. Finding a lack of critical discourse on women in horror beyond Carol Clover’s pivotal, but dated, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), I decided to perform my own examination. For the foundation of my research, I used the works of film theorists dealing with gender in the horror genre. I chose to look specifically at commercial American horror films, as it permitted me to focus on the ethos that emerges from the popular films of the U.S., and how it reflects the American ideological treatment of gender. Initially I planned to perform an analysis of all the aforementioned female-centered horror films, as they each offer atypical and multifaceted depictions of teenage girls; however, to keep this thesis a readable length, I have given an overview of the popular American horror films that inspired the new crop of horror heroines, primarily the exploitation and slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s, and then performed an in-depth analysis of *Jennifer’s Body*, gauging it against the tropes I identified in the films of the previous decades.

In the first chapter of this thesis, *The Nature of the Beast: Reading Gender in the Horror Genre*, I map out the framework for my analysis, explaining the value of reading the rhetoric of a film. I discuss the importance of analyzing the horror genre for the unique insight it provides into our treatment of gendered violence and sexuality. In Chapter 2, *From Scared to Scary: The Evolution of the Leading Lady in Contemporary Popular American Horror Films*, I outline the female characters in the exploitation and slasher films of the 1970s and the 1980s. I illustrate the systematic operation of gender stereotypes in the genre, and point at repeated themes that have damned female characters as prey for vicious killers and as victims of their own biology. In Chapter 3, *Eating Boys and Terrorizing Girls: Analysis of Jennifer's Body*, I use the framework established in the first chapter and the tropes identified in Chapter 2 to decode and analyze *Jennifer's Body*. I discuss the codes and behaviors used in the depiction of the characters that reinforce an ideological perception of female violence and female sexuality. I explain the ways in which the female characters have successfully challenged the shortcomings of their predecessors, and the ways they continue to restrict and vilify the empowered female. Finally, in Chapter 4, *Conclusions: The Reaping*, I summarize my findings and assess the new trends in the depictions of the adolescent female in the horror genre.

## 1. THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

### Reading Gender in the Horror Genre

“Horror movies are a good case in which the devil is most literally in the details.”

- Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead*, p. 10

For centuries, we have been fascinated with the telling of horror stories and titillated by bizarre and horrific imagery. At the heart of these stories is typically a monster, a being that deviates from normality and embodies our fear of the unknown. There are many theories as to why we take so much pleasure in scaring ourselves with monsters, such as the adrenaline rush we get from looking at and hearing things we know are socially unacceptable, or a natural curiosity driving us to seek out the ugliest side of our humanity. Regardless of our motivation, the monsters that appear in fiction are an insight into our cultural zeitgeist, or our collective fears and anxieties. In his article, “The American Nightmare: Horror in the 1970s,” Robin Wood explores the idea of the monster, or “the Other” as he describes it. He outlines the basic formula for the Hollywood horror narrative, stating:

The formula provides three variables: normality, the monster, and crucially, the relationship between the two. The definition of normality in horror

films is in general boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them. The monster is, of course, much more protean, changing from period to period as society's basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments.<sup>1</sup>

Because horror stories tap into our innate fears, the horror film genre is a significant area of research for cultural theorists. Analyzing the rhetoric of the popular horror film narrative can tell us just as much about the social classification of gender during a certain period as the headlines of popular newspapers. In her book, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*, Hillary Neroni argues, "Outbreaks of violent women in film – such as the femme fatale in film noir – occur at moments in history when a clear difference between genders ceases to be operative."<sup>2</sup> When the United States joined efforts in World War II and men began leaving their roles as family providers to fight in the war, women had to take jobs in order to support themselves and their families. Once the war ended, women were reluctant to give up their newly found pride and independence to return to their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers. During this time, a trend emerged in the depiction of

---

<sup>1</sup> Robin Wood. "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 1970s." *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 31.

<sup>2</sup> Hillary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*. (Albany: State University of New York, 2005), 20.

women in the film noir genre; female characters became the primary antagonist of the male lead. These female characters are ruthlessly ambitious, sexually manipulative, and markedly independent, often without a husband or children.

Since monsters oppose our sense of normality, examining the female monster in fiction offers a comprehensive insight into the collective fears pertaining to the female and femininity. Female monsters are a particular curiosity both in their rarity, since men are typically associated with violent behavior, and in the manner in which they exhibit their monstrosity. Neroni points out that in American culture, violent behavior is viewed as inherently masculine, and though the performance of violence is not exclusive to men, female characters that act out violently are invariably coded as having stereotypically masculine traits. Neroni continues to explain, “The intertwined nature of violence and masculinity is one of the reasons the violent woman is so threatening: she breaks up this symbolic relationship between violence and masculinity.”<sup>3</sup> The violent female jeopardizes the illusion of feminine purity and the monopolized power of masculinity. This tension exists because we reduce gender to a rigid binary system, where biological women and men adhere to specific behavioral scripts. For this reason, female monsters are implicit representations of androgynous figures demonstrating the fluidity of gender and sexual identity. Though the majority of the films mentioned in this thesis feature characters whose sexual identities are explicitly placed within

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 45.

this binary system, their actions and behaviors are implicitly coded as something more ambiguous.

Rigid perceptions of gender are entrenched in language and symbolism, thus we easily take for granted and overlook the codification of gender ideology in cultural texts. By examining the construction of gender shaped by the coding and behavior of the characters through story and visual elements, we can decipher the explicit, implicit, and unintended ideological meaning put forth by the filmmaker. In the upcoming chapters, I read and interpret the characterization, story lines, mise-en-scene, and symbolic representations of gender in popular American horror film and pose salient questions designed to uncover the systematic treatment of adolescent women in the horror film genre. Since horror films play off our collective fears, I analyze the repeated horrific elements of the films and examine what they tell us about our anxieties related to adolescence, female violence, and female sexuality.



## 2. FROM SCARED TO SCARY

### The Evolution of the Leading Lady in Popular American Horror Films

“No one ever thinks chicks do shit like this. Trust me. A girl can only be a slut, a bitch, a tease, or the virgin next door.”

- Ginger Fitzgerald, *Ginger Snaps*

There is a long tradition of women screaming in fright in American horror film. Even before the introduction of sound in film, a woman's role in horror has been to be scared and vulnerable. From Mary Philbin's horrified gasps in *The Phantom of the Opera* (Julian, 1925) to Janet Leigh's infamous cries of terror in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), the torture, rape, and murder of female characters is the nitty-gritty of the American horror film narrative. Film historian Gregory Mank points out in his book *Women in Horror Films, 1930s*, “There was, perhaps, something oddly askew in an era where a movie actress couldn't sound the slightest sigh of sexual pleasure, yet did unleash a wild, orgasmic scream whenever a monster crossed her path.”<sup>4</sup> For decades, audiences have contentedly watched women terrorized on the movie screen, but if a female character in a horror film willingly partakes in sexual intercourse, her unfortunate and violent fate is sealed. The oldest rule of the American horror film narrative is that for female characters

---

<sup>4</sup> Gregory W. Mank, *Women in Horror Films, 1930s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 1.

to survive until the end of the film, consensual sex is not an option. However, non-consensual sex, or the threat of rape, is a common plot device used in horror film, and was hugely popular in the rape-revenge subgenre that emerged in the late 1970s.

The female leads in horror films prior to the 1970s were traditionally the eye-catching damsels in distress. They were terrorized by werewolves, mummies, zombies, vampires, ghosts, aliens, psycho killers, and sexual predators, and all while maintaining a perfectly chaste and gorgeous appearance. If the female characters in the horror films of the mid-century survived to see their antagonists defeated, it was due to the aid of the male protagonist. A significant change in these depictions came in the early 1970s with the termination of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1968 and implementation of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system. The MPAA ratings system resulted in an increase in explicit content in mainstream horror films. Leonard Leff explains in *Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood Censorship, and the Production Code*, “By 1970, despite protests from conservatives, nude scenes had become common, and actors peppered motion picture soundtracks with the words ‘bitch,’ ‘goddamn,’ and ‘shit.’”<sup>5</sup> Mainstream horror filmmakers suddenly had the freedom to challenge the

---

<sup>5</sup> Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood Censorship, and the Production Code* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 276.

puritanical standards of female behavior and to employ sexual and violent themes once prohibited by the production code, albeit with a restricted “R” rating.

*The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), one of the top grossing and graphically explicit films of the 1970s, centers on 12 year-old Regan who becomes possessed by a demon just as she begins to show signs of puberty. The demon completely takes over her body and performs vile acts of self-mutilation as well as physical and emotional abuse upon those around her. This correlation made between female puberty and the occult turned up again in the seventies in the hugely popular adaptation of Stephen King’s *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976). The eponymous character demonstrates telekinetic abilities as she begins her first period. After months of being tormented by her classmates for her odd behavior, she finally enacts revenge, using her powers to set fire to the school’s gymnasium during the senior prom.

Critics and theorists often interpret Regan’s possession and Carrie’s sorcery as metaphors for the supposed monstrosity of a young woman’s hormonal transformation. Regan’s body is disfigured by the demon destroying from the inside out and Carrie’s true monstrous potential is unleashed when her antagonists drop a bucket of pig’s blood on her head. Horror film theorist William Paul explains that, “Menstruation is specifically tied to monstrosity in that we are made to feel the grossness of the flow of blood. The pretty has been made ugly, the

attractive made repulsive.”<sup>6</sup> By aligning the involuntary changes of the female body during adolescence with demonic possession and witchcraft, these filmmakers suggest that the natural female body is a site of terror and revulsion. The female protagonists in these horror films are vilified for the biology of their gender. They lack agency, as they have no control over their sexual maturation or their violent behavior.

A disturbing new trend emerged in the seventies, with a number of horror films centering entirely upon the rape of young women and their eventual revenge against those who victimized them. The popularity of the rape-revenge subgenre began with Wes Craven’s first feature film, *The Last House on the Left* (1972), and continued into the decade with *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971), *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978). Due to the female characters’ eventual violent retribution, viewers hailed rape-revenge films as feminist narratives. But for many critics, the films marked a period of regression in the representation of women in horror. The films were notorious for showing the actual rape of the female victims in realistic detail, leaning toward the explicitness of pornographic snuff films. Regardless of the female characters’ so-called justice, they suffer physically and emotionally for virtually the entire film. Neroni explains, “The 1970s horror films depict the woman’s violence as something she must resort to as the victim of horrible things that men do to women. Female violence

---

<sup>6</sup> William Paul, *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 358

remains, in the 1970s, a response to victimization, and in this sense, it continues to fit with a traditional image of femininity.”<sup>7</sup>

In the 1970s through the 1980s, slasher films were the most popular subgenre of horror. Notable slasher films of this period include *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), each of which stars a young woman as the protagonist. The films brought about a positive shift in the depiction of women in the genre in that the female characters went from being the helpless victims to the last girl standing, defending themselves against monsters and murderers with little help from a male hero. In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover dubs this character the “Final Girl” and denotes her self-reliance as an improvement in the characterization of young women in the horror film genre.<sup>8</sup> Clover defines her as the protagonist, in her teens, who is innocent, responsible, intelligent, aware of her surroundings, and who ultimately outsmarts her victimizer. She further describes the Final Girl as:

. . . boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine – not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters,

---

<sup>7</sup> Neroni, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton UP, Princeton New York, 1993), 35.

and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max.<sup>9</sup>

Clover's description of the Final Girl illustrates how the character fails to fully overcome the shortcomings of her subjugated predecessor. Not only is she still victimized by stab-happy men, but she is denied any semblance of a sexual identity. Cynthia Freeland states that "despite the fact that they present intriguing heroines, slasher films uphold gender ideology by upholding traditional 'male' virtues and derogating or punishing 'female' traits."<sup>10</sup> The Final Girl's gender is incidental other than making her a likelier target for male antagonists, and her sexuality only becomes relevant if she makes the mistake of engaging in sexual acts, increasing her chances of being murdered. In a 2009 study published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, the analysis of fifty U.S. slasher films released between 1960 and 2009 showed that "when sexual and violent images are concomitantly present, the film's antagonist is significantly more likely to attack a woman."<sup>11</sup> Through the repetition of this correlation between sexual activities and the likelihood of being murdered, the audience is meant to applaud

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Freeland, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Welsh, "Sex and Violence in the Slasher Horror Film: A Content Analysis of Gender Differences in the Depiction of Violence," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 16 (2009): 18.

the thrifty virginal female characters who actively avoid sexual encounters ensuring their own survival.

In the early 1990s, slasher film sequels thrived in the box office. The Final Girl character prevailed as the antagonized protagonist, but horror filmmakers began to write self-reflexive narratives, drawing attention to clichés of popular horror films from the previous decade. *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), the seventh film in the Freddy franchise, revitalized the series by suggesting Freddy Krueger enters the real world to terrorize the lead actress from the first movie. Wes Craven also produced *Scream* (1996), the film that kicked off the most popular horror franchise of the 1990s. Sydney Prescott, the female lead in the movie, is stalked and tormented by her deranged boyfriend and his equally disturbed sidekick. The film pokes fun at the slasher formula, but does little to defy it. Sydney engages in a sexual act and survives the film, but the final scenes reveal that her boyfriend seeks revenge, believing that her mother's sexual affair with his father caused the dismantling of his family. Though Sydney is not murdered for her sexual choices, she suffers for her mother's alleged adultery, and at the hands of the man who has "deflowered her". Her mother's affair is the motivation for the killers' violent acts, perpetuating the traditional horror trope that female sexuality is a driving force behind sadistic male behavior and that female sexuality is inherently dangerous.

The 1990s yielded the character intended to be the riposte to the Final Girl and the overall lack of feminist figures in the horror genre.<sup>12</sup> Buffy, from the television phenomenon “Buffy: The Vampire Slayer” (1997-2003), has been praised by critics and fans as one of the first truly feminist figures in the horror genre.<sup>13</sup> Show creator Joss Whedon explains, “I intended to invert the Hollywood formula of the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed in every horror movie. I wanted to subvert that idea and create someone who was a hero.”<sup>14</sup> In her book, *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage*, Sue Short explains the importance of Buffy in the horror genre. “It reprises Carrie’s theme of misfit outsiders, utilizing prom and graduation as key rites of passage in its heroine’s progression towards adulthood. It also updates the Final Girl’s negotiation of sexuality in the slasher, as well as the maternal role such figures have undertaken.”<sup>15</sup> Buffy is powerful, intelligent, and rebellious, and unlike the Final Girl, she engages in sexual acts and survives to tell her friends about it. The series also frequently deals with anxieties often plaguing adolescent girls, including burgeoning sexuality and parental expectations.

---

12 Mary Celeste Kearney, “Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary U.S. Cinema.” *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. By Frances K. Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2002), 132.

13 “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”. Dir. Joss Whedon. 1997-2003.

14 Joss Whedon as quoted in Anne Billson’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (London: BFI, 2005), 25.

15 Sue Short, *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage* (New York, Palgrave Macmillon, 2006), 111.



Despite the positive triumphs made by “Buffy: the Vampire Slayer” in the depictions of women in the horror genre, the main female character remains within the paradigm of the young woman threatened by primarily male antagonists. Neroni points out that “[Slasher films] can only imagine a woman as capable of violence if she is entirely enraged, and this anger can only occur when she is tortured, violated, and pushed into a state of total fright.”<sup>16</sup> Buffy falls prey to the standard female model of the sacrificial victim in the horror genre, and she repeatedly forgoes her own happiness and physical health for the sake of saving humankind. Though the female characters of the 1990s were more empowered by their ability to fight back, they were limited by the idea that women are only violent when violence is first enacted upon them. Their sexuality also remained a driving force behind male-initiated violence. Buffy’s first sexual encounter is with the male lead on the show, a vampire named Angel whose soul has been restored by a gypsy curse. After their first sexual experience together, the curse is lifted, and Angel literally turns into a soulless demon who gets his jollies from tormenting her and her loved ones. Before the 21st century, popular horror film writers had rarely imagined women outside of the role of the tormented, while easily imagining men as monsters, sociopaths, and anti-heroes.

In the 2000s, while rape-revenge films were making a comeback in the form of Hollywood remakes, imported Japanese horror films (or J-Horror) also grew in

---

<sup>16</sup> Neroni, 32.

popularity in the U.S., and films such as *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) and *Audition* (Takashi Miike, 1999) became instant cult hits. J-Horror films draw from the hyper-violent and surreal exploitation horror films of the sixties and seventies, and center on vicious and murderous young women. These leading ladies do not merely defend themselves against would-be evildoers; they kill because they are sadistic, demented, and demonic. Hollywood took notice, and began to remake films such as *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and *Ju-on* (Takashi Shimizu, 2004) for U.S. audiences. *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002), American remake of *Ringu*, centers on a journalist and single mother who investigates the link between a series of gruesome deaths and a videotape that is possessed by the tortured spirit of a little girl. The American remake of *Ju-on*, titled *The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2004), follows a similar storyline. A family moves into a new home with their live-in nurse and discovers that it is haunted by the ghosts of the previous tenants who seek to pass on their curse of agonizing death. The nurse sets out to uncover the mystery behind their deaths and put an end to their curse.

Whether J-Horror films tested the waters for American horror filmmakers by proving that audiences would dole out their entertainment dollar to see monstrous girls on the movie screen, or changing gender roles in the U.S. began to shift the cultural attitude toward the adolescent female, the trend did not end with Japanese horror imports. While J-Horror films and their remakes were gaining popularity, original horror films were popping up in the U.S. with similarly violent

female protagonists. The 2002 horror film *May* (Lucky McKee) features a female lead more closely akin to the anti-hero Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) than the female protagonists of past horror films. May is an eccentric and an introvert. She yearns to be social and connect with others, but her bizarre behavior and lack of social skills alienate her from the outside world. Not able to sustain relationships with ordinary people, she decides to build a friend from the parts of those who have rejected her. May engages in sex but her sexuality is not sensationalized for the audience's pleasure, nor does she suffer for her sexual activities. Furthermore, May's violent behavior is not in response to external violent threats; her derangement stems from years of loneliness and detachment. Her gender informs her story, but is not the cause of her suffering.

As with many horror films released since the dawn of the digital age, *May* reached its popularity only after its release on DVD. Similarly, the gross-out movie *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007) earned its notoriety long after it premiered in theaters. The film is a play on the myth of vagina dentata, which alleges the existence of women who have ferocious teeth in their vagina. Dawn, a high-school-aged, sexually abstinent girl, suspects there is something wrong with her anatomy as she begins to experience lust for the first time. She discovers most gruesomely that she has a toothed vagina, and through several violent sexual encounters with men, learns that she has control over the teeth. A treasure trove of cultural symbolism, *Teeth* deals with teen sexuality, female body issues, and the dangers of

sexual repression. Despite the filmmaker's intention to empower women with the story of a monstrous vagina, the concept is highly problematic. Not only does the film exploit the exoticism of the vagina as well as both men and women's anxieties caused by the female genitalia, but Dawn can only employ her "ability" by having sex with those men she despises and who have caused her pain.

*Jennifer's Body* (Diablo Cody, 2009) has the distinction of being the only popular horror film in the last decade that was both written and directed by women, and both women have a history of creating empowering stories for teenage girls. Director Karyn Kusama is responsible for the award-winning film *Girlfight* (2000), a drama about a troubled young woman who transforms her unbridled aggression into a successful boxing career. Writer Diablo Cody received critical acclaim for *Juno* (2007), which centers on a teenage girl who discovers she is pregnant and decides to give her unborn baby up for adoption. The female protagonists in these two films are confident, independent, sexually aware, and intelligent, standing out in a genre inundated with characters based on the mean girl, the popular airhead, or the sexually-hopeless-nerd-in-need-of-a-makeover. Immediately after completing *Juno*, Cody resolved to create a horror film pastiche of the films from the 1970s and 1980s that challenged the demeaning characteristics of young females in the genre. Cody explained in an interview, "In terms of content, obviously Karyn and I both love *Carrie*. But in a lot of ways, rather than being an homage, *Jennifer's Body* is more reactionary. We saw

something we didn't like and said, 'Let's not do that.'" <sup>17</sup> In *Jennifer's Body*, Cody addresses some of the less desirable stereotypes of horror film leading ladies, but the movie sustains ideological judgments of female sexuality and violence through the repetition of standard horror movie codes and behaviors, and through the way in which it juxtaposes the two morally opposing female leads.

In the next chapter, I analyze in depth the movie *Jennifer's Body* using the framework established in Chapter 1 and the horror tropes illustrated in Chapter 2. I consider the following questions: How do the textual and visual elements of the film work together to create ideological meaning in its representation of gender? Are femininity and female sexuality demonized in this film, and in what ways are they coded as such? Does the film address themes relevant to adolescent women? And finally, how do the characterizations of the leading ladies defy the clichés of the typical horror film narrative, and how do they perpetuate them?

---

17 "MIDNITES FOR MANIACS: Diablo Cody On Jennifer's Body." Interview by Michael Guillen. *Twitch: IndieClick Film Network*. 10 June 2012. Web. <<http://twitchfilm.com/interviews/2010/06/midnites-for-maniacs-diablo-cody-on-jennifers-body-2009.php>>.

### 3. EATING BOYS AND TERRORIZING GIRLS

#### *Analysis of Jennifer's Body*

“Hell is a teenage girl”

- Needy Lesnicky, *Jennifer's Body*

*Jennifer's Body* centers on the smart, naïve, and nerdy Anita “Needy” Lesnicky (Amanda Seyfried) and her tumultuous relationship with her best friend, the sexy and popular Jennifer Check (Megan Fox). Jennifer is a typical high school bully who feeds her ego by manipulating and belittling her eager-to-please friend. After indie rock band Low Shoulder mistakes Jennifer for a virgin and uses her in a botched ritual sacrifice performed in exchange for fame and success, Jennifer becomes possessed by a demon and develops a craving for eating teenage boys and an appetite for terrorizing Needy. Needy discovers her friend’s propensity for consuming her male classmates, and after Jennifer eats Needy’s boyfriend Chip, Needy realizes that she must destroy her best friend. In a final conflict, Needy kills Jennifer, but not before absorbing some of the demon’s powers.

Jennifer is the eponymous character, but not the protagonist of *Jennifer's Body*. Needy is our narrator and ultimately the heroine of the film, however, she was not featured in the movie trailers or promotional posters. The film was marketed as a vehicle for Hollywood bombshell Megan Fox, and 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. Kusama explained in an interview with *The New York Times*, “It may be one of the best ways for a young male audience to experience a female story without feeling like they have been limited by a female perspective.”<sup>18</sup> *Jennifer’s Body* broke even at the box office domestically, and Cody admitted that the film initially failed to reach a broad audience because of their poor marketing strategy. Despite its box office failure, the film has gained considerable attention since its DVD release in December of 2009, grossing over 6.1 million in DVD sales alone.<sup>19</sup>

### **“Good” Girl v. “Mean” Girl: The Binary Behavior of Female Adolescence**

*Jennifer’s Body* begins at the end, with Needy in a prison cell as she narrates her experience from behind bars. The camera lingers on her naked body as she changes her uniform, revealing scars on her back. The scars hint at the violent conflict that led to her imprisonment. She sarcastically describes the prison as “the mental Olympics,” explaining that the recreational activities that the imprisoned women are forced to participate in keep them submissive. As Needy narrates, we see the other female inmates playing badminton and tetherball; both games played

---

<sup>18</sup> “Taking Back the Knife: Girls Gone Gory.” Interview by Michelle Orange. *The New York Times*. 3 Sept. 2009. Web. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/movies/06oran.html>>.

<sup>19</sup> “Jennifer’s Body.” *The Numbers*. Nash Information Services, LLC. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2009/JBODY.php>>.

by girls in high school gym class while boys play aggressive sports like football and hockey. Needy walks through a packed cafeteria, and it becomes evident that the prison is analogous to a typical high school. Needy describes herself as a “kicker” and demonstrates her violent behavior when she kicks a non-threatening orderly across the cafeteria for giving her advice on healthy nutrition. They lock Needy in solitary confinement for her outburst and she states, “I never used to be this cracked. I used to be normal. Well, as normal as any girl under the influence of teenage hormones. But after the killings began I started to feel, I don’t know. Loose around the edges or something.”

Needy’s imprisonment and subsequent rage parallel the pressure experienced by teenage girls in high school. Filled with hormonal frustration and no means for venting (not even in gym class), they contend with increasing restrictions on their behavior and their bodies as they transition from girlhood to adolescence. In Elline Lipkin’s *Girls’ Studies*, she examines the various texts written on the history, development, and treatment of girls in American culture. Lipkin explains that as girls enter adolescence and begin to feel pressure to conform to gender expectations, they lose the carefree attitude of childhood. She writes, “In adopting the traits of traditional femininity, girls realize they must mute certain behaviors, and their understanding that they must take on these new traits often leaves girls feeling confused as they realize they might have to leave parts of their



previous identity behind as they adapt to new roles.”<sup>20</sup> Needy experiences these restraints in her literal imprisonment, her adherence to the prototypical “good girl” model of behavior, and in the limitations of the childhood relationships that she has outgrown.

In their first on-screen interaction, Jennifer pressures Needy to attend a rock concert at a local dive bar. Needy caves to Jennifer’s nagging, and agrees to “dress cute” for the show. The scene cuts to Needy getting ready for the concert, and through voice-over narration, she happily describes Jennifer’s strict dress code, explaining, “Wearing something cute meant something very specific in Jennifer speak. It meant that I couldn’t look like a total zero, but that I couldn’t upstage her either. I could expose my stomach, but never my cleavage. Tits were her trademark.” Jennifer has a tight hold on Needy, and the sequence exhibits a common dynamic amongst groups of teenage girls. Popular girls like Jennifer are the barometer for acceptable female adolescent appearance and behavior in high school culture. Psychologist and educator Lyn Mikel Brown writes in her book *Girlfighting*:

Girls can be excruciatingly tough on other girls. They can talk behind each others’ backs, tease and torture one another, police each other’s clothing and body size . . . and can promote a strict conformity to the norms and

---

20 Eline Lipkin, *Girls’ Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2009), 23.

rules of idealized femininity, threaten rejection and exclusion, and reinforce gender and racial stereotypes.<sup>21</sup>

The sequence continues with Needy in her bedroom, trying on different outfits in front of the mirror while her boyfriend Chip watches with reservation. He tells her, “Those jeans are hella low. I can almost see your front butt.” The exchange between Chip and Needy not only provides another example of the constant scrutiny Needy puts up with, but also establishes her monogamous and heteronormative relationship, which differs from Jennifer’s active pursuit of various sexual encounters.

The film codes Jennifer and Needy’s contrasting personalities through their physical appearance. The first time we see pre-jailbird Needy, she appears to be a dork, wearing Harry Potter glasses and a button down shirt with a frumpy granny sweater over it (both of which are two sizes too big for her figure). At one point in the film, she wears a t-shirt with bunny rabbits on it, and her dress for the school dance is a puffy pink nightmare that we might expect to see on a 1980s Midge doll. Her frizzy blonde hair is always pulled back in a ponytail, and though she is an attractive young woman, she is not conventionally sexy. We read these visual cues as signs of her infantilized emotionality. Her appearance also situates her as the more endearing character, making it easier for viewers to accept her as the protagonist and heroine.

---

21 Lyn Mikel Brown, *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls* (New York: New York UP, 2005), 5.

Wearing makeup or dressing in form fitting clothing should not denote that a girl is mean, insecure, vapid, or seeking attention, but these visual codes are frequently used in films to identify the sexually promiscuous, and by proxy, “bad girl” character. Jennifer is no exception to this trope. She dresses in revealing and fashionable clothing, her physique, hair, and makeup are flawless, and the film moves in slow motion to emphasize her stunning beauty as she walks down the school hallway to meet Needy at her locker. Jennifer’s characterization echoes that of the *Femme Fatale* described by Hilary Neroni as having a “self-centered nature, an overt sexuality, and an ability to seduce and control almost any man who crosses her path. She is almost always glamorous and beautiful and wears highly stylized clothes.”<sup>22</sup> The actress cast to play Jennifer, Megan Fox, is notorious for being one of the most gawked at female celebrities on the Internet. In 2009, the year *Jennifer’s Body* premiered, Fox was number four on *Yahoo’s* most-searched for terms list.<sup>23</sup> Fox was cast in the role because of her sex appeal, but also because her real-life popularity parallels that of the character. Needy sees Jennifer as the epitome of style and sexual confidence just as the actress herself represented the ideal of femininity and female sexuality in American culture at the time the movie was made. Needy’s relationship to Jennifer mirrors the relationship adolescent

---

22 Neroni, 22.

23 "Michael Jackson, Twilight, WWE, Megan Fox Top Yahoo's Most-searched Terms on Internet in 2009." *New York Daily News*. The Associated Press, 1 Dec. 2009. Web. <[http://articles.nydailynews.com/2009-12-01/news/17941887\\_1\\_online-search-requests-yahoo-megan-fox](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2009-12-01/news/17941887_1_online-search-requests-yahoo-megan-fox)>.

girls have to idealized women like Megan. I will explore this reflexive dynamic more in depth later in this chapter.

Jennifer is classified as a dumb, rich kid, while Needy is depicted as the savvy working-class hero. Needy, much like Carol Clover's Final Girl, is sensible and intelligent. When a fire breaks out at the bar, Needy adeptly chooses to escape out the window instead of the front door where she would likely be trampled. She instinctively distrusts Low Shoulder, while Jennifer is easily duped by the band's charm. Jennifer plays dumb to appear more attractive to men, telling the lead singer, "You play your instruments super good." Needy also repeatedly corrects Jennifer's vacuous remarks, such as "I'm having the best day since, like, Jesus invented the calendar." She also foolishly tells a classmate that she's "not into boxing movies" when he invites her to a showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975).

To accentuate their emotional dissimilarity, Needy has an extrasensory perception that allows her to see and feel things from Jennifer's perspective, but Jennifer does not exhibit this same power. In the midst of locking lips with Chip while in her bedroom before the concert, Needy stops to say that Jennifer has arrived at her house just seconds before her friend makes her presence known. Chip responds, "That's fucking weird." Needy's psychic ability is a convenient plot device that allows the character to sense when Jennifer is up to no good, but also demonstrates that Needy is sensitive in ways that Jennifer is not. Furthermore,

Needy's nickname is a nod to her emotional personality and over-dependence upon Jennifer, while Jennifer's last name, Check, is a synonym for control.

*Jennifer's Body* presents us with a typical good girl versus bad girl dichotomy. Needy displays personality traits indicative of the acceptable female adolescent (e.g. empathetic, accommodating, and modest) while Jennifer exhibits a deviant personality (e.g. insensitive, self-centered, dominating, and overtly sexual). "The line between good girls and bad, nice and mean, popular and unpopular is not a line girls created," Brown explains, "but one they've absorbed from the wider culture in which they live and one they're expected to maintain and anticipate wherever they go."<sup>24</sup> The characters Jennifer and Needy can be read as two halves of a whole adolescent teen, since even so-called good girls occasionally act dumb and get into trouble. Wood discusses this idea as the double or the doppelganger, "where normality and monster are two aspects of the same person."<sup>25</sup> Splitting the adolescent teen into these extremes and juxtaposing their personalities sends an unmistakable ideological message about female violence and female sexuality. By differentiating the monster, Jennifer, and the heroine, Needy, with these behavioral codes, the film upholds the good girl model of identification as superior and admirable, further demonstrated by the two character's disparate sexual prowess.

---

<sup>24</sup> Brown, 95.

<sup>25</sup> Wood, 31.

### “Good” Sex v. “Bad” Sex: The Binary Sexuality of Female Adolescence

In the 21st century horror film, the heroine is finally able to have a sex life without repercussions, albeit safely and within the confines of a heteronormative and monogamous relationship. The filmmakers subtly hint at Needy and Chip’s active sex life leading up to their on-screen sex scene. Moments before Jennifer’s arrival interrupts Chip and Needy’s make out session, Chip reaches down and begins unbuckling his belt. Needy does not react with surprise, signifying that the two have been sexually intimate beyond smooching. Just before a date, Chip also happily informs Needy, “I went to Super Target and picked up more condoms.” But despite these cues to Needy’s active sex life, she is still coded with characteristics of the archetypical adolescent virgin.

Catherine Driscoll argues, “Girls are *read* for the truth of their sex and in order to verify the integrity of various patriarchal structures.” She explains, “Representations of girl sexuality are inseparable from girl sexuality as lived experience or as an object of analysis. Figures of virginity epitomize the way in which girl sexuality has formed images claiming to represent the (as yet) unfinished process of feminine adolescence.”<sup>26</sup> The notion of virginity has less to do with sexual activity, and more to do with the representation of sexuality. While

---

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), 144.

Jennifer talks explicitly about her sexual encounters with men, Needy never initiates sex or talks about it openly. Chip reaches for his own belt during the kissing scene, and he is primarily responsible for their birth control. Needy's passive sexuality, lack of sexual agenda, modest behavior and appearance (all relative to Jennifer), code her as virginal despite her sexual activities. Virginal codification remains, in American culture, a sign of purity, and thus, "goodness." Furthermore, the way in which the characters' sex lives are intentionally contrasted sends an unmistakable moralistic message about "good" and "bad" female sexuality.

Jennifer exhibits her impure or "bad" sexuality through her coded appearance as described earlier, but also in her treatment of sex before and after her demonic possession. The first example of her deviant sexuality comes when she and Needy arrive at the sleazy bar where the band is scheduled to perform. Jennifer is immediately the center of attention. She ignores a classmate who tells her she looks pretty, stating, "He thinks he's cute enough for me, and that's why he's in retard math." A twenty-something looking man approaches Jennifer and they engage in antagonistic banter. Jennifer forcefully grabs his genitals, and he responds, "Don't do that, okay. Not here." We learn through their interaction that he is a cadet in the police academy and that the two of them have engaged in a sexual relationship. As the band arrives onstage, Needy shows reservations about approaching them before their set. Jennifer replies, "Don't be so J.V., Needy!"

They're just boys. Morsels. We have all of the power. Don't you know that?"

Jennifer then grabs Needy's breasts. "These. These things. They're like smart bombs, point them in the right direction and shit gets real." Much like the *Femme Fatale* character, Jennifer views her sexuality as a tool, which she uses to manipulate others. When Needy asks Jennifer how she plans on getting alcohol from the bar, she answers, "I'll just play hello-titty with the bartender."

Just before the band begins to play, Needy overhears them debating whether Jennifer is a virgin or not. She comes to her friend's defense stating that Jennifer *is* a virgin and that it "beats sleeping with creeps like you." When Jennifer returns from scoring a drink, Needy informs her of the band's suspicious conversation. Jennifer amusedly replies, "I'm not even a backdoor virgin anymore thanks to Roman," a reference to the man who she conversed with earlier. As the band begins to play, Jennifer runs to the stage, ignoring Needy's warning. Jennifer locks eyes with the lead singer who seemingly puts her under a mystical spell. Suddenly, a fire breaks out in the bar, and Needy and Jennifer flee out of the bathroom window. Jennifer, still in a bewitched haze, leaves Needy behind and jumps into a van with the dubious band. During a flashback sequence later in the film, we learn that the band took Jennifer out into a field, tied her up, butchered her, and left her for dead as an offering to Satan. However, because Jennifer was not actually a virgin, she survived the attack and woke up possessed and starving for human flesh.



This sequence of events insinuates that Jennifer was vulnerable to the band's malicious intent because she made herself more available sexually, or in other words, she was "asking for it." In fact, the sacrifice scene plays out like a rape, with Jennifer bound and gagged as the lead singer repeatedly penetrates her with a Bowie knife. In Leora Tanenbaum's book, *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation*, she states, "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>27</sup> Jennifer was dressed provocatively, drinking alcohol, and approached the band assertively. When Jennifer recounts the incident to Needy, she explains that she began to sense that something was wrong when she overheard one of the band members questioning if she was actually a virgin. Believing that a lack of sexual experience might save her from the pending danger, Jennifer worriedly assures the boys that she is a virgin, stating, "Yes! Yes, I'm a virgin. I've never even done sex. I don't know how. So you guys should find somebody who does." By adopting the convention that sexuality and the supernatural are somehow tied, a myth imbued with scorn for the overtly sexual female, the filmmakers uphold a harmful puritanical reading of female sexuality. The ideological message, that even Jennifer

---

<sup>27</sup> Leora Tanenbaum, *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation* (New York, New York, Perennial, 2000), 117.

seems to comply with, is that her sexuality is not “safe,” and she ultimately pays for her behavior with her soul.

To further demonstrate the differences between Jennifer and Needy’s sexuality, the filmmakers juxtapose a sexual interaction between Needy and Chip, and Jennifer and one of her victims. A romantic melody plays in the background as Chip and Needy prepare to have sex. Chip’s bedroom is tidy, brightly lit, colorful, and homey. His bedding is white, clean, and made-up perfectly. Needy expresses how nice the ambiance is after Chip turns on a glowing lavender air freshener. There is no apprehension as they touch lovingly and begin to kiss and undress each other. Chip breaks out a condom labeled Slippery Swirl, explaining that it is “supposed to make it feel good for the girl,” to which Needy replies, “cool.” Chip puts on the condom as Needy watches in childish excitement, eagerly asking him to “put it in.” Chip climbs on top of Needy and they have intercourse in the missionary position with Chip’s feet hanging out from under the bed sheet. Their coitus is interrupted when Needy begins to have strange, demonic visions; she sees blood drip from the ceiling tiles above her, and the ghost of one of Jennifer’s causalities sitting on a chair across the room. Needy’s horrified reactions are intercut with shots of Jennifer as she tears apart their classmate across town.

While Needy and Chip meet up for their date, Jennifer meets up with Colin, a goth boy from their school. He arrives at the location Jennifer chose for their rendezvous, and is surprised to pull up to a dilapidated house in an abandoned

neighborhood. He hesitantly breaks in through a boarded-up window and eerie sound effects play in the background as he climbs creaking stairs and calls out for Jennifer. The house contrasts Chip's cozy bedroom; there is no furniture, it is dirty and dark, and there are rats running across the floor. Colin, clearly apprehensive, finds Jennifer waiting for him on the top floor with candles and sexy music setting the mood for her seduction. With little introduction, Jennifer begins to undress herself. They kiss, and Jennifer unzips his pants and drops them to the floor. Colin notices Jennifer's eyes change color and dilate like a snake, and as he backs away from her, she breaks his hand and says, "I need you frightened. I need you hopeless." In the shadows cast on the wall, we see Jennifer biting into her date and tearing at his stomach. She transforms into a snarling demon with giant teeth while retaining her own body. The film cuts away to Needy as she reacts to the gruesome images she witnesses in her mind, and then back to Jennifer crouching over Colin's butchered remains as she scoops up his blood and drinks it from her cupped hands.

The sexually aggressive female monster, one of the oldest tropes of women's sexuality, is exemplified in medieval legend in the form of the Succubus. As we see later in the film, Needy researches the occult in order to determine why Jennifer is eating boys and comes across a text that presents the concept of "demonic transference." The text suggests that if a sacrifice offered to Satan is "impure" that the sacrifice is susceptible to demonic possession. In her search, she also comes

across information on the Succubus, a female creature that seduces men in their sleep in order to take their souls. Needy learns from her research that the only way to release the demon is to stab the possessed “beast” in the heart. Psychologist Sharon Lamb describes our tendency to demonize aggressively sexual women through these imagined characters, “When a girl is sexual, men become afraid. Societies become afraid. It’s as if the girl is usurping some essential form of male power. The sexual woman is seen as sucking out the vitality of the man, his prowess, his dignity. That’s why history has called sexual women temptresses and witches.”<sup>28</sup> Once Jennifer gains the powers of the demon, she demonstrates increased physical prowess as well as the ability to fly and move around stealthily. But despite her newly found strength and agility, Jennifer still relies on her sexual appeal to lure her victims.

### **Demonic Transference, Performing Gender, or Just PMS?**

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. *Jennifer’s Body* is different from other possession films in that Jennifer retains her own personality and free will. She does not physically embody the demon, but gains its strength and appetite for human flesh. Because of this, neither Needy nor the film viewer can be sure which acts of

---

28 Sharon Lamb, *The Secret Lives of Girls* (New York, The Free Press, 2001), 108.

violence Jennifer performs to curb the cravings of the demon possessing her, or out of her own cruel predisposition. In keeping with the tradition of possession films, however, Jennifer develops masculine characteristics once she is possessed. In *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing*, Isabel Christina Pinedo explains that the masculinization of female characters in horror films, “signifies the horror genre’s inscription within a male-dominated discourse where power is coded as masculine, even when embodied in biological females.”<sup>29</sup>

The codification of Jennifer with masculine behavior is not exclusive to her violence. She exhibits these traits in her particular use of language. Just before Jennifer agrees to go on a date with Colin, she tells Needy, “He’s into maggot rock, he wears nail polish; my dick is bigger than his.” Colin is aligned with the typical horror film female character who walks into dark alleys or enters spooky houses alone at night. This role reversal is most apparent in Jennifer’s sexual encounter with Colin. Comparable to Chip turning on the air freshener to comfort Needy, Jennifer sets up candles to create ambiance for Colin’s seduction. Jennifer’s performance in this scene also parallels the male sexual aggressor in the R&B song that plays in the background. The lyrics recount a sexual liaison between the male singer and a girl he zeroes in on at a club. When Jennifer pounces on Colin, he asks her, “Do you even know my last name?” Jennifer changes the subject by lying to

---

<sup>29</sup> Isabel Christina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (State University of New York, 1997) 81-82.

Colin and suggesting that she has been sending him signals all school year. She tells him “You give me such a wetty,” adapting a typical male expression of arousal to fit her own anatomy.

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. In *Female Chauvinist Pig: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, journalist Ariel Levy describes the problem with this approach to creating gender equality, “Even if you are a woman who achieves the ultimate and becomes ‘like a man,’ you will still always be like a woman. And as long as womanhood is thought of as something to escape from, something less than manhood, you will be thought less of, too.”<sup>30</sup> She argues that “authentic” empowerment cannot come from imitation of pre-set cultural norms, but from individual exploration. Jennifer does retain some female qualities, demonstrating that she is not merely a facsimile of male antagonists, but those qualities prove to be an altogether different complication.

Aviva Briefel notes in her article “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film,” “Violence in the horror film is often initiated by the female monster getting her period, an event that is either

---

30 Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 112.

suggested or overtly displayed.”<sup>31</sup> Jennifer’s need for eating human flesh seemingly coincides with a typical menstrual cycle. Thirty days after her first kill, Jennifer begins to show signs of deterioration; she is pale, fatigued, and irritable, coding her as having her period. She tells Needy, “My skin is breaking out, and my hair is dull and lifeless. God, it’s like I’m one of the normal girls.” Needy asks if she’s PMSing, and Jennifer replies, “PMS isn’t real, Needy. It was invented by the boy-run media to make us seem crazy,” denying a biological inevitable that makes her innately female. Associating Jennifer’s menstrual cycle with her devouring of men insinuates that every thirty days women turn into crazy, man-eating monsters.

Slut shaming, or vilifying women who enjoy sex with more than one partner, is a central theme in *Jennifer’s Body*. Because Jennifer’s acts of monstrosity are linked to her sexuality and we are meant to understand that Jennifer needs to commit these murderous acts in order to maintain her health, as illustrated in her encounter with Colin and her declining health 30 days after, the film text proposes that Jennifer’s power and confidence are derived from her numerous sexual encounters. When Jennifer reveals to Needy that she woke up after her attack starving for human souls, she describes finding her first male victim in a wandering foreign exchange student who also escaped into the woods after the fire. She explains, “Ever since then I’ve known what I have to do to be

---

31 Aviva Briefel, “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film.” *Film Quarterly*, 2005. Vol. 58, p21. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 April. 2012.

strong. And when I'm full, like am right now, I'm, like, unkillable." A long-standing misconception of female sexuality is that sexually curious young girls are somehow lacking in confidence, and seek numerous sexual encounters to mask their low self-esteem. While young men in our culture are encouraged to experiment with various sexual partners, young women are demonized for being sexually curious. Emily White sheds light on the impulse behind this tendency in her study on adolescent female sexuality:

Slut rumors hinge on the fear of female sexuality and its mystery; they evoke fear of the woman with a hole at the center of her body that is infinite, the black hole of feminine space into which a man could disappear. By turning one girl into the slut among them, the kids try to reassure themselves that they are on the right side of fate: They are good while she is evil. They are safe while she is unsafe. They have the right kind of desire while she is the wrong kind.<sup>32</sup>

Not to be overlooked is Jennifer's specific targeting of straight young men who attend her high school. At the end of the film when Jennifer threatens to eat Needy, we learn that the demon inside of her does not have a particular taste for either male or female flesh. Needy asks her friend, "I thought you only ate boys," to which Jennifer responds, "I go both ways." The line hints at Jennifer's unprejudiced sexuality, but also raises questions about why she chooses to only eat teenage boys.

---

<sup>32</sup> Emily White, *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut*, (Scribner, New York, 2002), 59.



Jennifer's victims were never a threat to her. In fact, all of the boys she targets are docile and defenseless. Jennifer never considers hunting down the sadistic boys in *Low Shoulder* who violated her, choosing instead to target the same straight, young men that the filmmakers intended to lure into the audience with Megan Fox's sex appeal.

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 movie for a change. The concept of the male gaze was made popular in Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey suggests that, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking is split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly."<sup>33</sup> In their attempt to challenge the male gaze, the filmmaker's employ the same problematic projections of the female figure that has debased female characters in the genre for decades. Jennifer's actual body is de-humanized in its use as the object of the film's allure. Even as the monster, Jennifer is sexualized. When Jennifer feeds on her victims, she only transforms from the neck up. Her face becomes the site of repulsion, while body remains the site of feminine appeal.

---

<sup>33</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975), 19.

### **Megan's Body: Homoeroticism and Female Identification**

After the opening scenes of *Jennifer's Body* that introduce Needy while she is in prison, the film cuts to a flashback of Needy watching Jennifer cheer at a pep rally. Needy explains that people have a hard time believing a dork like her and a popular girl like Jennifer would be friends, but that "sandbox love never dies." A classmate behind Needy taps her on her shoulder and accuses her of having a crush on Jennifer as the singer of the background song proclaims, "You are the girl I've been dreaming of ever since I was a little girl."<sup>34</sup> Diablo Cody describes how friendships with other girls tend to be more intimate and personal than any other relationship in a teenage girl's life:

I know when I was a teenaged girl, the friendships that I had with other girls were almost romantic, they were so intense. I wanted to sleep at my friend's house every night, I wanted to wear her clothes, we would talk on the phone until our ears ached. I wanted to capture that heightened feeling you get as an adolescent that you don't really feel as a grownup. You like your friends when you're a grownup but you don't need to sleep in the same bed with them and talk to them on the phone until 5 A.M. every night.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Black Kids. *I'm Not Gonna Teach Your Boyfriend How To Dance With You*. Bernard Butler, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> "Exclusive Q&A: Diablo Cody Talks Megan Fox, Therapy, and Doing "The View" With Courtney Love." Interview by Jessica Wakeman. *The Frisky*. BUZZMEDIA, 8 Sept. 2009. Web. <<http://www.thefrisky.com/2009-09-08/diablo-cody-interview/>>.

The bond that teenage girls have with their friends has often been a topic of exploration for writers and filmmakers, as it is not only unique in its strength, but the intimacy of these relationships provides fodder for salacious storytelling. The relationship between Needy and Jennifer explores the particular bond that girls have with their friends in adolescence, but the intimacy of their relationship also points to the characters' emergent bisexuality.

Needy hurriedly leaves Chip's place after her vision of Jennifer eating Colin, and drives to the safety of her own home. On the way, she encounters a bloody and maniacal Jennifer walking alone in the middle of the road. Jennifer jumps onto Needy's car, breaks her windshield, and then takes off into the dark. Once Needy makes it home, she runs in the door yelling for her "Mommy," who we know from a prior scene is working a night shift. Needy cries herself asleep on her couch and dreams about her demonic friend. She awakens to the empty house, wondering if the horrid events were merely a nightmare. Clearly less shaken than before falling asleep, she runs up the stairs to her bedroom and collapses on her bed. There, she finds Jennifer waiting for her in the dark. Startled, Needy screams and demands that Jennifer leave her house, to which Jennifer replies, "But we always used to share your bed at slumber parties," and then seductively removes Needy's glasses and strokes her hair. Jennifer leans in to kiss Needy, and Needy timidly accepts her advance. The two engage in a long, passionate kiss before Needy comes to her senses and shouts, "What the fuck is happening?" Needy again asks her to leave,

but before taking off, Jennifer pleads, “Come on Needy! Let me stay the night. We can play boyfriend girlfriend like we used to.”

Critics have complained that Needy and Jennifer’s kiss was a marketing ploy to get straight men into the movie theater, which is a fair assumption given the filmmakers admitted agenda and the fact that the kiss was featured in the majority of the promotional trailers for the film. Amanda Seyfried has spoken out about the kissing scene in interviews, saying, “We knew that it was going to play a really big role in publicizing the movie. We kind of rolled our eyes at the idea of having to make out.”<sup>36</sup> Given the nature of the girls’ relationship, however, the scene has a purpose beyond the obvious sensationalism. In their study *Research Perspective on Bisexual Women’s Friendships*, Elizabeth M. Morgan and Elisabeth Morgan Thompson write, “Exploring and constructing one’s sexual identity is a fundamental developmental task throughout adolescence and young adulthood that informs later management of physical and emotional intimacy in relationships with others.”<sup>37</sup> Engaging in sexual acts with their friends gives young girls the opportunity to explore their sexual orientation. For Jennifer, their sexual encounter is no different than her relationship with men, as she uses her sexuality

---

<sup>36</sup> Jen Sabella, “Amanda Seyfreid Rolls Her Eyes about Having to Kiss Megan Fox,” *AfterEllen*, Aug. 18, 2009, <http://www.afterellen.com/blog/jensabella/amanda-seyfried-rolls-her-eyes-about-kissing-megan-fox>.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth M. Morgan & Elisabeth Morgan Thompson, “Research Perspectives on Bisexual Women’s Friendships,” *Journal of Bisexuality*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, (2006): 9.

to manipulate her friend. Needy, on the other hand, has no apparent agenda, other than her own sexual curiosity.

In addition to the sexual tension present in this female friendship, there is a reflexive relationship between Needy's idolization of the character Jennifer and the actress Megan Fox's real-life popularity. In her article "Fashion and the Homospectorial Look," Diana Fuss argues, "The entire fashion industry operates as one of the few institutionalized spaces where women can look at each other with cultural impunity. It provides a socially sanctioned structure in which women are encouraged to consume, in voyeuristic if not vampiristic fashion, the images of other women."<sup>38</sup> Just as young girls fanatically consume images of pop stars and celebrities, Needy's preoccupation with her best friend verges on obsessive. Media and product marketers inundate our visual landscape with images of these "ideal women." Megan Fox, not so coincidentally, is one of those perfectly airbrushed women in magazines and advertisements. A teenage girl's over-consumption of these popular females can lead to poor self-image, as they compare themselves to an unachievable convention of beauty. Even Jennifer self-destructs in her effort to maintain her own attractiveness. Before their school dance, Jennifer sits in front of a mirror desperately trying to cover up her pale, sickly skin with makeup. She cries and violently smears makeup on her face as we see a photo in the background of Jennifer before she became possessed, looking

---

38 Diana Fuss, "Fashion and the Homospectorial Look," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 18 No. 4 (1992), 713.

like a picture-perfect model in a magazine. Briefel states, “When the female monster engages in masochistic acts, she does so either by coercion from an outside force or as a way of terminating her monstrosity.”<sup>39</sup> Jennifer’s perception of her “monstrosity” is her failing beauty, deteriorating from the demon eating away at her soul. Not only is her ugly physical appearance making her feel like she will no longer be attractive to boys, but she recognized that Needy does not idolize her as she used to.

### **Crossing Out Jennifer: Coming of Age through Autonomy**

Much like the criticisms of the rape revenge and slasher films, Needy does not become fully empowered until the last fifteen minutes of *Jennifer’s Body*. In a pivotal scene that takes place at the culmination of teenage angst, a school dance, Needy finally comes to blows with Jennifer. While waiting for Jennifer or Chip to show up at the dance, Needy senses that the two are together. Knowing that Jennifer is at the “time of the month” when she needs to feed, Needy runs to her boyfriend’s aid. She finds Jennifer gnawing at a half-dead Chip in the school’s abandoned indoor pool. The scene marks the first time that Needy sees Jennifer in her demonic form. Witnessing Jennifer’s monstrous behavior in person confirms Needy’s suspicions, and this crucial revelation gives her the courage she needs to finally confront her friend. Needy hurls herself into the pool and pulls Jennifer off

---

<sup>39</sup> Briefel, 21.

Chip. During their scuffle, Needy manages to push Jennifer under the water long enough to help Chip out of the pool. When Jennifer bursts out of the water and levitates above them, Needy taunts her by telling Chip, “She’s just hovering. It’s not that impressive,” igniting an argument between the two friends. Jennifer threatens to eat Needy’s soul just as Chip musters up enough strength to stab Jennifer through her stomach with a pool skimmer. Jennifer pulls the metal rod from her abdomen, and escapes out of a window while Needy stays with Chip as he dies on the floor of the pool hall.

*Jennifer’s Body* comes full circle when the pool scene cuts to the Check residence where we first saw Jennifer in the establishing shots of the film. Jennifer lies on her bed looking utterly bored and exhausted just as Needy crashes through the window with a box cutter in her hand, ready to eliminate her evil friend once and for all. Needy throws Jennifer down onto the bed and strangles her from above as she yells, “Best friends forever, huh? You killed my fucking boyfriend you goddamn monster! You dumb bitch!” seemingly referring to both the demon *and* her friend, unsure of which monster was responsible for Chip’s death. Jennifer bites Needy on her neck as they wrestle on her bed. Needy takes her blade and slashes an X in Jennifer’s exposed stomach, declaring, “Cross out Jennifer!” the same remark Jennifer used to belittle Needy when she initially refused to go the concert. Jennifer looks down at her mutilated abdomen, horrified by her no longer flawless body. She lifts the both of them up above the bed and the two girls wrestle

mid-air. Needy notices Jennifer's "BFF" or best-friends forever necklace to which she has the matching charm, and she rips it from Jennifer's neck. As if Needy has seized the last source of Jennifer's strength, Jennifer gives up, and the two fall to the bed. Needy quickly stabs the blade into Jennifer's heart, and as Jennifer drifts away, the color returns to her face, denoting that the evil has left her body. For a moment, Needy looks at her friend unsure of what she has done, but is interrupted by Jennifer's mom entering the room to discover the bloody mess.

Keeping with Hilary Neroni's summation that female characters in horror films only act out violently when pushed to their absolute limit, Needy confronts Jennifer only after she kills Chip. But unlike slasher films that typically end once The Final Girl has defeated her adversary, *Jennifer's Body* continues after the final conflict to explore Needy's transformation. After she kills Jennifer, Needy collapses onto her back, and in voice-over she says, "I don't know who Needy Lesnicky is anymore." The film then cuts back to her in the prison after placed in solitary confinement. She explains that she has changed since the encounter with Jennifer, describing herself as a "very bad, very damaged person." She also reveals the supernatural powers she absorbed from Jennifer's bite, and as the camera zooms out, we see Needy hovering above the floor. She then uses her powers to break through the bars on the prison window, and escapes into the night donning an orange jumpsuit and a pair of bunny slippers.



A teenager's identity resides in their childhood relationships with their parents, friends, and significant others, and most young women go through a stage where they eradicate their relationships of proximity, freeing themselves to develop relationships based on their actual interests and burgeoning personalities. Needy's mother is rarely present, her father is completely absent, her boyfriend is dead, and now she has murdered her best friend. Needy is liberated from her adolescent identity and is free to reinvent herself. The film text suggests that a young female must act out aggressively against a culture that has limited her behavior to the submissive "good girl," and marred her self-image with the concept of conventional beauty. Sharon Lamb argues, "Until we accept the darker side of women and girls, including our own aggression, our anger, and our urge to compete as well as dominate, we will perpetuate the myth of the good girl and the good woman that has so oppressed women for ages."<sup>40</sup>

Needy's newly found freedom and penchant for reckless behavior is exemplified by her actions immediately after she escapes from the prison. First and foremost, Needy does something that is unthinkable for any woman in real life, let alone in the traditional horror narrative; she hitches a ride from a strange man. 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. Needy has the stranger take her to the town where Low Shoulder is performing, and the film

---

40 Lamb, 179.

ends after Needy and her driver take off down the road. The credits are cut with home videos and photos of Low Shoulder partaking in debauchery in their hotel room. In one video we see a hooded Needy enter their room, followed by images of the bands' mutilated bodies after Needy enacts her revenge. While Jennifer chose to stay in her little town and eat local boys, never even considering the potential of her power, Needy uses her abilities to seek revenge and escape her literal and figurative prisons.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

##### The Reaping

“A ‘feminist horror movie?’ Yeah, that was our point, for sure. We were trying to turn the genre on its ear. One thing I'm obsessed with is that I don't think women are allowed to be anti-heroes. They're not allowed to be flawed.”

- Diablo Cody, *MIDNITES FOR MANIACS: Diablo Cody on Jennifer's Body*

*Jennifer's Body* provides salient examples of the progression of the female character in terms of their self-reliance. First and foremost, the lack of prominent male characters in the film allows the writer to explore the experiences of these young women outside of their relationship to men. It provides an opportunity for the female viewer to take on a rare perspective in the horror movie genre, one where she is predator instead of prey. The film is written from a female point of view, dealing candidly with subject matter that speaks specifically to adolescent females. Needy and Jennifer's toxic friendship, their insecurities, and their loss of childhood relationships are designed not to titillate viewers, but to communicate the terrifying angst of girlhood. And though it comes late in the film, Needy's final liberation conveys a truly feminist message of independence and resilience. The film presents an aspect of young female adulthood that we often overlook, yet

these stages of development can be the most horrific and vulnerable for teenage girls, making it perfect fodder for the horror genre. And by presenting these issues to viewers in a highly exploitative and sensational form, the filmmaker inspires a much-needed discourse on female sexuality and female aggression.

The films prior to the 2000s, women acted out violently only after being victimized by men, but the trend we see now are women who take pleasure in, and even benefit from, masochism and destructiveness. Needy finds her freedom and autonomy by defeating Jennifer, who inhibited her personal growth, and by destroying the patriarchal ties that bind her to the good girl archetype. Needy begins the story as the meek character and transforms herself into something truly terrifying; a smart and powerful young woman who fights back violently against anyone who tries to control her. There is a lesson to be learned from this movement in the horror genre. Though we certainly should not encourage young girls to participate in violence, we should encourage them to occasionally get dirty, to be intimidating and forceful, and to get into trouble. Popular opinion would have us believe that there is something wrong with the youth of today for exploring their sexuality and partaking in mischief. Teen girls are especially criticized for developing aggressive behaviors. In fact, girls who display aggression and traditionally masculine traits are not viewed as girls, but as an “other” gender. They are given derogatory nicknames like “tomboy,” “butch,” and “dyke.” But

*Jennifer's Body* is a story where the “good” girl finds freedom through violence, aggression, and ambiguity, breaking down gender roles and social expectations.

Despite Cody's successes in writing multi-faceted leading ladies, there is still something troubling at play in *Jennifer's Body*. Even though the male characters do not play a prominent role in the film, the female characters were created within the confines of patriarchal constrictions. The filmmakers were not fully committed to imagining either of these young women in a completely monstrous way. Needy acts out violently only in revenge, thus her violence can be justified making it less threatening to the audience. Needy can be added to the short list of female characters who have sex in a horror film and avoid violent ramifications, however Jennifer was punished for being too sexually aggressive and ultimately has to die because she kills for pleasure. Additionally, Jennifer's violence is toned down through her sexuality. In *Ginger Snaps*, the female monster changes into a horrific beast from head to toe, with no traces of her humanity or her sexuality. In *Jennifer's Body*, the monster remains unmistakably female. Her face becomes demonic, but only when she feeds on men, and she retains the idealized body of a sexual female. Hilary Neroni explains that, “If a woman is seen as overly sexy, so sexy that it is a ‘problem,’ then her violence can be seen as a part of this excess.

Her violence is then contained and is far less threatening because its ultimate purpose is for the pleasure of the viewer.”<sup>41</sup>

Whether or not Diablo Cody and Karen Kusama successfully created a feminist horror film in *Jennifer's Body* is not a question I can answer definitively. The film provides an opportunity for a woman to play the anti-hero, but as with most of the horror films discussed in this thesis, the female character's sexuality is at the forefront of the story. It is a fine line between a complex female character with a strong sexual identity and a salacious depiction of a monstrously sexy woman designed to sell more movie tickets. Where Cody was most successful was in creating female characters with a purpose beyond being the victim, as the plot of *Jennifer's Body* is a deliberate metaphor for the malicious friendships that trouble teenage girls. But Cody and Kusama rely on horror film traditions that make unmistakable ideological judgments about the female characters' behavior and sexuality. The most problematic of which arises through the deliberate juxtaposition of the heroine's "safe" lifestyle and the monster's "dangerous" life choices. By aligning Needy and Jennifer's personalities and sexualities with their representations of good and evil, *Jennifer's Body* explicitly demonizes the sexually aggressive female. As Emily White so aptly asks, "What is so monstrous about a sex-crazed girl?"<sup>42</sup>

---

41 Neroni, 78.

42 White, 59.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “Amanda Seyfreid Rolls Her Eyes about Having to Kiss Megan Fox,”  
Interview by Jen Sabella. AfterEllen, 18 Aug. 2009.  
<<http://www.afterellen.com/blog/jensabella/amanda-seyfried-rolls-her-eyes-about-kissing-megan-fox>>
- Berenstein, Rhona J. *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Billson, Anne. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. London: BFI, 2005.
- Brabon, Benjamin A. *Postfeminist Gothic: Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture*. Basingstoke Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Black Kids. *I'm Not Gonna Teach Your Boyfriend How To Dance With You*. Bernard Butler, 2008.
- Briefel, Aviva. "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," *Film Quarterly* 58.3 (2005): 16-27.
- Brown, Lyn Mikel. *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls*. New York: New York UP, 2005.
- Choi, Jinhee, and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, eds. *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2009.  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM101xe5FGE>>.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Driscoll, Catherine. *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.



- "Exclusive Q&A: Diablo Cody Talks Megan Fox, Therapy, and Doing "The View" With Courtney Love." Interview by Jessica Wakeman. *The Frisky*. BUZZMEDIA, 8 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.thefrisky.com/2009-09-08/diablo-cody-interview/>>.
- Freeland, Cynthia. "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films." *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1996. pp. 195-218.
- Freeland, Cynthia. *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000.
- Fuss, Diana. "Fashion and the Homospectorial Look," *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 713-737.
- Grant, Barry Keith. *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1996.
- Green, Philip. *Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.
- Hantke, Steffen. *American Horror Film: the Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2010.
- Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: the Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- "Jennifer's Body." *The Numbers*. Nash Information Services, LLC. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2009/JBODY.php>>.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary U.S. Cinema." *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. By Frances K. Gateward and Murray Pomerance. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2002.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.

- Lamb, Sharon. *The Secret Lives of Girls*. New York: The Free Press, 2001.
- Leff, Leonard J., and Jerold Simmons. *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990.
- Levy, Ariel. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free, 2005.
- Lipkin, Elline. *Girls' Studies*. Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2009.
- Mank, Gregory W. *Women in Horror Films, 1930s*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999.
- McCaughey, Martha, and Neal King. *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2001.
- "Michael Jackson, Twilight, WWE, Megan Fox Top Yahoo's Most-searched Terms on Internet in 2009." *New York Daily News*. The Associated Press, 1 Dec. 2009. <[http://articles.nydailynews.com/2009-12-01/news/17941887\\_1\\_online-search-requests-yahoo-megan-fox](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2009-12-01/news/17941887_1_online-search-requests-yahoo-megan-fox)>.
- "MIDNITES FOR MANIACS: Diablo Cody On Jennifer's Body." Interview by Michael Guillen. *Twitch: IndieClick Film Network*. 10 June 2012. <<http://twitchfilm.com/interviews/2010/06/midnites-for-maniacs-diablo-cody-on-jennifers-body-2009.php>>.
- Miller, April. "The Hair That Wasn't There Before: Demystifying Monstrosity and Menstruation in *Ginger Snaps* and *Ginger Snaps Unleashed*." *Western Folklore* 64.3/4 (2005): 281-303. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Feb. 2011.
- Modleski, Tania. "The Terror of Pleasure. The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory." *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Indiana UP, 1986.
- Morgan, Elizabeth & Elisabeth Morgan Thompson, "Research Perspectives on Bisexual Women's Friendships." *Journal of Bisexuality*, 6.3 (2006): 7-34.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 14-26.
- Murgatroyd, Paul. *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature*. London: Duckworth, 2007.

- Neroni, Hilary. *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary Noble*, Jean Bobby. *Masculinities without Men?: Female Masculinity in Twentieth-century Fictions*. Vancouver: UBC, 2004.
- Paul, William. *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany, NY: U of New York P, 1997.
- Pohl-Weary, Emily. *Girls Who Bite Back: Witches, Mutants, Slayers and Freaks*. Toronto: Sumach, 2004.
- Short, Sue. *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Spoto, Donald. *Spellbound by Beauty: Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies*. New York: Harmony, 2008.
- Svehla, Gary, and Susan Svehla. *Bitches, Bimbos, and Virgins: Women in the Horror Film*. Baltimore, MD: Midnight Marquee, 1996.
- "Taking Back the Knife: Girls Gone Gory." Interview by Michelle Orange. *The New York Times*. 3 Sept. 2009.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/movies/o6oran.html>>.
- Tanenbaum, Leora. *Slut!: Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation*. New York: Seven Stories, 1999.
- Welsh, Andrew. "Sex and Violence in the Slasher Horror Film: A Content Analysis of Gender Differences in the Depiction of Violence." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*. 16 (2009): 1-25.
- White, Emily. *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut*. New York: Scribner, 2002.
- Robin Wood. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.

**FILMOGRAPHY**

- Audition*. Dir. Takashi Miike. Vitagraph Films, 1999.
- Battle Royale*. Dir. Kinji Fukasaku. Toei Company, 2001.
- "Buffy the Vampire Slayer". Dir. Joss Whedon. 1997-2003. Television.
- Carrie*. Dir. Palma Brian De. United Artists Corp., 1976.
- The Devil's Rejects*. Dir. Rob Zombie. Lions Gate Films, 2005.
- The Evil Dead*. Dir. Sam Raimi. New Line Cinema, 1981.
- The Exorcist*. Dir. William Friedkin. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1973.
- Friday the 13th*. Dir. Sean S. Cunningham. Paramount Pictures, 1980.
- Ginger Snaps*. Dir. John Fawcett. Copperheart Entertainment, 2001.
- Girlfight*. Karyn Kusama. Screen Gems. 2000.
- The Grudge*. Dir. Takashi Shimizu. Columbia Pictures, 2004.
- Halloween*. Dir. John Carpenter. Compass International Pictures, 1978
- Hard Candy*. Dir. David Slade. Lions Gate Films, 2005.
- Heathers*. Dir. Michael Lehmann. New World Pictures, 1988.
- High Tension*. Dir. Alexandre Aja. Lions Gate Films, 2005.
- House of 1000 Corpses*. Dir. Rob Zombie. Lions Gate Films, 2002.
- I Spit on Your Grave*. Dir. Meir Zarchi. Cinemagic. 1978.
- Jennifer's Body*. Dir. Karyn Kusama. Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.
- Juno*. Dir. Diablo Cody. Fox Searchlight Pictures. 2007.

- Ju-on*. Dir. Takashi Shimizu. Intercontinental Film Distributors (HK), 2002.
- The Last House on the Left*. Dir. Wes Craven. Hallmark Releasing Corp. 1972.
- Let Me In*. Dir. Matt Reeves. Perf. Relativity Media, 2010.
- Let the Right One In*. Dir. Tomas Alfredson. Magnet Releasing, 2008.
- Lipstick*. Dir. Lamont Johnson, Paramount Pictures, 1976.
- May*. Dir. Lucky McKee. Lions Gate Films, 2002.
- A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir. Wes Craven. New Line Cinema, 1984.
- Phantasm*. Dir. Don Coscarelli. New Breed Productions Inc., 1979.
- Phantom of the Opera*. Dir. Rupert Julian. Universal Studios. 1925.
- The Ring*. Dir. Gore Verbinski. DreamWorks Distribution, 2002.
- Ringu*. Dir. Hideo Nakata . DreamWorks Home Entertainment, 2003.
- Rosemary's Baby*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount Pictures, 1968.
- Scream*. Dir. Wes Craven. Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1996.
- The Strangers*. Dir. Bryan Bertino. Rogue Pictures, 2008.
- Straw Dogs*. Dir. Sam Peckinpah, ABC Picture, 1971.
- A Tale of Two Sisters*. Dir. Jee-woon Kim. Tartan Films, 2004.
- Taxi Driver*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures. 1976.
- Teeth*. Dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein. Roadside Attractions, 2007.
- The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Bryanston Pictures Release, 1974.
- Trick 'r Treat*. Dir. Michael Dougherty. Warner Home Video, 2007.

*The Uninvited*. Dir. Charles and Thomas Guard. Paramount Pictures, 2009.

*Wes Craven's New Nightmare*. Dir. Wes Craven. New Line Cinema, 1994.