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1 Introduction

Ever since the inception of the social movement #MeToo in 2017, Hollywood has seen a rise in the production of films that address the psychological horrors women face as a result of sexual assault and similar forms of male abuse of power. Beyond that, MeToo¹ has provided an opportunity to view past movies from a new perspective with *Jennifer's Body* serving as a poignant example.

Jennifer's Body is a 2009 horror-comedy film written by Oscar-winning screenwriter Diablo Cody and directed by Karyn Kusama. It features Megan Fox in the lead role as Jennifer Check, a beautiful cheerleader and it-girl at the local high school of the small town Devil's Kettle, Minnesota. Amanda Seyfried co-stars as her childhood best friend Anita Lesnicki, also known as 'Needy', an awkward and nerdy girl who has very little in common with Jennifer. The plot is initiated when Jennifer is lured in by a local indie band, who, craving fame, attempt to sacrifice her in a demonic ritual. However, due to Jennifer not being a virgin, the ritual fails, and the demon remains trapped inside her. She thus transforms into a literal man-eater, who preys on men through seduction before murdering them and consuming their flesh. Needy struggles to comprehend Jennifer's changing behaviour at first, but when faced with the truth, is eventually forced to put an end to her deadly rampage. The film ends with Needy, who, following Jennifer's death, has claimed her demonic powers, enacting violent revenge on the indie band responsible for her best friend's fate.

Despite Diablo Cody's previous success with the Oscar-winning *Juno* (2007), *Jennifer's Body* became known as a commercial failure by the box office, earning only 16 million dollars on production costs of 32 million (cinemablend). While some critics have praised the movie at the time of its release, such as A.O. Scott from the *New York Times*, who noted that Jennifer's Body "takes up a common theme of slasher films—that queasy, panicky fascination with female sexuality that we all know—and turns it inside out," most critic reviews fall within the scope of the *Washington Times*, who asserted that "Jennifer's Body is neither laugh-out-loud funny nor cringe-inducingly frightening" (Bunch). As of April 2024, the film holds a 46% score among critics and 35% score among audiences on the American review-aggregation website *Rotten Tomatoes*, underscoring its lukewarm reception (Rotten Tomatoes).

However, in recent years, *Jennifer's Body* has achieved a sort of renaissance. The film was listed among the best female-directed horror movies by the *New York Times* (Stanford), was revisited by several critics, and gained a considerable presence on social media. In 2018

¹ For easier legibility, I will refer to the #MeToo movement as MeToo throughout the rest of this thesis.

and 2019 mainly, various online news outlets and magazines featured bold headlines such as "Jennifer's Body would kill if it came out today" (Blichert), "A Violent Feminist Tale Ahead of Its Time" (Jacobson), or "The Feminist Revenge Hero Who Came Too Early" (Cohen). This sudden resurgence is mainly attributed to an alternate reading of *Jennifer's Body*, which situates the film within the context of MeToo. Jennifer's demonic sacrifice came to be interpreted primarily as a metaphor for rape, and her subsequent thirst for revenge was seen as reminiscent of modern feminist films such as the critically acclaimed *Promising Young Woman* (2020). A decade after its initial release, *Jennifer's Body* thus earned a reputation as a feminist cult classic that was ahead of its time.

For the 10th anniversary of the movie, Diablo Cody and lead actress Megan Fox sat together in an interview for *ET live*, discussing how the film's initial poor reception was brought upon by its marketing campaign. Diablo Cody had envisioned *Jennifer's Body* as being made 'for girls', exploring themes of "girl-on-girl hatred, sexuality, the death of innocence, and also politics in the way the town responds to the tragedies" ([Emanuel Levy](#)). However, the marketing department had decided to advertise the movie exclusively to young (heterosexual) males through an exploitation of Megan Fox's reputation as a sex symbol (*Jennifer's Body Reunion*). Karyn Kusama too has voiced her discomfort over *Jennifer's Body* being marketed as a gothic romance and sexual fantasy for young men akin to *Twilight* (2008) but targeted at a male audience. "To see them suddenly make it a movie about Megan Fox looking hot, I was like, 'That's disastrous! She seduces guys, and then she eats their intestines! How is that appealing [to teenage boys]?' (Vary). Reviews such as "Megan Fox does not appear naked in Jennifer's Body. So if that's the main reason you want to go see this film, you're out of luck" (Holtzman) or "If you're in search of a way to ogle Megan Fox's body, there are a lot better ways to do it than subjecting yourself to this" (Berardinelli) affirm the significant disparity between the film's actual content and how it was presented.

Two crucial points emerge here. Firstly, the treatment of *Jennifer's Body* sheds light on the notion that cinematic audiences, particularly those of the horror genre, are by default assumed to consist of heterosexual males. Especially when a film incorporates sexual elements, such depictions are perceived as mere voyeuristic pleasure for men as opposed to a critical examination of the role sex plays within the lives of young women. The undermining of feminist cinema can thus be seen as inherently intertwined with the erasure of female spectatorship. Secondly, the factor of time might have also played a role in the way the film's feminist content was mitigated. The discrepant marketing raises questions whether *Jennifer's Body* had the potential for a feminist agenda radical enough to be perceived as a threat to the corporate

heteronormativity of 2009 Hollywood. *Jennifer's Body* is a unique case as to my knowledge, no other film of the 21st century has undergone such a drastic transformation in reception. The very phrase 'ahead of its time' points towards the notion that the understanding of media is always influenced by the historical context it is viewed in. This holds especially true for feminism, as socio-political movements can undergo substantial developments within short spans of time, as demonstrated by MeToo. Consequently, *Jennifer's Body* can be seen as a compelling case study concerning the intersection of genre conventions, feminist critique, and cultural context within contemporary Hollywood cinema. While the film's feminist content is now being widely recognised in popular discourse, academic research is needed to examine what this content is and to situate it within the historical, cultural, and cinematic context of the time of its release and subsequent renaissance.

The primary purpose of this thesis is therefore to explore *Jennifer's Body* through a feminist lens. I wish to focus on how the film challenged patriarchal norms of its time in both form and content, engaging with feminist issues and ideas of MeToo while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of cinematic genre conventions. If *Jennifer's Body* is to be considered a feminist classic ahead of its time, my goal is thus to determine the particular features that contribute to this reputation. In my thesis, I shall hypothesise three key features significant to the movie's feminist reading: genre hybridity, the feminist gaze, and the monstrous-feminine. Overall, I shall argue that *Jennifer's Body* deserves its status as a feminist classic ahead of its time, for the interplay of these three features effectively subverts conventional expectations of gender and horror. The movie posits a critique of horror cinema's traditional reliance on the male gaze, shifting the focus on women and their experiences, thus creating a powerful rape-revenge narrative which aligns with the agenda of the much later MeToo. By labelling *Jennifer's Body* a "feminist intervention", I aim to highlight its innovation within the genre, as the film proposes a feminist shift within horror cinema that audiences did not fully embrace until a decade after its release. This delayed acknowledgment highlights *Jennifer's Body's* feminist challenge to cinematic traditions and subsequent potential for academic study.

The portrayal of gender within horror cinema has been a longstanding subject of scholarly research with several prominent academic works (Clover; Grant; Hogan; Berenstein *Attack*) discussing in detail how this genre of filmmaking is heavily dependent on the sexual objectification and victimisation of women. More recent research has shifted its focus on the subversion of such traditional conceptions of female victimhood and male dominance. Based on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Creed's influential work *The Monstrous-Feminine*, for instance, introduced the notion of a monstrous configuration of the female body and female

sexuality. Due to the film's clear alignment with such tropes, *Jennifer's Body* has been studied from this perspective before (Paszkievicz; Harrington; Chusna and Mahmudah; Kooyman; Wills and Roberts; Renner; Fradley). However, several research gaps are identifiable. Firstly, existing articles treat *Jennifer's Body* as one example among several, therefore lacking space and depth in analysis. Secondly, as a rather recent phenomenon, scholars have yet to investigate *Jennifer's Body* within the context of its cultural resurgence. Thirdly, a majority of scholarly analyses of *Jennifer's Body*, including Creed's in her follow-up work, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, indulge in a queer reading of the film as opposed to my proposed focus on feminist filmmaking. I wish to address these research gaps by offering a more nuanced exploration of *Jennifer's Body* within the framework of its newfound feminist cult status.

My significant contribution to the study of gender and horror cinema lies in my emphasis on gaze theory. In her groundbreaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey posits that cinema inherently operates within a framework that objectifies women in order to cater to the voyeuristic pleasure of heterosexual males. This objectification, in turn, defines female characters solely through their "to-be-looked-at-ness" (11), a characterisation often leading to women's misrepresentation and sexualisation in the media. The male gaze has been deemed a pervasive tool within horror cinema, reinforcing gender dynamics of female passivity and male activity (Clover; Grant; Hogan; Berenstein *Attack*). Consequently, a series of scholars have sought to identify the female counterpart to the male gaze, imagining female spectatorship as an alternative to the default male audience. However, even though it is agreed upon that a female gaze should be conceptualised as a subversion of the male gaze, there is disagreement over what exactly this subversion shall entail. In my thesis, I wish to contribute to this discussion by reviewing existing definitions of the female gaze proposed by scholars and filmmakers. In particular, I plan to emphasise the distinction between the female gaze and the feminist gaze, the latter of which describes filmmaking that is not only targeted at female spectatorship but also challenges the patriarchal structures that define mainstream cinematic language. Through this distinction, I plan to identify the feminist gaze as a significant element of Claire Johnston's notion of "women's cinema as a counter-cinema," situating *Jennifer's Body* as a cinematic work which envisions and exemplifies her ideas.

To assess my hypothesis, I will utilise two methods: a content analysis to examine the broader aspects of *Jennifer's Body*, including genre, themes, narrative, and characters, alongside a close viewing to examine key scenes of the film in terms of mise-en-scène, language, and dialogue. The combination should enable a comprehensive analysis, providing both depth and detail while also facilitating the location of the film within a broader

contextualisation. My reading focuses exclusively on the original theatrical cut of the film, rather than the unrated extended version released later on DVD. While director Karyn Kusama has indicated that the extended cut aligns more closely with her original vision (Goodsell), the theatrical cut is more representative of the film's initial public reception and cultural positioning at the time of its release.

In terms of structure, this thesis explores the film's already introduced three interrelated key features: genre hybridity, the feminist gaze, and the monstrous-feminine, with the aim of examining their impact on the subversive quality of *Jennifer's Body*. While these elements will be discussed individually, it is important to note that they are deeply interconnected and might therefore also be referenced across multiple sections. To establish the theoretical framework, Section 2 provides a critical discussion of key analytical terms related to feminist filmmaking, the male gaze, the feminist gaze, and MeToo cinema. Section 3 offers a literature review of the historical portrayal of gender in horror cinema, with a particular focus on Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine. The subsequent analysis begins by investigating *Jennifer's Body* through the lens of genre hybridity, specifically how its fusion of horror and comedy satirises conventional gendered tropes. In addition, as it is set within a high school, attention must also be paid to the ways the film adheres to the genre conventions of the American teenage high school film. Secondly, I will emphasise how *Jennifer's Body* deconstructs the male gaze by showcasing the effects sexual objectification has on the character of Jennifer and her relationship with Needy. Through analysis, I will illustrate how the feminist gaze serves to highlight the emotions and experiences of female characters, while also granting them the agency to reciprocate the act of objectification. The latter is predominantly embodied in the third aspect under analysis, the monstrous-feminine. Through Creed's conceptualisation, I will examine how Jennifer's monstrous transformation functions as a means of reclaiming subjectivity in the aftermath of her objectification by the male gaze. Overall, I will demonstrate how *Jennifer's Body* employs several techniques of feminist filmmaking to construct a rape-revenge narrative reminiscent of MeToo cinema.

2 Framing Feminist Filmmaking

This chapter introduces three key analytical terms central to this thesis: the male gaze, the feminist gaze, and MeToo cinema. The first section revisits Laura Mulvey's foundational concept of the male gaze, tracing its definition and the subsequent scholarly debates surrounding the possibility of a female gaze. This leads into a discussion of the feminist gaze,

which in this thesis draws primarily on Joey Soloway's formulation. The second section explores MeToo cinema as a distinct mode of feminist filmmaking.

2.1 Gaze Theory

2.1.1 The Male Gaze

Since its initial publication in the journal *Screen* in 1975, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has received substantial academic attention, with many scholars declaring it a foundational text, if not the most fundamental, within the field of feminist film studies. In this article, Mulvey engages in a theoretical exploration concerning spectatorship and gender dynamics in cinema, coining the concept of the male gaze to explore the ways in which cinema stimulates visual pleasure in a male audience. Her perspective draws on psychoanalytic concepts by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. She claims that phallocentrism, which posits the female symbolically as the 'other' due to her lack of phallus, is reflected in film. Consequently, our fascination with cinema is shaped by patriarchal structures, which impose a dichotomy onto the ways gender is presented on screen, privileging the male spectator.

Mulvey distinguishes between two distinct modes of looking in cinema, scopophilia and voyeurism. The former involves deriving pleasure from gazing at an object, akin to a child's fascination with visual discovery. The act of looking in itself, she argues, holds a certain power, allowing for objectification. Cinema capitalises on this scopophilic pleasure as the bright screen, in contrast to the darkened theatre, invites spectators to look ("Visual Pleasure" 8-9). The voyeuristic mode involves "developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" (9). She links this way of looking to the mirror stage, which Lacan asserts to be a crucial moment in the development of the ego. When a child recognises their own image in the mirror for the first time, they will come to view their image as more perfect than their actual reality. Cinema audiences undergo a similar process by identifying with on-screen protagonists; the mere act of looking contributes to a sense of heightened self-perfection (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 9-10).

The combination of scopophilia and voyeurism affords spectators the opportunity to detach from their own reality. They are able to live vicariously through the idealised version of themselves on screen and are granted the power of the gaze (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 10-11).

Furthermore, according to Mulvey, this system of cinematic identification is inherently gendered. In film, men typically assume the role of possessor of the gaze, relegating women to the status of objects to be looked at. Female characters are solely defined through their to-be-looked-at-ness because under the camera's focus, they are reduced to a static spectacle, momentarily halting the progression of plot. Mulvey contends that traditional Hollywood

cinema caters to male audiences, crafting a voyeuristic power fantasy by men for men, the prevalence of men as central figures encouraging the male spectator to identify with characters who gaze at women. Consequently, this male gaze affects the representation of women on screen. Their roles are shaped by stereotypes, their agency and narrative potential limited in favour of male voyeuristic pleasure (“Visual Pleasure” 11-14). Mulvey has thus been influential in revealing a gendered active/passive dichotomy within cinema, prompting greater exploration of filmmaking’s influence in the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and dynamics.

2.1.2 The Female Gaze in Women’s Cinema

While Mulvey has received substantial acclaim for her formulation of the male gaze, she has also faced criticism, particularly for overlooking female spectatorship. While feminist film criticism in the 1970s sought to analyse the male gaze critically, the 1980s shifted its focus to the forms of pleasure that women could potentially derive from cinema (Stacey *Star Gazing* 22). Mulvey differentiates between three types of gazes: that of the camera, the characters on screen, and the audience, presuming them male by default, given men’s predominant power in the Hollywood industry (“Visual Pleasure” 17). Yet, one prominent question arose as a result: if this phallogocentric system is shifted in any aspect, could a female gaze be created?

Mulvey addresses this criticism in “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.’” She emphasises the possibility of introducing a female protagonist to counter the traditional representation of women as a gender characterised by passiveness. Witnessing a female character in control of the narrative can bestow a similar voyeuristic fantasy on a female viewer, reinforcing her ego and inspiring her to revolt against her own oppression (“Afterthoughts” 124). However, Mulvey (“Afterthoughts” 129) as well as Ann Kaplan (32), another feminist film scholar, recognise that this form of empowerment almost always entails a masculinisation of the female protagonist. The attainment of dominance is contingent upon the relinquishment of those qualities traditionally associated with femininity. This process serves to reinforce the existing power structures, which are informed by a dichotomous understanding of gender.

The feminist theorist Jackie Stacey attempts to conceptualise a potential female gaze by reversing the structure of the male gaze, suggesting that if the male gaze involves the objectification of women for male voyeuristic pleasure, a female gaze would entail the objectification of men for female voyeuristic pleasure. However, Kaplan rejects this conceptualisation, asserting that the reinforcement of a male spectator’s ego is not only derivative of voyeurism but also intertwined with the level of control they hold over the image of women, a power women cannot wield over men given their marginalised position within the

gender binary (34). Mary Ann Doane supports this argument, highlighting the requirement of distance between image and spectator for the practice of voyeurism. Female spectators, she asserts, stand in such close proximity to the image of the woman on screen that they experience overidentification, thus lacking the spatial detachment necessary for voyeuristic pleasure. This phenomenon is exemplified by the fact that the image itself, not the woman on screen, becomes the subject of the spectator's gaze (135-137).

The debate over the existence of a female gaze, envisioned as the counterpart to the male gaze, has been a longstanding inquiry of feminist film critics. Yet, in contrast to the male gaze, as defined by Mulvey, the female gaze lacks a fixed definition or foundational text for scholars to rely upon. This can be attributed to the inherent challenges faced in its conceptualisation (Doane 134). Mere alterations to Mulvey's framework to create room for a female spectator seem inconsequential due to the overarching influence of the patriarchal unconscious that structures the entire system of cinematic spectatorship. As Kaplan asks, "Is it enough simply to 'give women the voice,' if women can only speak from a position already defined by patriarchy?" (197).

To conceptualise a potential female gaze, I suggest taking a step back and focusing on its relation to women's cinema. It is widely acknowledged that the majority of jobs within cinema are occupied by men, and patriarchal structures within the industry thus actively influence those presented on screen (Muir 143). Despite a growing percentage of women working in the field, they still constitute a minority, positioning women's cinema as what Gilles Deleuze would refer to as "minor cinema" (214)—a form of cinema emerging from those outside the hegemonial mainstream, contesting their representation, akin to Black cinema or queer cinema (Butler 34). While Alison Butler notes the difficulty in defining women's cinema as "it suggests, without clarity, films that might be made by, addressed to, or concerned with women, or all three" (9), it is generally agreed that it remains removed from mainstream Hollywood. Claire Johnston, in her essay titled "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," however, asserts that women's cinema should not merely offer an alternative to patriarchal mainstream filmmaking but should pose as its challenger, which she calls "counter-cinema." She thus advocates for the political potential of women's cinema as "our objectification cannot be overcome simply by examining it artistically. It can only be challenged by developing the means to interrogate the male, bourgeois cinema" (37).

Building upon this argument, in "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema," Teresa de Lauretis contends that women's cinema should develop an aesthetic distinct from the traditionally male-dominated cinematic landscape. For de Lauretis, feminist

filmmaking extends beyond the content displayed on screen; rather it lies in how this narrative is presented (159-160). The aim of women's cinema is to challenge the predominant cinematic conventions, prompting women to identify with women's perspectives, presenting diverse aspects of the female experience without succumbing to gender essentialism (157-158).

The avoidance of gender essentialism proves to be a challenging endeavour though, when terminology such as 'women's cinema' implies inherent differences between films made by men and women (Ritterbusch 27-28). Similarly, Mulvey's male gaze has drawn criticism for its essentialist undertones, prompting scholars to broaden spectatorship beyond a gender binary. An example of this is Marcelline Block's *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*, which contains essays that diversify spectatorship by exploring aspects of queerness (Todd) and sexual attraction to multiple genders (Vaughan). Similar efforts have been made by Caetlin Benson-Allott, who underscores the importance of intersectional gaze theory, or bell hooks whose oppositional gaze theory focuses on spectatorship from the point of view of black women.

However, as Amy Ritterbusch argues, such critiques often overlook the underlying intention behind Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which is to critique the dominant cinematic practices that perpetuate the male gaze. In her concluding statement, Mulvey advocates for an alternative cinema that radically opposes this dominance. Therefore, while the critique regarding her essentialist terminology is valid, it is important to understand that Mulvey's main focus was not to enforce a gender binary but to expose the problematic nature of mainstream filmmaking that perpetuates it. Her call for action aligns perfectly with the goals of feminist cinema, which seeks to disrupt and redefine the established cinematic language (Ritterbusch 35-36). Considering the male gaze is the very cinematic technique identified by Mulvey as a significant oppressive force and perpetuator of sexual difference on screen, creating an alternative female gaze becomes paramount. The question thus shifts from whether the female gaze can exist. Rather, the challenge is to configure the female gaze in a way that enables it to be utilised as an effective tool to challenge cinema's phallocentric status quo.

2.1.3 Theorising the Feminist Gaze

So, how can we define the female gaze, and what criteria must a film meet to fall into such a category? Opinions on this matter are split. Zoe Dirse and Sophie Coavoux, for instance, argue that the female gaze is rooted in the filmmaker's gender. Drawing from her experience as a cinematographer within the genre of documentary, Dirse asserts that it is her personal perspective as a woman which allowed her to imbue a female gaze in her work. Coavoux

reinforces this notion in her analysis of the female-directed Greek film *Chevalier*, positing that it exhibits a female gaze despite its complete absence of female characters. While linking a female gaze to a female director's perspective appears logical at first, it falters considering that women, just like men, have been proven capable of perpetuating sexist ideologies (Benson-Allott 65). Furthermore, de Lauretis herself has cautioned against succumbing to an intentional fallacy, asserting that a film cannot simply be defined as feminist just because a female director claims it to be (160-161).

The issue of essentialism is raised once again then. This is for good reason, as according to Stacey, "how to argue for a feminine specificity without falling into the trap of biological essentialism" ("Desperately Seeking" 119) poses one of the most significant challenges for feminist theorists. Indeed, reinforcing a binary opposition of gender directly contradicts the very aims of feminist theory to deconstruct traditional gender norms and promote gender equality, which is why gender essentialism remains a crucial consideration to any conceptualisation in feminist film theory (119). A popular solution to avoid gender essentialism proposed by feminist scholars is to replace the essentialist labels of 'male' and 'female' through the culturally constructed terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Ritterbusch 28). However, rather than adopting the term 'feminine gaze' moving forward, I suggest taking this matter another step further through another critical distinction, namely that between the feminine and the feminist gaze. As Kaplan notes, the influence of patriarchal frameworks within the film industry is too inherent to be overcome through sheer imitation. Embedding a female perspective—through a female director or female protagonist—into a movie does not inherently make it feminist; it may provide space for a female spectator, but it falls short of challenging the pervasive nature of the male gaze (Kaplan 34). Consequently, the feminist gaze acts not as a mere alternative of the male gaze but a response to it; it aligns with the ideals of Johnston's "counter-cinema" as it is characterised by a feminist agenda in both form and content. This gaze is not solely crafted by women for women, but invites men to identify with women's experiences, allowing them to transcend their own perspectives (de Lauretis 161). Thus, the feminist gaze assumes the role of a critical examiner, harbouring a transformative potential which offers not only increased representation but a reconfiguration of those cinematic norms at fault for misogynistic representations of women on screen in the first place. Nonetheless, although I employ the term 'feminist gaze' in my own framework, it should be noted that most scholars researching this topic still utilise the term 'female gaze.' Given that their arguments resonate well with my conceptualisation, I will adopt my own terminology when speaking of them.

Insight into the practical implications of the feminist gaze can be drawn from recent scholarship operating within this framework, such as by Alicia Izharuddin, Elizabeth Olayiwola, Shipra Tholia and Amar Singh, and Hui Faye Xiao. It should be noted here that the aforementioned trend of diversifying spectatorship beyond a gender binary has resulted in a scarcity of recent studies investigating the feminist gaze, particularly in the Anglophone realm. While the focus on the feminist gaze seems unpopular with the Anglophone space, its appearance as a conceptual framework in the countries of China, Malaysia, India, and Nigeria indicates that the dismantling of the male gaze has become a transnational concern.

The studies in question exhibit considerable variation in terms of the films they examine. However, a common thread emerges in their understanding of the feminist gaze. Firstly, there is a shared acknowledgment that a film embodying this gaze centres its narrative on women's issues and female empowerment. The specific nature of these issues remains largely contingent on cultural contexts, confirming past research which has suggested that feminist cinema mirrors the feminist agendas of its specific time and place of origin (Alison Butler). Secondly, there is a tangible effort made to elicit empathy, to create a female protagonist with whom audiences can identify. Finally, breaking away from entrenched stereotypes and cinematic conventions in order to disrupt expectations is seen as another pivotal criteria of a feminist gaze.

However, these three criteria diverge significantly from Mulvey's framework of the male gaze, which relied heavily on psychoanalytical theory. It is important to note that Freud and Lacan's concepts are often viewed unfavourably by feminist scholars due to their misogyny. Stacey has even speculated that the essentialist conundrum of the male gaze stems from Mulvey's psychoanalytical framework, which itself is grounded in a rigid gender binary (*Star Gazing* 27). Despite widespread confusion as to why a theory deeming women a mere displacement of the male phallus should be utilised for feminist claims, Kaplan strongly advocates for a partial embrace of psychoanalytic theory. She firmly denies that phallocentrism possesses any universal truth, but she does argue that many of the suggested themes within psychoanalytical theory are prevalent in literature and film. Therefore, she regards psychoanalysis as a valuable tool, as it sheds light on how the patriarchal unconscious influences society's perception of gender roles. Psychoanalysis enables feminists to trace numerous recurring cinematic themes back to their psychological origin, which in turn aids in understanding the ways women are positioned through film (28-29).

The potential for employing psychoanalytical theory for feminist goals is already evident in Mulvey's original essay. Mulvey's approach went beyond merely identifying on-screen elements, instead interrogating how these depictions interact with the spectator. Her theory thus

not only considers how patriarchal ideologies influence films themselves but also our relationship with them as spectators. Thus, to understand the complexity of how a feminist gaze could operate within such a framework, a similar theoretical language should be used for its formulation.

The most proximate reference for such a definition can be found in a lecture on the female gaze given by Joey Soloway, the Emmy-awarded director of television series such as *Transparent* (2014-2019) and *I Love Dick* (2016-2017), at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival. In this lecture, Soloway imagines how a female gaze—or, according to my choice of terminology, feminist gaze—could be put forth based on Mulvey's original text. In their definition, they distinguish three levels of establishing this gaze.

I think the Female Gaze is a way of feeling seeing. It could be thought of as a subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist, especially when the protagonist is not a [cis male]. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing—the characters. I take the camera and I say, hey, audience, I'm not just showing you this thing, I want you to really feel with me [...] The Female Gaze. Part One. Reclaiming the body, using it with intention to communicate Feeling Seeing. (Soloway 17:34)

This first level, which I would like to call 'reclaiming the body' is in line with scholars' earlier mentions of the feminist gaze's ability to evoke empathy. This definition represents a fundamental subversion of the male gaze, which encourages a voyeuristic identification and the reinforcement of the ego. For the feminist gaze, the process of identification stems from an entirely different motivation, namely empathy, which in turn alters the spectator's perspective. The goal therefore is to identify with another body, a woman, whose actions and emotions would otherwise be undermined by the pervasive influence of the male gaze, reducing her to a passive object.

The second level is described by Soloway in the following way:

I also think the Female Gaze is using the camera to take on the very nuanced, occasionally impossible task of showing us how it feels to be the object of the Gaze. The camera talks out at you from its position as the receiver of the gaze [asking you to] come feel with me specifically how I become as I become what men see. It's about what I'm doing by being seen—my effect—this is what it causes in the world. The gazed gaze. (Soloway 21:17)

The second level proposed, the 'gazed gaze', effectively combines women's cinema's objective of deconstructing the male gaze with scholars' arguments that films categorised by a feminist gaze entail a narrative centred on women's issues. As opposed to the male gaze, where the viewer comes to obtain a dominant position as the wielder of the gaze, the feminist gaze offers the audience a place of objectification. This is done with the intention of exposing the male

gaze and the patriarchal structures that inform it for the harm they inflict through the depiction of gender discrimination, sexual violence, and other forms of misogyny. However, this level only operates effectively when it interacts with ‘reclaiming the body.’

Barbara Creed argues, when employing the feminist gaze to depict, for example, instances of rape, the emphasis is not on portraying the physical violence of it, as it could inadvertently lead the audience to identify with the rapist. Instead, any portrayal of such injustices is centred on the victim’s perspective, the feminist gaze thus serving as what Soloway describes as an “empathy machine” (24:06) in contrast to the male gaze, which supports sadistic power fantasies (Creed *Return* 53).

This third thing involves the way the Female Gaze dares to return the gaze. It’s not the gazed gaze. It’s the gaze on the gazers. It’s about how it feels to stand here in the world having been seen our entire lives... it says we see you, seeing us. it says, I don’t want to be the object any longer, I would like to be the subject, and with that subjectivity I can name you as the object. the object becomes you. (Soloway 22:57)

Soloway posits that the third level, termed ‘returning the gaze,’ is the most difficult one to achieve and has therefore been relatively unexplored (23:46). The difficulty is that returning the gaze requires not only a subversion of the male gaze in terms of identification and perspective but also of agency. But considering Johnston’s aforementioned argument that combating women’s oppression goes beyond mere depiction (37), this level might arguably be the most crucial. The concept itself is not entirely new. In her examination of the feminist gaze within the police drama *Cagney & Lacey* (1982-1988), Loraine Gamman noted how the titular female protagonists “look back” (16) at their gazers. This, she argues, is done by the two explicitly confronting their male colleagues for their misogynistic behaviour, effectively challenging the norms of not only the on-screen characters but also the audience (Gamman 15-16). The feminist gaze, therefore, not only depicts women’s objectification but also shows women actively trying to fight it.

Soloway utilises a similar terminology, advocating for the gazers to become the ones gazed upon. This conception might seem reminiscent of Stacey’s suggested reversal of roles, wherein men are depicted as the objects of women’s voyeuristic pleasure. However, Soloway’s approach is more complex. Instead of establishing a new status quo from the beginning of the narrative where women gaze at men, Soloway envisions a dynamic shift occurring within the narrative itself. This shift sees a transformation in the voyeuristic power dynamics, ultimately resulting in women wielding the power of the gaze. I would argue that this focus on transformation is precisely why ‘returning the gaze’ is particularly popular in cinematic genres that are inherently subversive and experimental, such as horror. Specifically, I suggest that

Jennifer's Body achieves this final level of the feminist gaze through its portrayal of the monstrous-feminine.

2.2 MeToo Cinema

While it would be reductive to attribute the origins of MeToo to a singular event, as it is widely recognised as a cumulative effort to raise awareness of issues such as sexual assault and male abuse of power, particularly as experienced by cisgender women, the movement's emergence is often located in a tweet issued by actress Alyssa Milano on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). In this tweet, Milano coined the hashtag #MeToo, urging women who had experienced sexual violence to share their stories. The hashtag quickly went viral across multiple platforms, with countless women disclosing their experiences of sexual violence across private, public, and professional contexts. MeToo thus created an opportunity for gender-based violence and discrimination to be rendered visible. In particular, it generated significant discourse within the film industry, as numerous women working in Hollywood came forward with accounts of harassment, coercion, and assault in the workplace. These revelations exposed a systemic tendency to suppress female victims' voices while protecting male perpetrators (Funnell and Beliveau 2).

Although the discourse soon extended to various professional contexts, the initial concentration on the film industry also prompted critical inquiry into how patriarchal structures shape not only labour dynamics but also the language of filmmaking. Scholars and critics began to interrogate how the dominance of white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class men in key creative and executive roles contributes to the marginalisation of female voices, both on screen and behind the camera (Funnell and Beliveau 1). As a result, many feminist films emerging in the wake of MeToo can be understood as responses to these structures, foregrounding sexual violence and the hegemonic structures that perpetuate it, while simultaneously creating space for female filmmakers to express their perspectives (Funnell and Beliveau 3).

However, it is important to exercise caution when referring to 'MeToo cinema' as a distinct category or suggesting that the movement alone catalysed subsequent feminist filmmaking. Not every feminist film produced during this period was directly influenced by MeToo, and the movement itself forms only a part of a longer history of feminist intervention in cinema (Heller-Nicholas 154). Nonetheless, two points should be noted. Firstly, several filmmakers such as Emerald Fennell (*Creed Return* 56) and Coralie Fargeat (*Creed Return* 61) have explicitly cited MeToo as a heavy influence on their work. Secondly, several film scholars

have identified a broader shift in feminist filmmaking and especially rape-revenge stories that coincides with the late 2010s and early 2020s.

Barbara Creed, for instance, coins the emergence of a "feminist new wave" cinema, characterised by films that are "primarily directed by women" and that "tell stories about women who are in revolt against male violence and corrosive patriarchal values including misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anthropocentrism" (*Return* 2). Henry (2014) anticipated the continuing rise of "revisionist rape-revenge," films often directed by women that feature "the spectacular subversion of the male gaze, the centrality of morality in revenge, and avoidance of the spectacle of female suffering" (Réti 203). Building on such observations, Keating later observed an evolution in rape-revenge toward more nuanced and complex portrayals of feminine trauma, agency, and resistance. While these developments cannot be wholly attributed to MeToo, there is a visible overlap in the interrogation of patriarchal cinematic language such as the male gaze, a shift towards a feminist perspective, and thematic focus on challenging rape culture. Moreover, Creed (*Return* 18), Réti (189), Heller-Nicholas (173), Falvey (219), and Keating (66) all acknowledge the movement's role in shaping the concerns of contemporary feminist cinema. In light of this, I will use the term MeToo cinema to encompass their combined ideas, as well as other forms of filmmaking that embody the features they discuss.

In *Screening #MeToo*, Lisa Funnell and Ralph Beliveau contend that MeToo has not only provided space for newer forms of feminist filmmaking but has also facilitated the re-evaluation of earlier films through a contemporary feminist lens (3-4). This re-evaluation serves a dual purpose: On the one hand, it highlights how patriarchal structures have historically imposed misogynistic representations on screen; on the other hand, it uncovers how feminist content might have been suppressed, overlooked, or misinterpreted due to the same structures operating behind the scenes.

The recent cultural resurgence of *Jennifer's Body* perfectly exemplifies the latter potential, showcasing the potential for reassessing the film through the lens of MeToo. In my analysis of *Jennifer's Body*, I will therefore draw frequent comparisons to readings of critically acclaimed works associated with MeToo cinema, such as *Promising Young Woman* (Fennel, 2020), *Revenge* (Fargeat, 2017), *I May Destroy You* (Coel 2020), and *Black Christmas* (Takal, 2019), in order to identify the defining features of MeToo cinema and to what extent *Jennifer's Body* anticipates them. Through this framework, I aim to illustrate how the film was ahead of its time in several key aspects.

3 Gender and Horror Cinema

This section functions provides a literature review on horror cinema and its relationship to gender. It examines the representation of gendered violence within the genre, with particular attention to how these representations intersect with theories of spectatorship, most notably the male gaze. My discussion then turns to Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, which provides a framework for analysing female monstrosity in horror. Specifically, I will explore the tropes of the vagina dentata and the femme castratrice as they play a key role in my subsequent analysis of *Jennifer's Body*.

3.1 Horror Cinema and Gendered Violence

According to *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, the genre of horror film is described as “a large and heterogeneous group of films that, via the representation of disturbing and dark subject matter, seek to elicit responses of fear, terror, disgust, shock, suspense, and, of course, horror from their viewers” (Kuhn and Westwell). Its origin is often located within the literary tradition of Gothic fiction, which featured similar themes of terror and suspense. However, horror was not firmly established as a separate genre until the 1930s. Since then, horror has flourished in several forms of media, in novels, comics, or video games, and most prominently, cinema, where it has become highly lucrative (Pulliam 11).

Film scholars have been fascinated with horror for decades. Noël Carroll claims this fascination stems from the inherent paradox of horror cinema's appeal. After all, why would audiences be drawn to films that are revolting to the eyes, which depict everything typically shunned in society, and elicit such undeniably negative reactions as fear and disgust (“Why Horror” 30)? According to Andrew Tudor, those who enjoy horror films might even be seen as “disturbed people indulging nasty, perverse desires” (40). Historically, moral panic has often been linked to horror films, with audiences, critics, and medical professionals viewing mediated violence as potentially traumatising as well as enabling similar violent tendencies in viewers (Farrimond 151). As a result, the history of censorship within horror cinema has been well-documented (Hills 93).

In contrast, others have approached the genre with greater seriousness, recognising its potential for layered and nuanced meaning. Christopher Sharrett points out how horror films are frequently read as producing social allegories, revealing deep truths about the society we live in. It is precisely by exploiting our deepest fears that horror can function as a critique of the systems that control everyday life (56). Nonetheless, Sharrett also claims that “the horror film, like all forms of art, continues to embody the ideological circumstances of the moment

that contains it” (Sharrett 71). Therefore, while horror films often serve to mirror and problematise hegemonial power dynamics, such as the white bourgeoisie patriarchy, their production still operates under those very structures.

This pervasive influence of hegemonial power structures is exemplified in horror cinema’s complex relationship with gender representation. Rhona J. Berenstein points out the widespread assumption that horror is a genre particularly enjoyed by young men. She references the classic trope of a young couple attending a horror film screening. In this scenario, the horror film serves as a test of courage for the man, while the woman is expected to be frightened, shielding her eyes and seeking protection in her date’s arms. This image reinforces the common stereotype of women as the weaker sex, but it also perpetuates the notion that women generally do not enjoy horror films (“It Will Thrill” 147-148). Katherine Farrimond builds upon this argument, suggesting that not only is the horror genre inherently unattractive to women, but that, in line with the title of her 2020 article, “being a horror fan and being a feminist are often a conflicting business.” But why would she make such an assumption?

In her highly influential text *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, Berenstein criticises classic horror cinema for its “sexual division of labor” (*Attack 2*). She claims that “[c]onvention holds that males perform both the civilized and uncivilized parts, and that their status as fiend or hero is determined via a woman. Attack a woman and you are a monster; save a woman and you are a chivalrous man” (Berenstein *Attack 2*). As such, while male characters in the horror film can embody diverse roles, female characters are consistently depicted as passive victims, whose survival depends solely upon the male protagonist.

According to Judith Butler, gender functions as a performative act; it is not something that one is but rather something one does. Gender is enacted similarly to a role in a stage play; it is performative in so far as one engages in behaviours aimed to express an identity which bears no meaning outside the performance (*Gender Trouble* 191). Berenstein cites the image of the female scream as an exemplary portrayal of gender performance. Upon imagining a scream, a picture of a young woman typically comes to mind, her mouth agape, her hands pressed against her cheeks as she lets out a high-pitched sound. This image, Berenstein claims, is paramount to the American horror film (*Attack 1*). The scream serves as a performative act, enabling a societal construction that equates femininity with victimhood. Unable to fend for herself, the only thing a woman in the horror film can do upon being confronted by the monster is scream in terror. The strategic use of the female scream both within horror cinema and its marketing serves two purposes: it instructs female viewers on the expected emotional response, while simultaneously reinforcing masculine ideals by implying that fear is a failure of

masculinity (Berenstein *Attack* 8). As Butler suggests, such continued enactments of gendered behaviours obscure the constructed nature of gender, leading to gender essentialism (*Undoing Gender* 42-43).

Similar insights into the representation of gender within classic horror cinema are given in Carol J. Clover's highly influential *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, particularly its chapter dedicated to the examination of the slasher subgenre. Clover posits that slasher films adhere to a strict formula, within which the premise —featuring a human killer, often masked and armed with a lethal weapon terrorising and systematically murdering a group of young adults—is just as predictable as its depiction of women (21). Whereas both men and women fall prey to the killer in the slasher, the deaths of female characters include heightened brutality and afford greater emphasis both in screen time and cinematographic framing (35). Clover notes that the killer's wielding of a phallic weapon evokes connotations of sexual violence and rape. Consequently, she claims the killer functions as a manifestation of “the normally repressed animal sexual energy of the civilized male” (47), using women as an outlet for his sexual sadism.

Despite this underlying misogyny, the subgenre offers a significant challenge to gender representation through the introduction of the final girl. Unlike classic horror films, where the monster is eventually defeated by the male protagonist, in slashers, it is a lone female survivor, the final girl, who emerges victorious over the killer. While this marks a notable shift in female agency within the horror genre, Clover observes that the final girl is typically portrayed as more masculine compared to the female victims. She is depicted as a tomboy in name, appearance, and interests, possesses high intelligence and unlike her sexually active peers, she remains a virgin (48).

The final girl archetype therefore illustrates Berenstein's argument regarding the dual nature of horror cinema:

[O]ne of the fascinations of horror is that it is a venue for the dual operations of convention and transgression. Horror is committed to the maintenance of the status quo in terms not only of gender roles but also of social structures, institutions, and belief systems in general. Yet, at the same time, it engages in full-throttle efforts to destroy those systems or at least loosen them from their stable foundations. (*Attack* 10)

The final girl represents a paradox because, while it gives new agency to female characters in the genre, it ultimately reinforces existing gender hierarchies that equate strength with masculinity. Thus, while horror films can indeed function as social allegories, the persistent portrayal of femininity as victimhood undermines most efforts at subversion.

3.2 Horror Cinema and Gendered Spectatorship

Berenstein posits that "in its classic and contemporary forms, horror cinema is a genre of looking" (*Attack* 91). The horror genre's dark themes, excessive depiction of violence, and distinct appeal have warranted a particular focus on spectatorship within its study. Several scholars have observed that horror has a strong tendency to operate under the principles of Mulvey's male gaze (Clover; Grant; Hogan; Berenstein *Attack*).

In the context of horror, the male gaze can be considered amplified. Women are not merely depicted as passive victims to be looked at for sexual gratification, but rather, as stated before, their objectification becomes markedly more brutal, graphic, thus sadistic. In her original conception, Mulvey explored how the male gaze functions as a source of ego reinforcement, inviting the viewer to perceive themselves as more in control and powerful as they actually are through identification with the male hero. In contrast, Clover argues that in the slasher subgenre, the viewer's identification shifts from the protagonist to the killer (43). She contends that viewing a horror film can be considered an act of sexual violence itself, of "killing and fucking" (Clover 177), wherein the camera compels the spectator to adopt the killer's sadistic perspective on women. The horror film exhibits a dual gaze: the assaultive gaze, which allows sadistic control (Clover 182), and the reactive gaze, which places viewers into a masochistic position (191-192). However, given the limited variety in role distribution on screen, this dichotomy becomes inherently gendered. Male spectators are invited to assault whereas female spectators are invited to be assaulted, the assaultive masculine gaze versus the reactive feminine gaze (186). Thus, it is the interplay of on-screen content, its cinematic framing, as well as the audience's identification which has established misogyny as a defining feature of not only the slasher subgenre, but horror cinema overall.

While this clarifies why horror films might not appeal to women, it would be incorrect to say that women cannot find any enjoyment in the genre. Yet, Farrimond also claims that horror films popular among female audiences typically lie outside the mainstream, possibly due to a subversion of many misogynistic tropes that have come to be seen as a default to the genre (150). Research indicates that women are especially drawn to horror films which centre on female agency, feature motivations such as revenge, and position women as the killer or monster (Cherry 137).

3.3 The Monstrous-Feminine

Gender dynamics within horror cinema have largely been examined through the lens of women's victimisation by male monsters. Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* proposed a shift in focus towards woman-as-monster instead, an aspect which had been overlooked by both horror and feminist scholars up to that point. In her work, Creed critiques feminist scholars for only examining the portrayal of women within cinematic genres such as the melodrama, while also criticising horror scholars for either neglecting female monstrosity as its distinct category or reducing the female monster to a representation of "man's castrated other" (*Monstrous-Feminine* 5).

By deliberately selecting the term 'the monstrous-feminine' over 'female monster', Creed makes an important distinction. The monstrous-feminine, she contends, is not a monster which happens to be female. Rather, it is femininity itself—the female body including its sexual organs and reproductive functions—which becomes the source of monstrosity. This form of monstrosity is inherently different to the male monster as she is defined by her sexuality and gender (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 5).

In line with several horror and feminist scholars, Creed grounds her concept in psychoanalytical theory, in particular the abject, introduced by Julia Kristeva, and castration anxiety, introduced by Sigmund Freud. Kristeva defines abjection as the ultimate manifestation of otherness, encompassing all that lies outside "borders, positions, rules" (4), therefore posing a threat to the symbolic order. Exclusion is paramount as the abject marks the threshold of what constitutes the human subject. Given this definition, it is unsurprising that abjection enjoys frequent use within the analysis of horror cinema. As Creed argues, borders are central to the horror film:

In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast (Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Creature from the Black Lagoon, King Kong); in others the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (Carrie, The Exorcist, The Omen, Rosemary's Baby); or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (Psycho, Dressed to Kill, A Reflection of Fear); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (The Hunger, Cat People). (*Monstrous-Feminine* 13)

Moreover, Kristeva notes how the abject is embodied through bodily wastes including blood, vomit, excrements, all elements commonly displayed within horror cinema to evoke disgust (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 11). Even the ultimate form of abjection, the corpse, finds its representation in horror cinema, be it through the zombie, the vampire, or in the case of *Jennifer's Body*, a flesh-eating demon (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 13).

How does abjection connect to the monstrous-feminine though? Linda Williams already noted the parallels between the portrayal of women and monsters in horror cinema in her essay “When the Woman Looks.” In gothic romance especially, women might fall for the monster because of their “similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing” (20), meaning their bodies share a deviation from the default human male subject. Expanding on this idea, Creed argues not for similarity but the inherent sameness of the bodies of the monster and woman. In a patriarchal world, women are consistently positioned as the ‘other.’ Their reproductive bodily functions including menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth serve to alienate them from the symbolic order, thus positioning them as abject (*Monstrous-Feminine* 13). This is made evident by the prevalence of myths surrounding female monstrosity across diverse cultures throughout history (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 3).

Femininity being perceived threatening to men therefore appears to be a universal idea, but what actually constitutes this threat? Barbara Creed traces this fear back to Sigmund Freud’s theory of castration anxiety. According to Freud, upon recognising the mother’s lack of a phallus, the male child assumes she has been castrated. To cope with this traumatic realisation, the child substitutes the absent penis with a stand-in object such as a piece of clothing, a fetish, onto which he projects both his desires and anxieties (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 125).

Creed, along with numerous critics of psychoanalysis, critiques the misogyny in Freud’s conceptualisation of castration anxiety because despite the origin of fetishisation, Freud locates the child’s fear of castration in the father, rather than the mother. The child fears that the father will mutilate his genitals as punishment for his unconscious desire for the mother, thereby leaving him castrated like her. This fear enables the child to resolve the Oedipus complex and, ultimately, to redirect his desire toward a woman of his own (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 120). Within this framework, male anxiety stems not from the mother herself but from the perceived loss of power associated with castration. As a result, Freud situates the fear of women in their alleged powerlessness, rather than acknowledging the potential power they may possess—an issue he notably avoids discussing. His model thus reinforces a rigid gender binary, in which women are rendered passive while men remain active, thereby denying any representation of women as possessing power in their own right (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 130). Building on this theoretical background, Creed outlines several conceptualisations of the monstrous-feminine, two of which I will focus on as they are especially relevant to *Jennifer’s Body*.

3.3.1 The Vagina Dentata

As opposed to Freud, Creed identifies the source of castration anxiety within the mother, or woman. Castration anxiety, she argues, is for instance embodied via a common trope the

monstrous-feminine takes on, the vagina dentata or toothed vagina. This symbol is often associated with the idea of women being 'maneaters,' entrapping men like a carnivorous plant. Female characters bearing the vagina dentata are depicted as highly seductive, luring men into sexual encounters, only to confront them with menacing teeth upon penetration, ensuing in castration (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 116-117). As a site of terror, the vagina dentata has been utilised to reinforce pervasive negative attitudes concerning female genitalia. Erin Harrington, for instance, highlights its presence in World War II propaganda, where it symbolised the perceived danger of sexually transmitted infections and unrestrained female sexuality. Given these connotations, it is unsurprising that the vagina dentata finds representation within the horror genre (Harrington 54). Creed traces the presence of the vagina dentata in horror cinema through the fascination of monsters bearing vicious teeth, such as vampires, aliens, or even sharks. Beyond these depictions, she also identifies a more metaphorical depiction of this concept in horror's recurrent imagery of long, dark hallways, corridors, and ominous entrances into the unknown, symbolic spaces that evoke anxieties surrounding entrapment and consumption (*Monstrous-Feminine* 118).

However, an alternative reading of the vagina dentata positions it as a site of transgression, one that destabilises the symbolic order and can, therefore, be interpreted as emancipatory. Symbolically, the vagina embodies the opposition between birth, as the site of origin, and death, where one is ultimately consumed. Moreover, it disrupts the binary distinctions between penetrated/passive and penetrator/active (Harrington 53). As Harrington, drawing on Irigaray's concept of autoeroticism, suggests, the vagina dentata speaks of a distinct, feminine agency as it is self-pleasuring and independent of the masculine phallus. In doing so, it asserts its autonomy and resists subjugation to phallic powers (55). This emancipatory aspect is for instance featured in the American black horror comedy *Teeth* (Liechtenstein, 2007), which follows Dawn, a teenage girl who discovers that she has a vagina dentata, which activates in response to men's nonconsensual advances. Through its usage of camp aesthetics and humour, the film offers a critique of sexual violence in a similar way that *Jennifer's Body* did two years later (Kelly).

3.3.2 The Femme Castratrice and Rape-Revenge

Expanding on the notion of the woman as a castrator, who presents a more active role for women in the construction of male fear, Barbara Creed introduces another variant of the monstrous-feminine, the femme castratrice. It should be noted that while technically considered a distinct category in Creed's framework, the line between the femme castratrice and the vagina

dentata as an emancipatory figure is not clearly defined. Both archetypes evoke castration anxiety and are likened to mythical figures who entice men only to castrate them. As such, scholars, including myself, consider both archetypes in their analysis of a singular configuration of the monstrous-feminine.

My personal interpretation of Creed's concepts suggests that the two types diverge in terms of agency and functionality. The vagina dentata predominantly serves as an embodiment of dangerous female sexuality, visually and symbolically rather than functionally defined. When framed in an emancipatory context, as in the film *Teeth*, it represents a site of resistance against male power, positioning female sexuality as a weaponised defence mechanism (Harrington 65). The femme castratrice, on the other hand, constitutes a more active and offensive threat, dismantling and actively challenging male dominance. It is characterised less by visual symbolism and more by its narrative function within rape-revenge (Kelly 89).

The categorisation of the rape-revenge film remains a point of debate. While it has been identified as a subgenre of horror by Clover due to its frequent inclusion of graphic violence, others define it either as its own distinctive genre or as a narrative structure that appears across various genres (Henry 2). While this debate is valid, it lies outside the scope of this thesis. Since classifying rape-revenge as a distinct genre would needlessly complicate my chapter on genre hybridity, in line with Jacinda Read and Projansky's conceptions, I will refer to it as a recurring narrative (Keating 60-61).

Rape-revenge narratives typically follow a specific two-part structure: rape, followed by revenge (Henry 4). Projansky identifies two main categories within this structure. The first category was popularised by Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* (1972) and involves a woman being raped and her rape being avenged by someone close to her, often a male figure such as a family member or partner. The second category, which pertains to the femme castratrice, involves a woman avenging her own rape. She undergoes a profound transformation due to the trauma of experiencing rape. Fuelled by rage, she becomes a metaphorical monster, seeking revenge not only against her rapist(s) but often also the patriarchal culture that enables sexual assault. This distinction is central to understanding the feminist potential of the femme castratrice trope, as she represents a shift from woman as a victim to woman as an avenger (60).

However, despite this potential, rape-revenge films have also been the subject of significant controversy. For instance, *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978), considered by many scholars one of the most influential rape-revenge films, has been heavily criticised for perpetuating a trend in which the depiction of brutal rape is imbued with voyeuristic tendencies, playing into the male gaze and thus eroticising the act (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 139). This

trend is perhaps more effectively explained by Jacinda Read, who argues that although rape-revenge films may portray rape as an offence warranting violent retribution, they are not inherently feminist. Instead, such films should be viewed as attempts to “make sense of feminism” (10), reflecting how feminist concerns are negotiated and represented within particular historical and cultural contexts. In this sense, my argument that *Jennifer’s Body* was ahead of its time rests on the idea that, although it predates MeToo, the film engages with the rape-revenge framework in ways that resonate with the feminist discourse popularised during the movement, namely by critiquing the cultural and institutional structures that silence, exploit, and commodify young women.

To conclude with the theoretical background essential for the analysis that follows, I would like to briefly note that 30 years after her original work was published, Creed released a follow-up book titled *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*. This book’s greatest innovation is situating of the monstrous-feminine within what Creed terms “feminist new wave cinema,” as well as shifting the focus from female to male abjection. Drawing on Kristeva, Creed identifies male abjection not as corporeal but behavioural, manifesting in acts that threaten to expose the instability of the symbolic order, such as rape. Accordingly, MeToo cinema depicts a female protagonist who revolts against the system that enables male abjection, often through her transformation into a monstrous-feminine figure (9-11).

While *Jennifer’s Body* certainly contains elements that align with a critique of male abjection, most notably in its critique of rape culture, it ultimately aligns more closely with female abjection as theorised by Kristeva and elaborated by Creed in her original work. For one, Jennifer’s objectification of men predates her transformation, suggesting that her monstrous behaviour is not a reversal of power but an amplification of already abjected femininity. The central preoccupation of the film is not with the instability of male authority but with the female body itself as a site of horror, desire, and agency. Jennifer’s body becomes a grotesque spectacle that transgresses the boundaries of the clean and proper and thus threatens the social order. For this reason, I have chosen to rely primarily on Creed’s original work as the theoretical foundation for my analysis of the monstrous-feminine and abjection, while incorporating her later book mainly in relation to MeToo cinema.

4 Genre Hybridity in *Jennifer’s Body*

A key feature that Barbara Creed identifies in #MeToo cinema is genre hybridity. Given that the film industry has largely been shaped by patriarchal structures, MeToo-era films often seek

to expose how genre itself can restrict feminine subjectivity and reinforce gendered power dynamics. Through a blending of genres or the strategic use and subversion of familiar tropes, such films challenge the constraints traditionally imposed on representations of women and their narratives on screen (*Return* 6).

An example of a MeToo-era film that employs such genre hybridity is *Promising Young Woman* (2020). While predominantly a thriller, the film parodies the rom-com genre by incorporating classic tropes such as the ‘meet-cute,’ only to dismantle them. The protagonist’s love interest, initially framed within the conventions of a charming romance, is ultimately revealed to have been complicit in the sexual assault of her best friend. In contrast to the redemptive arcs typical of romantic comedies, the film refuses to forgive or redeem him, thus rejecting the genre’s tendency to overlook or romanticise problematic male behaviour (Rétif 196-198).

Like *Promising Young Woman*, *Jennifer’s Body* uses genre hybridity as a strategic tool. The following chapter aims to analyse the film’s integration of horror, comedy, and the American high school film, and how these elements contribute to its feminist tone. My central argument is that, through the exaggeration of established genre tropes and character stereotypes, and the use of self-aware humour, the film effectively satirises the societal pressures imposed on teenage girls.

4.1 “Our Star Kicker was Someone’s Snack Pack” — The Horror-Comedy

The hybridity of horror and comedy is far from a recent development. As Bruce G. Hallenbeck argues, the horror-comedy genre is not only well-established but has also demonstrated considerable resilience over time (208). It initially gained prominence within musical theatre, particularly on Broadway (Hallenbeck 13). The transition of the horror-comedy into cinema was gradual; it first emerged in the 1940s due to the subtle infusion of dark humour into horror films (Hallenbeck 60) before reaching a full realisation in the 1960s and 1970s (Paul 66-67) with films such as *Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) (Hallenbeck 64) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) (Hallenbeck 111-112), which, despite their boldness for the time, have become highly influential within the genre. The 1980s then saw a surge in horror-comedies, largely due to the popularity of teen slasher films (Hallenbeck 136). By the 1990s, it became rare to encounter a horror film that did not incorporate comedic elements (Hallenbeck 167). To this day, horror-comedies persist as a genre, especially thanks to the success of major franchises such as *Scream* (Craven, 1996) (Hallenbeck 189).

At first glance, the popularity of horror-comedy might seem implausible considering these two genres appear fundamentally opposed. Comedy aims to evoke laughter and

amusement, while horror seeks to elicit fear and terror. Comedy relies on humour and jokes, whereas horror utilises metaphors and tension to stimulate our deepest anxieties. It seems illogical to laugh in moments meant to provoke screams, or to scream during scenes designed for laughter (Carroll “Horror and Humor” 145). However, despite these surface differences, Noël Carroll claims the two genres share a key similarity: they are among the cinematic genres most dependent on audience response. Both horror and comedy are made to invoke reactions from viewers, whether that be laughter or fear (149). Furthermore, Hallenbeck notes that both horror and comedy require a distortion of reality, asking audiences to suspend disbelief for the sake of a heightened emotional experience. Thus, while the emotional effect may differ, the mechanics of these genres operate in parallel (3).

Yet, as several scholars have observed, for a horror-comedy to be effective, a balance between the two genres must be achieved. Neither comedy nor horror should dominate; instead, they must complement one another (Hallenbeck 6-7; Kawin 199). Ideally, the comedic and horror elements would integrate seamlessly, but according to Bruce F. Kawin, in practice, they often merely alternate. A terrifying horror scene might thus be followed by comedic relief, which can create a somewhat disjointed tone (199).

4.1.1 Horror

This applies to the initial third of *Jennifer’s Body*, which features two independent horror sequences standing in tonal dissonance with the first act of the film. The first of these scenes occurs during the film’s opening prologue and serves as a prolepsis foreshadowing the film’s climax. At this moment, the audience has little understanding of the characters or their relationships which adds a sense of mystery. The camera lingers on a figure walking towards a suburban house, where a teenage girl, later revealed to be the titular Jennifer, is seen lounging on her bed, idly watching a fitness commercial. The scene abruptly shifts when a girl suddenly appears outside Jennifer’s window, bearing an expression of intense hatred as she watches Jennifer ominously.

The flashforward ends, and the narrative reverts to a linear progression, formally introducing the main characters: Needy, who serves as the narrator, and Jennifer, her childhood best friend. Both are high school students living in a small American town called Devil’s Kettle. Jennifer persuades Needy to accompany her to the local bar Melody Lane to attend a concert by a rock band from the city, Low Shoulder, in the hopes of hooking up with their lead singer, Nikolai. However, the evening takes a tragic turn when a fire breaks out at the bar, forcing the two teenage girls to flee as the building burns down, trapping several residents of the town

inside. Although Needy implores Jennifer to return home with her, Jennifer, visibly shaken by the event, chooses to leave with the band members instead.

The second stand-alone horror sequence occurs later that same night. Needy, now home alone, becomes alarmed by strange noises within the house. She eventually encounters Jennifer in her kitchen, drenched in blood. Needy calls out to her friend in concern, but Jennifer remains unresponsive, grinning manically. She then proceeds to rummage through the refrigerator, consuming an entire raw chicken before vomiting black bile onto the floor. Soon after, she corners Needy, nearly sinking her newly grown fangs into her neck, only to retreat at the last moment, leaving Needy in a state of shock and confusion.

These two scenes are easily identifiable as belonging to the horror genre not merely because of their content but also because of certain cinematic techniques. Horror films, according to Robert Spandoni, are atmospheric in nature (151). The importance of atmosphere within cinema is frequently dismissed, as it is believed that to achieve the desired effect, atmosphere must “not call too much attention to itself” (Spandoni 155). Instead, it subtly reinforces the narrative, evoking the intended emotional response from the audience such as suspense, dread, or a combination of both. Suspense aims to leave the audience uncertain of future events whereas dread conveys the “awful near certainty that the imminent outcome for a character will be bad” (Spandoni 157). In the horror genre, this mostly manifests as a monster or killer lurking somewhere with the intent to harm or kill (Spandoni 157).

In the two aforementioned scenes in *Jennifer's Body*, this atmosphere of dread is achieved through the application of several cinematic techniques including setting, camerawork, sound design, and music. The use of setting and sound is particularly significant in creating a threat that is felt rather than directly observed (Spandoni 157). Needy's confrontation with Jennifer's demonic form occurs during the night inside a family home, with both the absence of light as well as the enclosed architecture—including narrow corridors, sharp corners, and several potential hiding spots—severely restricting visibility. Yet, Jennifer's presence is implied through a combination of visual and audible cues. As can be seen in Figure 1, her shadow appears in the background of various shots, lingering behind Needy before disappearing again. This visual indication of movement is complemented by a soundscape including several diegetic sounds common to horror films such as footsteps, creaking doors, and indistinct groans and scraping noises (Whittington 182). The scene's tension is further amplified through a subversion of expectations. As Needy investigates the source of the mysterious noises, she repeatedly enters rooms only to find them empty. These misdirections build a sense of amplified

dread as the audience becomes increasingly wary of the potential for an attack that only materialises after two minutes of hide-and-seek.



Fig. 1. Jennifer's shadow looming behind a scared Needy (20:35)

Another technique employed is the use of camerawork to invite identification with a character's point of view. In the prologue, the audience is not explicitly shown that Needy is the one approaching Jennifer's house; instead, the camera adopts a first-person perspective. The same occurs during Needy's search in the house, where several shots invite the viewer to experience the scene through her eyes. The camera tracks her movements, drawing closer to the locations she walks to and shifting as her field of vision changes. This technique is augmented by shaky, handheld camera movements, as well as the incorporation of laboured and accelerated breathing. Combined, these features not only emphasise Needy's heightened emotional state during the scene but invite the audience to show similar physical responses (Whittington 176-177).

The sense of dread is further amplified by the musical score. While any cinematic genre has musical particularities, horror film score has become highly conventionalised to the point its musical characteristics are highly recognisable even outside the context of cinema (Tompkins 187). According to Joe Tompkins, horror music is designed to be "assaultive" (190). A common aspect of horror scores is the use of repetitive musical passages, which subtly instil a persistent sense of unease as they play in the background (Tompkins 190). In *Jennifer's Body*, such musical passages build upon the imminent sense of danger felt through an increase in tempo and volume as Needy comes closer to discovering the threat. Whenever Needy turns around only to find nobody, the music abruptly stops, creating a moment of silence before the cycle resumes as she continues her search. The audience's expectations are effectively manipulated, and the suspense is drawn out until it finally manifests in a resolution.

In horror, this resolution is commonly referred to as the “jump scare,” a sudden and shocking moment (Draven 52). This technique typically involves two key components: a sudden visual shift, such as the abrupt appearance of a figure seemingly emerging from nowhere, and a stinger, a sudden loud burst of sound (Tompkins 190). The two discussed scenes in *Jennifer’s Body* exemplify this technique. In the first scene, a jump scare occurs when Needy suddenly appears before Jennifer’s window, whereas in the second it is implemented through the revelation of Jennifer’s demonic form. Both scenes present unsettling imagery. The screenshot in Figure 2 depicts Needy cloaked in a black hood, reducing her image solely to her disembodied face, which carries an expression of intense hatred. In Figure 3, Jennifer can be seen with a pallid complexion, blood streaking her face, and a sinister grin that emphasises her demonic transformation. While the imagery alone is disturbing, the suddenness of the visual shift, coupled with the sound transitioning into a sudden loud and sharp dissonant musical chord, elicits a startling effect in the audience.



Fig. 2. Needy appears before Jennifer’s window (01:25)



Fig. 3. Jennifer’s demon form revealed (22:25)

According to several scholars of horror, cinematic techniques for creating suspense and dread are most effective when they are subtly integrated and not overtly noticeable. Audiovisual

elements are seamlessly combined to evoke fear in the audience, and this subtlety is a key factor in the conventionalisation of horror atmosphere. Audiences may experience a sense of dread without being able to precisely identify the contributing sound effects or music. This degree of conventionalisation also means that audiences have developed a subconscious understanding of how horror cinema operates. Specific cinematic cues are associated with particular narrative events, allowing creators to manipulate audience expectations with deliberate intent (Spandoni 157; Whittington 177; Tompkins 191). This approach is evident in *Jennifer's Body*. On the surface, the film's use of horror elements in these two specific scenes may not appear extraordinary. However, these scenes stand out due to their juxtaposition to the remainder of the first third of the film. For example, after Jennifer's initial transformation, a subsequent scene shows the two girls at school, with Jennifer behaving as though nothing has happened. This leaves Needy confused and questioning her sanity. Thus, the film introduces horror elements sporadically at the beginning, foreshadowing a darker shift later in the narrative.

4.1.2 Comedy

Of course, when regarding *Jennifer's Body* as a horror-comedy, it is equally important to consider how the film integrates comedy. Comedy, much like horror, is highly subjective and thus manifests in various forms. In the horror-comedy, humour frequently emerges through parody. Established horror tropes are subverted and mocked, illogical clichés are foregrounded and ridiculed—an approach that has given rise to entire franchises (Kawin 21). While I would personally not consider *Jennifer's Body* a parody of a horror film—a point which I shall elaborate on in sections 4.2 and 4.3—a certain self-reflexivity undeniably plays a key role in setting a comedic tone for the film.

As opposed to physical comedy frequently utilised in the first major horror-comedies of the 1980s (Paul 86), much of the humour in *Jennifer's Body* emerges through its dialogue. Violent and grotesque events and imagery are intentionally undercut through vague descriptions or humorous analogies made by the characters, which in turn, emphasises the absurdity of the supernatural aspect of the film. For example, when Needy describes Jennifer's demonic transformation to her boyfriend Chip, she states that Jennifer “barfed up this, like, disgusting prickly stuff that looked like roadkill and, like, sewing needles mixed together” (28:16), to which Chip simply replies “yuck” (28:25). This indifferent reply starkly contrasts with the grotesque image the audience had just witnessed of Jennifer vomiting black bile. Other instances of this comedic undermining occur when Needy describes the murder of a football player as “our star kicker was someone’s snack pack” (38:51), and her schoolmates later refer to another student’s corpse as resembling “lasagna with teeth” (1:07:32). While the events

depicted are, in essence, deeply gruesome and disturbing, the film avoids adopting a traditional dark or sinister tone. Cannibalism is trivialised as merely having a ‘snack’, while the imagery of a mutilated body is compared to a disfigured dish. This humour thus distances the audience from the horror, reframing violent acts as objects of amusement rather than terror.

A particularly ironic moment arises during the murder of the ‘snack-pack,’ the school’s football captain, Jonas. Before his murder, he is depicted as emotionally distraught, grieving the loss of a classmate, who perished in the fire, on the school’s football field. As Jennifer lures him into the woods and proceeds to kill him, the screen shifts back to the football field where the school’s biology teacher is present. This teacher, who had previously advised the students to acknowledge their grief, hears the jock’s screams from afar and interprets them as an emotional release. Nodding approvingly, he remarks, “Let it all out” (32:45), completely oblivious to the fact that his student is, at that moment, being brutally murdered and cannibalised by Jennifer. By employing irony and comedic dialogue, *Jennifer’s Body* thus engages in a form of self-reflexivity, commenting on the inherent absurdity of its plot. This approach allows the film to blur the boundaries between horror and comedy, subverting expectations while commenting on the very genre tropes it utilises. However, while some characteristics of such horror parodies can be identified in *Jennifer’s Body*, I would argue that the film’s comedic aspects largely stem from its focus on teenagers.

4.2 “I Was the Snowflake Queen!” — The American High School Film

The American teen film is first and foremost characterised by a focus on adolescent characters (Shary & Grant 578). Secondly, according to Samantha Colling, this genre typically relies on coming-of-age narratives (2). Catherine Driscoll further identifies several common themes in teen films, including high school, virginity, parties, and romance (65). This broadness and lack of specificity can be attributed to the primary objective behind the creation of the teen film: to appeal to an adolescent audience. Following the commercial success of these films, studios sought to maximise their profits by catering to a diverse range of youth subcultures. Consequently, numerous subgenres emerged such as teen horror, high school films, rock film, juvenile delinquency films, etc (Shary & Grant 579).

While *Jennifer’s Body* could easily be classified as a teen horror film given its horror elements and adolescent characters, I suggest regarding it as a hybrid between a horror film and a high school film. The high school film, in particular, is characterised not only by its setting within the physical space of an American high school but also by its depiction of the high school as a social institution. The high school can be seen as a microcosm of society with its own set of rules, hierarchies, and power dynamics. The subgenre captures the pressures faced by

teenagers to conform to this system, capturing broader anxieties of navigating the transitional period between childhood and adulthood (Shary 26-27).

4.2.1 High School Stereotypes

A notable feature which pertains to this objective is the categorisation of characters into recognisable stereotypes. The most fundamental of these stereotypes were popularised in the 1980s, thanks to the success of the films made by John Hughes. His most renowned work, *The Breakfast Club* (1985), for instance, brings five such different stereotypes—the jock, the nerd, the rebel, the princess, and the goth—into a shared space during detention. On the one hand, these stereotypes form segregated social categories as members of different groups typically do not interact. On the other hand, stereotypes also function as markers of hierarchy. For instance, a nerd who prioritises academic success is typically depicted as being unable to attain the same level of popularity as a jock, who focuses on athletic success. The interaction between different stereotypes such as in *The Breakfast Club* therefore allows to portray as well as challenge these hierarchies (Kaveney 12-13).

Jennifer's Body features several recognisable high school stereotypes in its supporting characters. Jennifer's victims, for instance, embody three distinct high school stereotypes. The first victim whose death the audience witnesses is Jonas, the football captain of the school and a stereotypical jock (Shary 69). Figure 4 depicts his muscular physique and hypermasculinity, with his letterman jacket serving as an indicator of his athleticism and thus elevated status within the school's hierarchy. However, this position also requires Jonas to continuously maintain his masculinity, which is why he is portrayed as emotionally restrained, struggling to express grief for a teammate who died during the fire.



Fig. 4. Jonas, the jock (29:46)

The second victim, Colin, fits the outcast or goth stereotype with his dark, brooding aesthetic, including black clothing, heavy dark makeup, and piercings (Shary 52), as illustrated in Figure 5. His detachment from mainstream high school and a rejection of superficiality sets him apart from his peers. In contrast to the jock Jonas, he is shown as being able to express emotions openly, discussing the tragedy of the fire with a soft voice. However, this nonconformity to hypermasculinity also marks him as an outsider.



Fig. 5. Colin, the emo (28:58)

Jennifer's third victim is Chip, Needy's boyfriend, who embodies the nerd stereotype. In contrast to Jonas's hypermasculinity and Colin's unconventional look, Chip is unremarkable in appearance and characterised by his sweet yet awkward demeanour (Shary 33). This is visually evident in Figure 6, where Chip appears in dull colours and a reserved posture. His interests are intellectual and artistic rather than physical; he plays drums in the school's marching band, an activity that distances him from the school's dominant culture of sports. Chip's lack of traditional masculinity thus also renders him unpopular, overlooked and dismissed by more popular characters such as Jennifer. His frustration with his lower social status is subtly revealed in a scene where he poses in front of a mirror, flexing muscles he does not possess.



Fig. 6. Chip, the nerd (1:09:08)

However, while the use of stereotypes is omnipresent in *Jennifer's Body*, it is particularly evident through the dual protagonists of Jennifer and Needy. As demonstrated in Figure 7, the contrast in their physical appearances makes it clear that Jennifer and Needy belong to different types and thus have a different statuses within the school. Jennifer embodies the stereotype of the popular girl, the it-girl, or Queen Bee: she is depicted as highly conventionally attractive, meticulously styled and eye-catching (Shary 61-62). In addition, she represents a highly exaggerated form of femininity. Her body is thin yet curvaceous, her alluring features accentuated by fashionable clothes with deep cuts in stereotypically feminine pink (Creed *Return* 114). She is the school's head cheerleader, the female equivalent to the football captain, and is presented as highly desirable and confident.

In stark contrast, Needy is portrayed as “smart, shy and bookish” (Creed *Return* 115). This demeanour alongside glasses characterises her as the nerd stereotype. (Shary 38). Her appearance is more reserved, and her clothing is notably more modest and less striking than Jennifer's. Additionally, whereas Jennifer's hair is worn openly, Needy typically styles hers in a ponytail or half ponytail. She is presented as studious and amiable, yet her degree of insecurity is evident in both her body language and speech.



Fig. 7. Popular girl Jennifer and nerd Needy (05:58)

There is thus a clear hierarchy between the two that is established from the very beginning of the film: The first scene set at the high school shows Jennifer performing a routine as the head cheerleader, being showered in applause by all her schoolmates, while Needy is relegated to sitting in the audience and waving. Needy's narration of the scene, "people found it hard to believe that a babe like Jennifer would associate with a dork like me" (05:47), highlights the perceived incompatibility of her and Jennifer as friends within the high school social structure. However, her remark, "sandbox love never dies" (05:50), suggests that their friendship predates their current social stratification and thus transcends the prevailing norms of segregation between members of different groups. However, as the film unfolds, it becomes evident that Jennifer and Needy's friendship is irrevocably tied to their social standings.

4.2.2 The Power of Popularity

A common focus of high school films is the examination of girlhood and social hierarchies, with *Heathers* (Lehmann, 1988) and *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004) serving as two highly influential examples. Despite the 16 years in between their creation, both films address the dynamics of popularity and its effects on teenage girls. Specifically, they feature a plot in which an unpopular girl infiltrates the ranks of the popular girls through assimilation and gaining enough cultural capital (Colling 47).

Similar to the aforementioned hypermasculinity associated with teen boys' popularity, hyperfemininity is crucial for girls seeking social status. In both *Heathers* and *Mean Girls*, this hyperfemininity aligns with conventional standards of beauty. Popular girls are portrayed as fashionable and overtly feminine in appearance, following a shared dress code (Smith 94). In *Heathers*, the eponymous popular girl squad don matching shoulder-padded monochrome outfits (Kaveney 52), while in *Mean Girls*, the 'plastics' wear different dresses and skirts but

all in the same hyperfeminine pink (Smith 98). To achieve popularity, an unpopular girl must thus undergo a makeover, a significant transformation in appearance through grooming, fashion, and makeup (Colling 43).

The second kind of cultural capital required for a girl to obtain popularity is attention from her peers. This attention is twofold: she is romantically and sexually desired by the other gender, while her attractiveness and popularity with men elicit a mixture of adoration and envy from her own gender (Smith 94). A notable demonstration of her desirability comes through the catwalk or strut, a highly stylised walking scene aimed at signifying “an individual’s or group’s visibility and dominance of space” (Colling 50). This scene is typically supported by cinematography.

In *Jennifer’s Body*, for instance, a slow-motion effect is utilised as Jennifer struts down the school hallway akin to a model on a runway. Slow motion, as argued by Colling, serves primarily to grant the portrayed subject additional screen time, allowing a lingering look to develop into a spectacle (63). In this scene, the effect accentuates Jennifer’s physical appearance, emphasising details such as her swaying hips, flowing hair, and dangling earrings, all elements that typically occur too quickly to fully appreciate in real time. Her hyperfeminine attire, a bright pink top adorned with red hearts, features a revealing design, with a deep neckline and low-rise jeans that further highlight her curves. Rather than employing a conventional tilt movement on the body as Colling describes (63), the camera remains stationary as Jennifer approaches, with the focus shifting from her body to her face, creating the impression that she is walking directly toward the viewer. As illustrated in Figure 8, Jennifer is sharply in focus, the surrounding bystanders intentionally blurred. While the other students are not central to the spectacle, Jennifer is depicted as interacting with them—waving, playing with her hair, and smiling—indicating that her presence draws attention within the school.

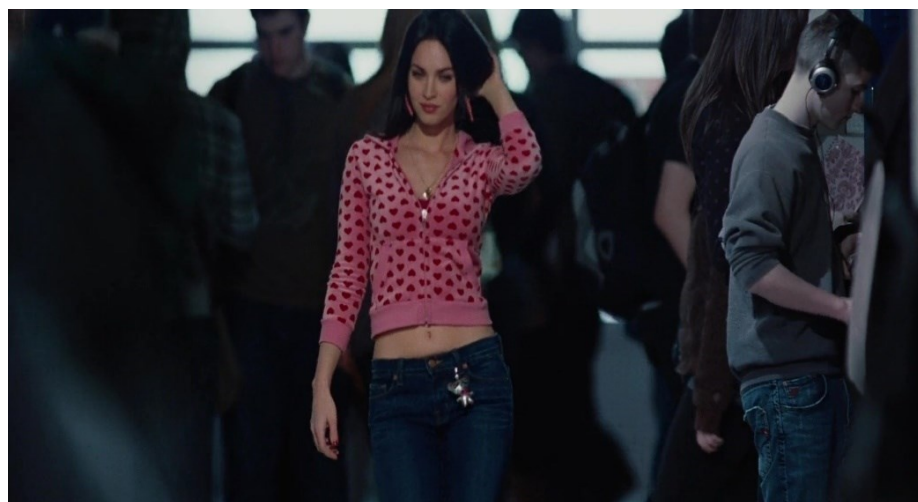


Fig. 8. Jennifer’s strut (38:33)

Jennifer is portrayed as an embodiment of sexual desirability not only in her appearance and popularity but also in her promiscuity. Yet, given her social standing, she is also depicted as highly selective in her potential sexual partners. Throughout the film, multiple male characters express interest in Jennifer, but her reaction is typically characterised by disinterest and a sense of superiority. For instance, after a football player approaches her at a club, Jennifer dismissively tells Needy, "He thinks he's cute enough for me. No wonder he's in retard math" (10:03). Similarly, the goth Colin receives an absentminded response, "You wanna know if I'll go out with you... just go ahead with the pitch" (42:11). However, Jennifer's usual confidence is replaced by nervousity and stumbled words when she attempts to flirt with the lead singer of the band, Low Shoulder. This contrast establishes that her influence over men is confined to the institutional boundaries of the high school.

4.2.3 A Toxic Friendship

While these are the mechanisms through which popularity is gained and sustained in high school films, it should also be noted how popularity translates into power, which in turn facilitates control over others. In *Heathers*, the protagonist Veronica is manipulated into humiliating her friend as a condition for joining the popular clique of the titular Heathers. As Kaveney further observes, the leader of the clique, Heather Chandler "needs Veronica and at the same time resents her, and needs to keep her under control" (53). A similar dynamic unfolds in *Mean Girls*, where Regina George, the school's Queen Bee, imposes a ruthless set of rules on her two sidekicks, Gretchen and Karen (Kaveney 102).

According to Katarzyna Paszkiewicz (85-86), the relationship between Jennifer and Needy operates by the same principle. As previously noted, their friendship is already regarded as unconventional due to their contrasting stereotypes; however, it is the disparity in social standings which fosters a dynamic of submission and control. Needy appears to believe their friendship is perfect, but the film subtly discloses how Jennifer robs her of agency. Chip openly comments that Needy "always does what Jennifer wants to do" (08:20), to which Needy responds "It's just that I like the same things that she likes. We have stuff in common. That's why we're biffs" (08:23), as opposed to an earlier scene where Jennifer convinces Needy to attend Low Shoulder's concert despite Needy's disinterest. A particular passage from Needy's narration further emphasises the unequal relationship between the two: "Wear something cute" meant something very specific in Jennifer-speak. It meant I couldn't look like a total zero, but I couldn't upstage her either. I could expose my stomach, but never my cleavage. Tits were her trademark" (06:58). This line reveals that Jennifer's control over Needy also entails her physical

appearance. Since physical appearance is a means of cultural capital, Needy needs to remain attractive enough to be able to enter her social sphere, but never to the point of outshining her. Moreover, Jennifer's control extends to Needy's romantic relationships. Jennifer is notably dismissive of Chip as a suitable boyfriend for Needy. Queer implications aside, as Jennifer's best friend, Needy is expected to align with Jennifer's standards in her choice of partner. Despite both Needy and Chip being nerds, Chip does not conform to Jennifer's ideal for Needy, leading her to constantly belittle and tease him. Through her disdain for Chip, Jennifer indirectly reveals her broader disapproval of Needy's choices, further asserting her dominance and control over Needy's life.

As the film progresses, Needy gradually becomes aware of the toxic nature of her relationship with Jennifer, culminating in a confrontation during the film's climax:

NEEDY	You know what? You were never a good friend. Even when we were little, you'd steal my toys, pour lemonade on my bed.
JENNIFER	And now I'm eating your boyfriend. See? At least I'm consistent.
NEEDY	Why do you need him? You could have anybody that you want, Jennifer. So why Chip? Is it just to tick me off? Or is it because you're really insecure?
JENNIFER	I am not insecure, Needy. God, that's a joke. How could I ever be insecure? I was the snowflake queen!
NEEDY	Yeah. Two years ago when you were socially relevant.
JENNIFER	I am still socially relevant!
NEEDY	And when you didn't need laxatives to stay skinny. (1:22:03)

This exchange marks Needy's realisation of the exploitative and damaging aspects of their relationship, revealing a friendship defined by power imbalance and manipulation rather than mutual respect or genuine affection. While other films in the high school genre may more explicitly examine the impacts of popularity politics on the entire student body, *Jennifer's Body* narrows its focus to the relationship between its two central characters. Jennifer's defensiveness in response to Needy's provocations highlights her deep-seated insecurities regarding her social status. As thinness represents a crucial form of cultural capital, she resorts to using laxatives to conform to these ideals while simultaneously clinging to past titles to validate her worth. Caught in a system of societal pressure, Jennifer redirects her anger towards Needy. Thus, their relationship serves as a representation of the harmful effects of high school hierarchies on individuals, illustrating that Jennifer's and Needy's conflict is rooted in much more than a demonic possession.

4.3 “Hell is a Teenage Girl” — A Horrific Satire of Girlhood

As stated before, *Jennifer's Body* initially uses horror sequences sporadically, alternating with the mundane aspects of high school life. However, as the film progresses, these two aspects gradually merge, with horror becoming an integral part of the high school experience. In what follows, I will examine the film's subversion of two central events commonly associated with the high school genre, the loss of virginity and the prom, before turning to a broader discussion of how genre hybridity shapes the film's overall feminist tone.

4.3.1 The Loss of Virginity

In the high school film, the act of losing one's virginity is frequently portrayed as a crucial rite of passage, symbolising a transition into adulthood (Driscoll 71). For that reason, sexual experience is equated with popularity. Characters who are virgins are marginalised for a “failure to engage with life yet” (Kaveney 13), while those who are sexually active attain a certain status within the school hierarchy. This dichotomy is once again present with Needy, who is a virgin, and Jennifer, who is “not even a backdoor virgin” (13:48).

The film's portrayal of the loss of virginity occurs as Needy takes this step with her long-term boyfriend Chip. Yet, *Jennifer's Body* juxtaposes this scene with a horror sequence of Jennifer murdering her third victim, Colin. At first, the scenes are shown in parallel, adhering to the rules of their cinematic genres. Needy's and Chip's first time is depicted in a fashion typical of high school films, taking place in Needy's bedroom adorned with posters of bands. The encounter is characterised by nervous excitement, Needy and Chip awkwardly undressing each other and softly kissing before falling onto the bed. In stark contrast, suspense is built up as Colin drives to what he assumes to be Jennifer's house only to find himself in front of a decrepit building in an isolated neighbourhood in the dead of night. The rock song Colin was listening to on the radio is replaced by howling wind and the occasional hoot of an owl before light unsettling music is added, which intensifies as he enters the house and heads up the stairs. The cinematography employs close-ups of Colin's anxious expressions, occasionally assuming an ego perspective, building anticipation until he finally encounters Jennifer, standing in a dark room filled with ominous candlelight. As Needy and Chip kiss gently, the scene shifts to show Jennifer hungrily kissing Colin. Jennifer's demonic transformation is signalled by her eyes turning grey and soon after, she overpowers Colin and proceeds to eat him.

Subsequently, the high school and horror elements start to converge. Still engaging in sex, Needy's perception shifts when she suddenly visualises blood pooling on the ceiling, followed by a jump scare as the deceased football player and Jennifer in her demonic form

appear before her mind. As shown in Figure 9, Jennifer's brutal attack on Colin is conveyed through silhouetted imagery. Meanwhile, as illustrated in Figure 10, Needy's pleasure transforms into terror, her cries mirroring the agony of Jennifer's victim. The scene reaches its climax as Needy's realisation of her best friend's murderous streak coincides with Jennifer's kill.



Fig. 9. Jennifer eats Colin's flesh (52:13)



Fig. 10. Needy has a breakdown during sex (52:32)

This scene exemplifies a form of genre hybridity where the humorous and light tone of the high school film is disrupted by the supernatural violence typical of horror. Needy's significant milestone of adolescence is abruptly interfered as her sheer distress prevents her from continuing. The loss of virginity, which is often treated as a metaphor for loss of innocence, is demonstrated in a striking shift in Needy's character. She loses her joy in teenage romance, loses her trust in her childhood best friend and overall, is shocked to discover the perils and violence of adulthood.

4.3.2 The Prom

This blend of high school and horror elements is particularly evident during the film's climax. Coming-of-age narratives frequently incorporate formal rituals, with the prom being a quintessential element of American high school films. The prom, as such, operates as a highly heteronormative rite of passage into adulthood, necessitating conformity to both gendered and class-based norms of behaviour. Because of the prescribed dress code—suits for men and gowns for women—and the romanticisation of men asking women to be their date, it has even come to be regarded as a precursor to marriage (Smith 65-66). As noted by Driscoll, the significance of the prom lies less in its cultural specificity and more in its narrative function; it can easily be replaced by any event that serves a similar purpose in the storyline (70). In *Jennifer's Body*, for example, there is no explicit prom, but rather an unspecified formal dance. For the purposes of analysis, I will use the terms 'formal dance' and 'prom' synonymously.

When the formal dance is introduced in *Jennifer's Body*, Chip appears eager to attend, whereas Needy shows reluctance. Despite ultimately agreeing to attend, it is evident that she has become disinterested in typical adolescent rituals. Figure 11 illustrates Needy's mother's attempt to capture a photograph of her in her puffy, pink prom dress, but Needy is shown unable to smile for the picture. At the prom, while other teenagers appear to be enjoying themselves, Needy remains visibly uneasy. Her initial hesitation stemmed from the fear of another attack by Jennifer, and thus, for Needy, the prom represents not a place of celebration but imminent danger.



Fig. 11. Needy is less than amused to attend Prom (1:12:38)

This fear materialises when, in Needy's absence, Chip is seduced by Jennifer, who is dressed in a long white prom gown, reminiscent of a bride. Recognising that Chip is Jennifer's next victim, Needy rushes to save him, her urgency intensified by the film's dramatic title song as she runs in slow motion through the woods. Despite the shift in location, the prom theme

remains intact as she struggles to navigate the terrain in her long dress, and along the way, she finds a discarded carnation, a ritualistic present Chip had prepared for her.

The film ultimately never fully immerses the audience in the prom experience, aside from this brief scene. Instead, the climax takes place in an abandoned public pool, where the characters' attire serves as a persistent reminder of the formal event they were meant to attend. As Paszkiewicz points out, there is a stark contrast between the elegance of their clothing and the horrific events that unfold, as their garments are torn and smeared with bile and blood. As demonstrated in Figure 12, the characters' styled hair is dishevelled, sparkling accessories are lost, and the couple emerges completely soaked from the pool (91-92). The showdown thus encapsulates a similar blend of horror and high school elements but heightens the tragedy to befit the film's climax. What was intended to be a significant milestone in Needy and Chip's relationship and a precursor to marriage ultimately culminates in Chip's death in Needy's arms after Jennifer kills him. This transformation of a celebratory occasion into a moment of profound loss comments on the darker realities that lurk beneath the romanticisation of adolescence.



Fig. 12. The tragic end of Needy and Chip's prom date (1:24:01)

4.3.3 Satirising Girlhood

Categorising films into cinematic genres serves as a useful framework for filmmakers, audiences, as well as film scholars. However, this practice can also lead to an oversimplification that fails to capture diversity and creativity within those boundaries. Labels such as horror or comedy fall short in explaining the unique tone of *Jennifer's Body*. The film is too humorous to rival classic horror films, but too gruesome in its violence to align with high school comedies such as *The Breakfast Club*. For every adherence to a genre convention, a subversion can be found. As stated before, *Jennifer's Body* heavily relies on high school stereotypes for its

characters, but it also features a brunette as the popular girl and a blonde as the nerd, an unusual inversion of the conventional Hollywood trope where blondes are typically associated with conventional beauty and desirability. Moreover, although *Jennifer's Body* employs much of the cinematic language and narrative structure of slasher films to create suspense, Needy is significantly more feminine than the archetypal final girl Clover described (48). Even the hybrid label of horror-comedy cannot do *Jennifer's Body* justice. Its wit and self-awareness do evoke horror-comedy franchises like *Scream*, and yet the film is less concerned with mocking horror clichés and more focused on critiquing teenage behaviour and the social dynamics of high school. In this regard, *Jennifer's Body* can be best compared to high school comedies such as *Heathers* and *Mean Girls*.

According to Colling, high school films often feature girl-centred narratives, providing a tool for Hollywood to construct an idealised version of girlhood that audiences unconsciously subscribe to. This ideal emphasises hyperfemininity, characterised by a preoccupation with physical appearance and romantic relationships (5-6). *Mean Girls* and *Heathers* challenge those idols by presenting hyperfemininity as a sinister force. Whereas teenage boys resolve their conflicts through physical violence, teenage girls are dangerous in their own right. Girls are depicted as manipulative, strategic, and cunning, using their social status and words to undermine others (Smith 91). A notable example is Cady in *Mean Girls*, who befriends it-girl Regina but sabotages her by encouraging her eating disorder, effectively making her lose her status as an icon of beauty (Kaveney 102). There is thus a distinct juxtaposition between the "saccharine norms of girlhood and the slyly aggressive practices" (Smith 90) of the girls who embody them, which makes girlhood malicious.

That *Jennifer's Body* presents a similar exploration of girlhood is already made evident by its very first line, "hell is a teenage girl" (1:34). But while the film shares its satirical tone with *Heathers* and *Mean Girls*, it distinguishes itself by utilising horror to elevate this theme. In this context, the malice of girlhood transforms from a state of mind to a tangible monstrosity. Jennifer embodies the hyperfemininity and social status of the popular girl; however, while her human form relies on manipulation to control others, her demon form externalises this aggression, transforming her into a lethal predator. As Needy points out: "She's evil. Like really evil, not high school evil" (1:09:10).

The most striking aspect of *Jennifer's Body* in its quest for a genre classification is perhaps its satirical tone. As Paszkiewicz has pointed out, the film's self-awareness and exaggeration are central to its unique style, with terms like carnivalesque, camp, and parody capturing its essence the best (81). In line with Creed's identification of genre hybridity as a

defining feature of MeToo cinema, *Jennifer's Body* blends elements of the high school film, horror, and comedy. Rather than merely parodying genre tropes such as popularity, toxic friendships, or adolescent sexuality, the film thus offers a critical examination of the rigid expectations placed on teenage girls. The use of horror is significant in so far as it suggests the challenges of girlhood might be the most terrifying of all.

5 The Feminist Gaze in *Jennifer's Body*

One significant aspect of MeToo cinema that *Jennifer's Body* aligns with is its challenge to Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. While few filmmakers explicitly state their work to be using a feminist gaze, many films associated with MeToo make a conscious effort to interrogate and subvert the visual and narrative structures that traditionally privilege masculine desire and perspective (Creed *Return* 16). These filmmakers instead prioritise feminine subjectivity (Creed *Return* 2), centring women's perspectives and inner lives in a way that strongly resonates with conceptualisations of the feminist gaze. *Jennifer's Body* participates in this shift by portraying female characters not as passive objects of desire, but as agents of their own stories.

This chapter examines how *Jennifer's Body* exemplifies the feminist gaze, as defined by Soloway in their 2016 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) lecture. In analysing the first step 'reclaiming the body', I argue that the film not only resists operating within the male gaze but also challenges it by centring women's embodied experiences. In the analysis of the second step, the 'gazed gaze,' I explore how the film's thematic content and cinematic techniques expose the harm patriarchal structures inflict on young women. By encouraging identification and empathy with its female characters, *Jennifer's Body* adopts a more feminist tone uncommon to horror cinema of its time.

5.1 "My Name is Jennifer" — Reclaiming the Body

The first step of Soloway's feminist gaze, "reclaiming the body" (Soloway 21:05), involves two central components. Primarily, this concept seeks to reclaim the representation of women from the male gaze by subverting their reduction to objects for visual consumption only. This approach emphasises the use of a "subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist" (Soloway 17:43) to create a way of "feeling seeing" (Soloway 21:11). Through this lens, the focus shifts from portraying the body as a spectacle to presenting it as an integral part of a human being with a complex inner life. This method prioritises emotional engagement over

action, encouraging the audience to connect deeply with the characters' feelings rather than their physical appearances. Consequently, the body remains central, but its depiction serves to humanise and evoke empathy rather than to objectify (Soloway 19:30).

The title *Jennifer's Body*² immediately places emphasis on the feminine body. By referencing Jennifer's 'body' rather than any aspect relating to her personhood, the title is, on the one hand, deeply objectifying. It echoes how women are portrayed under Laura Mulvey's male gaze: as objects to be looked at, exploited, and particularly in horror cinema, violated. However, in its referral to ownership, the title also suggests that even in its transformation, Jennifer's body is hers to inhabit and control. Moreover, by naming Jennifer directly, Jennifer is shown to be more than an anonymous victim. The audience is encouraged to view her body from her own perspective, as something she possesses, positioning her as a subject as opposed to an object. The juxtaposition of these two words thus frames Jennifer's body as a site where feminine agency is contested and negotiated. As such, the title not only introduces one of the film's most central themes but also lays the groundwork for its broader engagement with the politics of the male gaze. This critique is developed further through the film's visual language and narrative techniques, which highlight Soloway's 'reclaiming the body.'

5.1.1 Subverting the Male Gaze

The first challenge a film attempting a feminist gaze must make is to subvert the status quo established by patriarchal filmic conventions such as the male gaze (Johnston 37). *Jennifer's Body* does this first and foremost by putting two female characters, Jennifer and Needy, at the centre of the story. Unlike narratives shaped by the male gaze, where women are often passive objects or secondary to male-driven plots (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 11-14), Jennifer and Needy are active participants in their own narrative. While most of the supporting characters in *Jennifer's Body* are male, except for Chip and the members of Low Shoulder, their roles are secondary to the central plot. Chip's character, in particular, subverts traditional gender roles. Rather than Needy being defined in relation to Chip, Chip is defined by his role as Needy's boyfriend. This inversion is further emphasised by Needy, a woman, coming to rescue her male love interest. Female agency is highlighted throughout the film, as the complexity of Jennifer's and Needy's relationship, the events they experience, and the decisions they make serve as the catalysts for the film's central conflict. Their presence is indispensable; without them, the story cannot exist.

² The title might also present an intertextual reference to the 1994 song "Jennifer's Body" by the American rock band Hole. The song's lyrics speak of the abduction and dismemberment of a woman named Jennifer at the hands of a man, similarly foregrounding themes of female objectification and violence.

As noted in the introduction, one of the primary reasons *Jennifer's Body* was theorised to have underperformed upon its release in 2009 was its marketing, which targeted the male gaze. The film was positioned as a voyeuristic fantasy aimed at young men who were drawn to Megan Fox's status as a sex symbol and her fame following her performance in the *Transformers* franchise (Fradley 213). The lack of resonance with its intended audience is understandable, given that the voyeuristic fantasy promised by the marketing was not present in the film. For one, there is no clear source of identification for the male viewers. Male characters are not developed characters; they serve mainly as victims, who meet brutal ends in a manner far from erotic. Grady argues that this absence of male agency left young male viewers with little room to project themselves into the narrative³, which, he suggests, contributed to the film's failure to deliver the kind of voyeuristic gratification implied by its marketing.

More than simply failing to cater to the male gaze, *Jennifer's Body* appears to make a deliberate effort to subvert it. The film plays with the male gaze, a key strategy in MeToo cinema used to challenge traditional modes of spectatorship (Creed *Return* 17). At the time of its release, many reviews noted that the film was not sexy in the slightest (Santamaría Ibor 147), which certainly holds truth. *Jennifer's Body* exhibits an ironic tendency to withhold voyeuristic pleasure, even when audience expectations might suggest its presence. Despite its 18 and above rating, which permits the depiction of nudity, the film deliberately refrains from fulfilling this expectation.

Mónica Santamaría Ibor (156) highlights that Jennifer's character specifically replicates the male gaze with the intention of exposing it. Several shots and scenes of Jennifer deliberately utilise techniques which Mulvey would consider as belonging to the male gaze. Her presence disrupts the narrative flow as she is made into a spectacle (Paszkievicz 72). For instance, Figure 13 illustrates how the camera suggestively follows Jennifer's movements as she unzips her shirt to seduce Jonas. However, the scene cuts away abruptly just as her bare chest is about to be revealed, transitioning directly to Jennifer's attack on Jonas. Within the narrative, Jonas is deceived by Jennifer's manipulation, while on a meta-level, the film similarly deceives the audience. By deliberately employing the techniques of the male gaze only to subvert them, the film effectively disrupts the audience's expectations of voyeuristic gratification.

³ This presupposes, of course, that male viewers are less likely to cross-identify with female main characters, which makes sense in light of Mulvey's claim that the male gaze is treated as the default perspective in mainstream cinema. If male protagonists are the norm, the need for cross-identification among male viewers is considerably rarer than among female viewers.



Fig. 13. Jennifer appealing to the male gaze (31:54)

A similar subversion occurs shortly afterward when Jennifer is shown swimming naked through the lake after returning from her successful murder. Although her body remains submerged, the contours of her movements beneath the water strongly suggest that she is fully nude, inviting the audience to anticipate a reveal once she reaches shore. The screenshot in figure 14 demonstrates how the camera lingers on her as she swims with a seductive grin, a slow-motion effect framing her in a way typical of the male gaze. But as Jennifer reaches the shore and begins to climb the ladder, the framing teases the audience again. The camera moves with her, following the curve of her naked back rather than lingering to reveal anything below waist. Subsequent shots alternate between close-ups of her wet feet stepping onto the pier and her head as she's wringing out her hair, carefully avoiding any view of her body in between her ankles and collarbones. The scene's rock soundtrack enhances its subtly seductive tone, further hinting at more to come but as the song reaches climax, the sequence abruptly culminates with a cut to Jennifer fully dressed again, which can be seen in Figure 15. By consistently withholding explicit visual access, the film manipulates audience expectations once more, denying the gratification typically associated with this type of framing. It thus shifts the focus from Jennifer's body as an object of desire to its role within the narrative.



Fig. 14. Jennifer's naked body is teased (35:09)



Fig. 15. Jennifer is dressed again (35:42)

One of the most heavily marketed scenes in the film is the kiss between Jennifer and Needy, which occurs when Jennifer visits Needy's bedroom after Colin's murder (Paszkiewicz 71-72). In the scene, Jennifer kisses Needy, who initially appears surprised but soon reciprocates, leading to a deepened kiss as they fall onto the bed. While initially criticised as a fetishisation of Megan Fox's bisexuality (Paszkiewicz 71-72), it remarkably resists overt sexualisation and is instead defined by an emphasis on softness and intimacy. Figures 16 and 17 demonstrate the use of close-up shots and tight framing, which, combined with the absence of music, creates a sense of closeness that feels deeply personal and almost intrusive to the viewer. The scene is abruptly interrupted as Needy pulls away, and no further sexual activity occurs. This restraint exemplifies Soloway's concept of 'reclaiming the body;' it emphasises the emotional impact of the kiss on the characters rather than framing it as a visual spectacle for male voyeurism. Consequently, the scene may leave viewers seeking traditional male-gaze-driven gratification dissatisfied.



Fig. 16. Jennifer and Needy kiss (57:16)



Fig. 17. Jennifer and Needy kiss close-up (56:46)

Over time, this kiss has been reinterpreted within a queer context, reflecting the film's broader emphasis on complex female relationships and queer subtext (Creed *Return* 116-117). By deliberately undermining male gaze conventions, the film not only challenges audience expectations but also critiques the voyeuristic tendencies often imposed on female relationships in media. The narrative remains firmly centred on Needy and Jennifer's characters, encouraging deep emotional engagement with Needy, especially.

5.1.2 Feeling Seeing through Needy

Another crucial element in Soloway's 'reclaiming the body' is the concept of 'feeling seeing', which foregrounds the emotional journey of the female protagonist (21:11). A similar notion is brought by Creed, who identifies an "an all-embracing sensory gaze, one that understands the protagonist's daily life, emotions, relationships, bodily states, and desires" as a significant method within MeToo cinema to challenge the male gaze. This gaze, she argues, "sees and feels the whole person—details about the woman's life not normally presented to the male gaze: her

contemplative moments, desires, scenes of intimacy, and moments of self-recognition” (*Return* 17).

Although *Jennifer’s Body* centres its title and plot around Jennifer and her murderous spree, I would argue that this strategy of ‘feeling seeing’ is more effectively encapsulated in the character of Needy. She serves as the narrator, and the film’s structure is framed around her perspective. The film begins with a flashforward of Needy being imprisoned, framing the entire story as the events that led to this moment. The flashforward concludes when Needy escapes prison at the end of the film, emphasising that it is her journey that is being told. While Jennifer’s transformation is crucial to the story, Needy is far from a passive observer. Rather, she is emotionally invested in Jennifer’s experience, and through Needy, the audience is invited to empathise with the complexities of her emotions as she witnesses the tragedies befalling her hometown and changes in Jennifer’s behaviour.

A significant example of Needy’s emotional centrality is the way the audience learns about Jennifer’s transformation simultaneously with her. When Jennifer reappears before Needy in her demon form, only to behave normally the following day, the audience is placed in a position of shared confusion and shock. Consequently, the audience experiences the same sense of gaslighting as Needy when both Jennifer and Chip dismiss her suspicions about what happened the night before. Moreover, although the audience is shown that it is Jennifer who is on a murderous spree before Needy realises it, the reason for her possession, Low Shoulder’s demonic sacrifice, is revealed to the audience concurrently with its revelation to Needy.

Jennifer is primarily framed through Needy’s perspective, allowing the audience to witness her complex emotions toward her best friend. For instance, Figure 18 depicts Needy looking up at Jennifer with adoration as the latter reaches to hold her hand during Low Shoulder’s gig. However, her enamoured smile falters the moment she realises that Jennifer’s attention is solely focused on Nikolai. In addition, the audience is shown two flashbacks from Needy’s childhood, where she reflects on how Jennifer had treated her poorly, even as a child. As Needy processes these memories, she comes to the same realisation as the audience—that their friendship has perhaps always been exploitative. Lastly, Figure 19 illustrates the audience’s perspective aligning with Needy’s as she watches Jennifer depart with Low Shoulder after the fire. The camera lingers on Jennifer’s face until the door closes, followed by a shot of Nikolai’s ominous smile just before the van drives away. The unsettling music that accompanies this moment amplifies the sense of fear Needy experiences for her best friend, instilling the same fear in the audience.



Fig. 18. Needy's adoration for Jennifer (15:31)



Fig. 19. Jennifer leaves with Low Shoulder (18:22)

Moreover, close-up shots and tight framing are frequently employed to effectively convey Needy's emotional turmoil, providing a visual anchor for the audience to connect with her feelings. Several stand out. For example, Figure 20 captures Needy's shocked and worried expression against the backdrop of the burning building after Jennifer is taken away by Low Shoulder. In fact, Needy's conflicted emotions towards Low Shoulder are already hinted at in the prison flashforward at the beginning. In Figure 21, Needy gazes upward, her tear-streaked cheeks and slightly open mouth accompanied by the sound of Low Shoulder's "Through the Trees" playing on the radio. The cold, grey background and bluish filter intensify the redness of her face, highlighting her emotional exhaustion at being reminded of the band.



Fig. 20. Needy watches Jennifer leave (18:27)

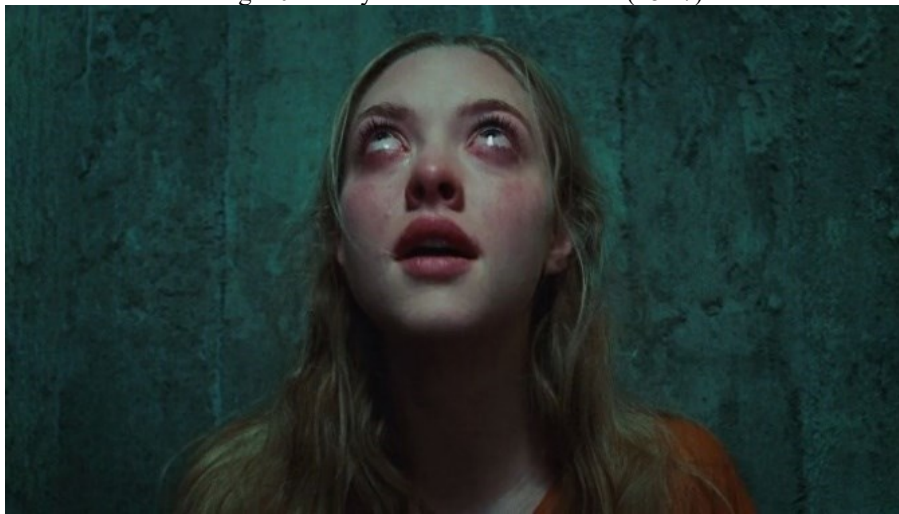


Fig. 21. Needy's reaction to "Through the Trees" (04:17)

Similarly, Figure 22 demonstrates Needy's intense hatred for Low Shoulder at the school dance, with the camera focusing on her seething expression in a sharp contrast to the other students who are happily dancing and enjoying the band's performance. Several other shots capture Needy's emotional turmoil. Figure 23 presents her dazed stare as she sits in class after the fire at Melody Lane, Figure 24 depicts her breakdown while scrubbing the bile-soaked kitchen, and Figure 25 showcases her heartbreaking cries as Chip succumbs to his injuries. These carefully framed moments of vulnerability and emotional resonance serve to immerse the audience in Needy's perspective.



Fig. 22. Needy watches Low Shoulder perform (1:18:14)



Fig. 23. Needy after the fire at Melody Lane (24:53)



Fig. 24. Needy cleaning Jennifer's black vomit (26:13)



Fig. 25. Needy's anguish after Chip's death (1:25:15)

This focus on Needy's internal world shifts the emphasis from spectacle to emotion, steering the narrative towards a 'feeling seeing' perspective rather than one of voyeurism. Needy is deeply affected by Jennifer's transformation, and much of the film revolves around her emotional response to Jennifer's changes. Through Needy's experiences, the audience is invited into her subjective reality, following her psychological journey from adoration and confusion, to attempts at saving Jennifer, to coping with the loss of her boyfriend, and ultimately deciding to kill Jennifer.

Identification plays a pivotal role in Needy's transition from a passive victim to an active avenger, and this shift is subtly conveyed through the film's use of camerawork. This is particularly evident in the two horror sequences mentioned in chapter 4.1.1., the first occurring when Jennifer ambushes Needy in her home following the sacrifice and the second occurring as Needy plans to kill Jennifer in her home following Chip's death. In both scenes, the camera adopts a first-person perspective, aligning the viewer with Needy's point of view and inviting identification with her experience.

In the former scene, the camera tracks Needy's movements as she searches the house, drawing closer to the locations she walks to and shifting as her field of vision changes. This technique is augmented by unsteady, handheld camera movements aiming to mirror Needy trembling from fear. Additionally, the sound design incorporates laboured and accelerated breathing, emphasising Needy's alarmed state.

The same techniques are employed in the latter scene. The audience is not explicitly shown that Needy is the one approaching Jennifer's house; instead, the camera adopts a first-person perspective that simulates Needy's viewpoint. As the camera draws closer to Jennifer's house, it mirrors Needy's approach, culminating in the shot of Jennifer through the window, as depicted in Figure 26. The use of shaky camerawork and audible breathing continues, but here

these elements signify agitation and determination rather than fear. The breathing is deeper and less erratic, reflecting Needy's controlled exertion, while the camera movements are broader, corresponding to walking rather than trembling.



Fig. 26. Needy preying on Jennifer (00:59)

Although both scenes enforce identification with Needy, their impact on the audience diverges significantly due to the evolution of Needy's character. During Jennifer's initial demonic transformation, Needy is positioned as a powerless victim. By the film's climax, however, Needy has gained the resolve to strike back. This change is conveyed through cinematic language, conditioning the audience to respond emotionally, either with fear or anger, depending on whether they identify with the assaulted or the assaulter. *Jennifer's Body* cleverly positions Needy as the vessel through which the audience experiences Jennifer's transformation⁴. As Needy grows into her own agency, the film not only empowers her but also grants the audience agency in the process. Confronted by the harsh reality of patriarchal exploitation, viewers are encouraged to move beyond passive observation and become active critics of the violence inherent in the gazed gaze.

5.2 “It Was Invented by the Boy-Run Media to Make Us Seem Like We're Crazy” — The Gazed Gaze

The second step in Soloway's feminist gaze is termed the ‘gazed gaze.’ It utilises the camera to illustrate "how it feels to be the object of the gaze" (Soloway 21:24). This concept emphasises the objectification of female characters and how they experience the weight of societal

⁴ The unrated extended cut of the film highlights Needy's perspective even more prominently, which indicates that the notion of ‘feeling seeing’ through Needy was a deliberate directorial choice by Karyn Kusama. However, this emphasis was cut back by the production who preferred to centre Jennifer more strongly.

expectations, particularly those shaped by the male gaze. Thus, the ‘gazed gaze’ not only foregrounds the individual’s subjugation to male desire but also critiques the broader structures of patriarchal systems. In *Jennifer’s Body*, it highlights the effects of objectification, sexual assault, and male abuse of power, while also critiquing how women are forced into competition with each other under the male gaze.

5.2.1. A Rape in All but Name

Among the broader and often contentious debates surrounding the depiction of graphic violence in cinema, the depiction of rape is particularly controversial. This is because, unlike other forms of violence, it is nearly impossible to separate rape from the subject of gender; rape, Clover asserts, is “the most quintessentially feminine of experiences” (154). In *Watching Rape*, Projansky identifies a critical paradox concerning the representation of rape in visual media. On the one hand, portraying rape is crucial to fostering discourse about the pervasive harm caused by rape, as well as confronting the systemic power systems which perpetuate it. On the other hand, these very depictions contribute to the overall cultural presence of sexual violence against women. Positioning women primarily as victims may heighten women’s anxiety regarding their safety while simultaneously normalising or even enabling harmful attitudes in men (Projansky 96). The depiction of rape thus functions as both “an assault on women” and “an expression of the horror of assault” (Projansky 96). Within this paradox, even films with explicit antirape objectives may be perceived as perpetuating misogyny and undermining feminist aims (Projansky 95). Building on this complex paradox, the portrayal of rape presents several challenges. First, rape is marked by a certain unrepresentability, as it demands the effort to “make visually palatable that which has no beauty whatsoever” (Heller-Nicholas 15). Additionally, it necessitates visualising intangible elements such as trauma (Heller-Nicholas 15). Finally, despite significant criticism, a certain degree of violence may be required to effectively convey the gravity and seriousness of rape (Young 69).

How, then, can one depict a rape scene in a feminist way? Revisiting de Lauretis’ argument that feminist cinema must establish an aesthetic distinct from traditionally male-dominated cinematic conventions, (159-160), this question hinges not on *what* is depicted, but on *how* it is presented. A film cannot be deemed inherently feminist by addressing rape, rather, its feminist potential is contingent on the cinematic language it employs in its portrayal of rape. As previously discussed, gaze theory plays a significant role in the portrayal of violence in horror films. The same principle applies to the depiction of rape. Two key aspects of the gaze must be considered: scopophilia, or the pleasure derived from looking, and identification. In analysing any depiction of rape, two crucial questions arise: Is the rape framed as erotic or

horrifying? And from whose perspective are we viewing the scene, the victim's or the perpetrator's?

These questions are central to MeToo cinema, which interrogates how depictions of rape, especially in rape-revenge stories, may “exploit an ugly desire to watch female violence” (Heller-Nicholas 10), thus reinforcing patriarchal power structures rather than challenging them. In her theorisation of revisionist rape-revenge films, Claire Henry stresses the importance of de-eroticising rape and inviting viewer identification with the victim rather than the rapist in order to foster empathy (Henry 35). This strategy is characteristic of MeToo films, such as *Revenge*. In her analysis of the film, Creed highlights how it avoids depicting the physical aspects of rape altogether. Instead, the camera lingers on the victim's face and emotional responses in a way that makes visible the horror and brutality of the act without resorting to voyeurism (*Return* 53).

Focusing on a rape victim's perspective in such a manner is critical as it has the potential to lend legitimacy to the claim of rape (Cuklanz qtd. in Projansky 107). The feminist gaze, as Soloway defines it, serves as an “empathy machine” (24:13). It enables viewers to engage with a victim's perspective, allowing them to feel *as* the woman and to focus on how she perceives the male gaze directed at her. Any instance of rape must thus convey the horror of it; any failure to do so, Henry claims, represents a “feminist political failure” (34).

At first glance, it may seem unreasonable to speak of a rape scene in *Jennifer's Body*, as the film does not contain an explicit depiction of rape. However, as a longstanding trope in cinema, rape has often been alluded to rather than shown, especially during periods of heightened censorship during the 1930s to the 1960s (Projansky 26). While *Jennifer's Body* does not face such constraints as a horror film rated for viewers aged 18 and above, it is precisely due to its affiliation with horror that the film is drawn to the language of metaphor, even in its portrayal of rape (Fradley 208).

Among MeToo-era re-readings of *Jennifer's Body*, the scene of Jennifer's demonic sacrifice by Low Shoulder has largely come to be reinterpreted as a “rape in all but name” (Fradley 214). Several elements within this scene point to this interpretation. Firstly, it is heavily alluded to in the dialogue. As Jennifer sits in the van with the band, she notices several symbols suggesting satanic rituals. Rather than questioning whether they are Satanists, she asks, “Are you guys rapists?” One band member groans in response, saying, “I hate girls,” (58:30) dismissing any fear of rape. Although they require a virgin for their ritual to succeed, Jennifer interprets this conversation as indicating their intent to sexually assault her, as they never explicitly deny being rapists. In a state of fear, Jennifer insists that she is a virgin, believing that

her virginity might protect her from rape. Furthermore, after Jennifer leaves with Low Shoulder, Needy recounts the incident to Chip, “They took her in their spooky van with all the windows blacked out.” When Chip responds with, “Did you get the make and model?”, Needy sharply retorts, “I don’t know, Chip! An ’89 rapist?” (19:33).

Secondly, both the scene’s trajectory and imagery evoke parallels to sexual assault. The non-consensual nature of the act is indisputable, as there is no suggestion at any point that Jennifer is a willing participant. Instead, she is explicitly depicted as resisting, attempting to escape as the van door is opened. Even after being dragged by her neck, physically restrained and gagged, her persistent struggle, fearful expressions, and desperate pleas —“please don’t do this” (1:00:51)—highlight her lack of agency. Figure 27 captures the moment of Nikolai’s repeated stabbing of Jennifer, a visual metaphor for forced penetration, with the knife functioning as the phallic imagery Clover identified as prevalent in slasher films (47).



Fig. 27. Jennifer’s sacrifice evokes parallels to sexual assault (1:01:59)

Thirdly, the sacrifice in *Jennifer’s Body* functions narratively in a similar way to other rape stories, particularly within rape-revenge. Within rape-revenge stories, rape typically serves as a critical turning point when occurring to one of the primary characters (Keating 61). Likewise, the event of Jennifer’s sacrifice, though not shown chronologically and instead revealed through a flashback later in the film, acts as the catalyst for the film’s tonal shift toward a more prominent focus on horror. In addition to the narrative function, Jennifer’s sacrifice mirrors the character transformation often associated with depictions of rape, where the victim undergoes profound changes as a result of their trauma (Keating 61). Within rape-revenge narratives, this transformation is frequently described as a symbolic death, reflecting a feminist reinterpretation that considers rape a crime as severe as murder (Clover 152). In *Jennifer’s Body*, this death and rebirth are not merely symbolic; Jennifer reveals that the act indeed killed her, but that she was resurrected as a result of the demonic possession. The satanic ritual thus

operates on a dual level; it serves as both a metaphor for rape and a representation of the trauma it causes.

In light of the two questions posed earlier, whether the audience is positioned to identify with the rapist, perceiving the act of rape as erotic and empowering, or with the victim, being prompted to empathise with the violence inflicted upon them (Henry 35), *Jennifer's Body* clearly falls into the latter category. The ritual scene for instance avoids the conventions from pornography that Henry argues are often used to eroticise depictions of rape, such as lingering shots of the body, camera movements that follow a rhythmic pattern, and a sensual soundtrack (34). Nor does it include the fragmentation of the victim's body through close-ups, point-of-view shots from the rapist's perspective, or the framing of the victim's body both before and after the assault, techniques which Young identifies as contributing to the construction of women as objects to-be-looked-at (71). Instead, *Jennifer's Body* places emphasis on the victim's suffering, which in Jennifer's case is unmistakably conveyed through both auditory and visual means. Her agony is amplified through the soundscape, where her desperate pleas, terrified cries, and rapid, laboured breaths are foregrounded against the quiet backdrop, occasionally accompanied by an eerie echo. Visually, Figure 28 captures the intensity of Jennifer's fear, her wide, terror-stricken eyes, trembling lips, and the visible shuddering of her body all convey her helplessness and suffering.

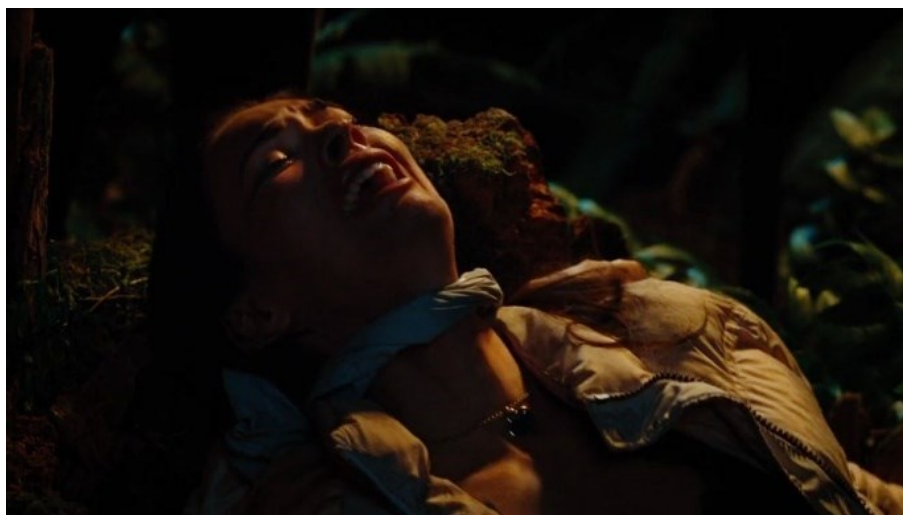


Fig. 28. Jennifer's suffering is emphasised (1:01:55)

Another aspect that serves to frame the scene as terrifying as opposed to erotic is atmosphere, which is one of discomfort and unease. Set in the remote forest during the night, the location is isolated, with no other characters present except for Jennifer and Low Shoulder. Correspondingly, the setting is deliberately dimly lit, enhancing the sense of confinement as the surroundings become indistinct and obscured. The band's dark clothing merges seamlessly with

the shadows, their faces the only features distinguishable from the darkness. In stark contrast, Jennifer's white jacket reflects the available light, separating her from her assaulters.

The absence of music, thus no sound aside from the diegetic sounds of the night, intensifies the silence, making the characters' voices even more jarring in contrast. Perhaps the most unsettling moment occurs when the lead singer Nikolai momentarily raises the knife, and pauses mid-motion, only to tenderly caress Jennifer's face and speak to her, "You know what, I just thought of something, Jennie. I don't know you, but you're the girl for me. You make me so happy. I tried to call you before, but I lost my nerve" (1:02:02). This brief moment of intimacy causes a flicker of hope in Jennifer, only for it to be abruptly shattered as it turns out Nikolai's sweet words were mere song lyrics, which Santamaría Ibor identifies as Tommy Tutone's "687-5309 Jenny," a song "about a man who discovers the telephone number of a woman called Jennifer on a wall and becomes obsessed with her" (153). The silence is soon filled by the band's detached, nonchalant singing "Jenny, I got your number, I got to make you mine" (1:02:15), accentuated by close-up shots of their mouths. What started as discomfoting quiet is overtaken by a dissonant, monotonous chorus, with their emotionless delivery evoking a chilling anthem of death befitting the satanic ritual.

Coming back to the second aspect of MeToo cinema conventions, the question of whose perspective the viewer is invited to adopt, it can be observed that *Jennifer's Body* seeks to emphasise the gravity of the situation by encouraging identification with the victim, Jennifer. This is achieved through shots of the perpetrators, often framed with the camera tilted upwards, which aligns the viewer's perspective with Jennifer, who has been forced to lie on the ground. Figure 29 demonstrates the members of Low Shoulder looking down at the camera, their taunting expression emphasising their dominance over her. Identification with Jennifer is further invited through the introduction of blurred shots following her stabbing, representing the distortion of her vision as she slips into unconsciousness, ultimately fading to a white screen as she dies.



Fig. 29. Low Shoulder looking down at Jennifer (1:01:50)

Corresponding to the ‘gazed gaze’ Soloway describes, the film fosters empathy by positioning the viewer to see through Jennifer’s eyes, experiencing her vulnerability as she becomes the object of the male gaze. Beyond the violence, Jennifer’s objectification is emphasised when Nikolai begins the ritual but halts, having forgotten her name, which has to be included in the incantation, “What’s your name again? Tiffany?” When Jennifer fearfully responds, “My name is Jennifer,” (1:00:42) the band continues to disregard her presence, infantilising her through the nickname “Jennie.” In this moment, Jennifer is not only stripped of her name but also reduced to an instrument for their ritual.

The film’s enforcement of empathy with Jennifer does not end with the ritual scene itself but extends to the trauma that follows. In this sense, *Jennifer’s Body* anticipates the concerns of MeToo cinema, which frequently foregrounds the lasting psychological impact of sexual violence on victims (Keating 65). *Black Christmas* (2019) exemplifies this approach by presenting the protagonist solely in the aftermath of her sexual assault. Although the audience never witnesses her prior to the incident, other characters remarking the changes in her personality subtly convey the during impact the rape has had on her mental health (Keating 68). While *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) offers limited insight into Jennifer’s internal experience post-assault, save for one scene which will be analysed in 5.2.2., it heavily focuses on Needy’s perspective on the incident. This choice allows the audience to engage with the aftermath of Jennifer’s assault through the eyes of a grieving friend who is struggling to navigate her sense of empathy with her pursuit of her emancipation. MeToo cinema thus tries to avoid turning rape into a visual spectacle, focusing less on physical representations of rape but still making visibly the pain and destruction it can bring on feminine subjectivity and inter-female relationships.

By rejecting the male gaze, the ‘gazed gaze’ not only avoids voyeurism, but also forces the spectators to question their own ways of looking. Young argues that passive viewing of a

rape scene is inherently impossible; we cannot "just look" (70) because, as viewers, we are made complicit in the act. Watching a rape scene forces viewers to confront their own moral position on rape and recognise that the male gaze itself is inherently sexually assaulting. The tools of spectatorship, therefore, not only depict the horrors of rape but also reveal how many are complicit in perpetuating it (Young 70).

Complicity becomes a central topic in MeToo cinema through its explicit critique of rape culture (Spallacci 136). Whereas traditional rape-revenge films often depict sexual violence as a gang crime, MeToo cinema attempts to interrogate the "pervasive set of socially accepted ideas that increase tolerance for a normalization of rape and sexual violence" (Magestro 13). MeToo activism demands institutional justice and accountability not only for sexual offenders, but also for those who enable, excuse, or minimise acts of sexual violence (Burkholder-Mosco 169). Within this framework, rape is not treated as a crime on an individual basis, but as a societal one. Accordingly, MeToo cinema resists reductive stereotypes such as 'the evil rapist,' instead criticising the cultural scripts that sustain sexual violence including disbelief in victims, the silencing or shaming of survivors, and the protection of perpetrators (Réti 194). Réti, for instance, observes how in *Promising Young Woman* the protagonist Cassie's acts of rape-revenge extend beyond the perpetrators to include those complicit in the assault of her best friend:

In addition to "good guys" like Jerry, Cassie takes revenge on actual actors in Nina's case: Madison (Alison Brie), their female friend, who still maintains her view that if someone acts like that, it is no wonder something bad happens to her; Dean Walker (Connie Britton), who took Munroe's side; the lawyer who represented the man (Alfred Molina), and the perpetrator himself. (194)

Even Ryan, Cassie's love interest, is eventually held accountable when she discovers he witnessed the assault and did nothing to stop it (Réti 198).

This widening of responsibility points to an essential facet of rape culture: its foundation in homosocial politics. Clover contends that rape, particularly in the case of gang rape, is less concerned with the power dynamics between the male perpetrator(s) and the female victim, and more with the homosocial power relations among men (122). Young similarly claims that male group dynamics often encourage men to engage in sexual violence (46). In *Jennifer's Body*, the band Low Shoulder exemplifies this homosocial hierarchy of masculinity, with the lead singer, Nikolai, positioned as the ringleader. He takes charge of most of the ritual: selecting Jennifer as the victim, reading the instructions, and ultimately killing her. The other band members, in contrast, perform more passive roles, such as carrying Jennifer or holding her down. One band member, Dirk, expresses doubts about the ritual, looking at the bound and gagged Jennifer with visible unease. However, Nikolai, as the leader, tries to convince him, preying on Dirk's

insecurities: "Do you want to be a loser forever or do you want to be rich and awesome?" (01:00:04) As he encourages Dirk, Nikolai pats him on the shoulder in a display of male affection, but once Dirk agrees, he mocks him with a vomiting gesture behind his back. Dirk, by voicing his reluctance and expressing doubt about exploiting a woman, is portrayed as an outsider within the homosocial group, highlighting the influence of social coercion and masculinity within rape.

However, as Réti observes, women can be just as complicit in perpetuating rape culture (194). While *Jennifer's Body* may not engage with rape culture as explicitly as *Promising Young Woman*, it nonetheless hints toward the structural conditions that enable sexual violence. Needy's experiences, for example, reflect patterns of victim-blaming and dismissal. Her repeated attempts to express concern about Jennifer's behaviour are met with scepticism by her boyfriend Chip, who suggests she seek psychological help. Notably, Jennifer herself actively gaslights Needy through sexist remarks such as "you do have a tendency to overreact" (23:32), demonstrating how women can perpetuate patriarchal norms and discredit other women's claims.

The film also highlights how women can unwittingly protect or even idolise men who exploit women for personal gain. Low Shoulder's primary motivation for the demonic sacrifice is their belief that it will guarantee success and stardom in their musical career. Although the sacrifice ultimately fails, leaving the demon trapped within Jennifer, the band still benefits significantly from her exploitation. They capitalise on the tragedy of the fire to propel themselves to fame, becoming overnight sensations as "Through the Trees" is adopted as the official theme of solidarity for the town of Devil's Kettle. In a scene set at the high school, a teacher announces that Low Shoulder has released their song as a benefit track, with 3% of the profits allocated to families affected by the fire. In addition, the band members are now widely regarded as "American heroes" (40:44), who supposedly saved lives during the incident, a narrative accepted by the residents of Devil's Kettle without questioning. Low Shoulder's popularity is especially pronounced among Jennifer and Needy's female peers. When Needy expresses doubt about Low Shoulder, "They didn't actually help anyone escape the fire. I don't even know how that rumour got started" (40:47), she is swiftly dismissed by her classmate Chastity, who exclaims, "You take that back!" (41:04) and insists Low Shoulder must be who they claim to be because "it's written on their Wikipedia page" (40:56).

This disparity between the public's adoration of Low Shoulder and Needy's knowledge of their true nature is foreshadowed at the start of the film, with a flashforward of Needy imprisoned for Jennifer's murder. In her cell, Low Shoulder's song plays on the radio. Needy's

visceral reaction—groaning in frustration, “I hate this song” (03:20)—highlights her feeling of injustice. For Needy, the song encapsulates the hypocrisy of a town that celebrates a group of violent rapists and murderers responsible for her best friend’s death as national heroes. While traditional rape-revenge narratives frequently imply that sexual violence is a result of some sort of institutional failure (Spallacci 136), MeToo cinema expands on this premise by explicitly foregrounding the systemic structures that sustain and enable such failures. *Jennifer’s Body*, although preceding MeToo, anticipates this shift by demonstrating the mechanisms that obscure abuse and reward those who perpetrate it.

5.2.2. Jennifer’s Internalisation of the Male Gaze

While I have thus far examined Soloway’s concept of the “gazed gaze” in its most direct articulation, their phrase “come feel with me specifically how I become what men see” (22:42) bears repeating. This quote suggests that the gazed gaze exposes the harm sexual objectification places on women, including its most overt manifestations such as sexual assault. However, it can also be interpreted as pointing to the more subtly effects of internalised objectification. Jennifer’s character exemplifies this effect as her self-worth is depicted as inevitably tied to male validation. Thus, her transformation into a demonic figure becomes both a literal and metaphorical manifestation of her deep-seated anxieties about her value in a male-dominated world.

While Jennifer is initially portrayed as the quintessential it-girl, beautiful, envied, and desired by her peers, there is a marked emphasis on her obsessive desire to maintain her beauty. Subtle hints throughout the film suggest this preoccupation even before her demonic transformation. Needy mentions that Jennifer uses laxatives to stay thin, and in the prologue, a fitness commercial featuring the words “butt squeeze” can be seen playing in the background of Jennifer’s room. However, it is through her transformation that these anxieties are made literal. As Needy uncovers in her research, Jennifer’s beauty is intricately tied to her consumption of boys. When she is deprived of sustenance, she is depicted as ugly, or in Needy’s words, “ugly for her” (1:09:58). Jennifer herself expresses frustration over her appearance, lamenting, “My hair is dull and lifeless, my skin is breaking out, god it is like I am one of the normal girls” (41:29). Despite Megan Fox’s undeniable attractiveness, this iteration of Jennifer is devoid of the glamour and spectacle typically associated with her character. Her makeup and clothing appear plain, and the camera no longer frames her as an object of desire, as it did earlier in the film, evident in Figure 30. In contrast, when Jennifer consumes boys, she becomes “really pretty and glowy” (1:09:51), reclaiming her allure and accompanying scopophilic gaze.



Fig. 30. Jennifer's appearance when she has not fed (41:30)

A particular scene vividly illustrates Jennifer's desperation to preserve her beauty. Sitting at her desk in front of a mirror, she attempts to prepare herself for the dance, brushing her hair only to watch it fall out. The camera shifts to a framed photograph of Jennifer on the desk, serving as a reminder of the standard she is holding herself to. As can be seen in Figure 31, the camera lingers on Jennifer's reflection as she applies beauty products to her face, in juxtaposition to the photograph, which remains visible at the edge of the frame. The contrast between the two images highlights the difference between her current state and the version she once embodied. Her attempt to reclaim control over her appearance through makeup becomes a futile effort as Jennifer starts to become teary-eyed.



Fig. 31. Jennifer clinging to her beauty (1:13:18)

Diablo Cody has described Jennifer as a “product of a culture that pressures girls to be skinny, beautiful, and just like movie stars” (Cody qtd. in Renner 39). Santamaría Ibor has expanded on this assertion, suggesting that Jennifer's obsession with beauty exemplifies a neoliberal pursuit, where physical appearance is treated as a desirable form of capital (155-156). However, the mirror scene critiques this notion by exposing the vulnerability beneath

Jennifer's outward confidence. The male gaze positions women as objects of visual pleasure, constructed primarily for the consumption of male spectators. In this framework, beauty is not defined by women themselves but by societal ideals shaped to satisfy male desire. These ideals prioritise physical attributes that reinforce a narrow and unattainable standard, creating a culture in which a woman's value is disproportionately tied to her ability to embody these traits. Jennifer's self-worth is deeply tied to her physical attractiveness, so when she mourns her loss of beauty, by extension, she also comes to mourn her value. This perception is reinforced by her environment, where her beauty is consistently acknowledged and rewarded, making it central to her identity.

In addition to her beauty, Jennifer's sense of worth is also closely tied to men's sexual desires for her. From the beginning, Jennifer is presented as a hypersexual character, who speaks about sex in a detached, transactional manner, with her language choices of referring to boys as "morsels" (06:29) or "salty" (06:03) revealing her objectification of men. She even speculates about an exchange student's circumcision, "I've always wanted to try sea cucumber" (10:17).

However, beneath Jennifer's sexual confidence lies a profound insecurity, which becomes apparent in her interactions with both Chip and Nikolai. Upon being rejected by Chip, who chooses Needy over her, Jennifer seeks to kill him, unable to conceive of a man who does not desire her. A man's rejection is seen as a great personal invalidation in Jennifer's eyes. Even during her sacrifice, Jennifer's need for male validation persists. As shown in Figure 32, Nikolai's recital of song lyrics—"Jenny, you're the girl for me. You don't know me but you make me so happy" (1:02:05) —stirs a brief glimmer of hope in Jennifer, making her momentarily believe she is desired and valued. Although the words are revealed to be mere lyrics, the brief shift in Jennifer's expression confirms her deep-seated need for external affirmation.



Fig. 32. Jennifer's brief moment of relief (1:02:10)

What is particularly intriguing, and potentially controversial, about Jennifer's character is her use of casual sex as a means of empowerment. Rather than viewing sex as a pursuit of emotional connection, Jennifer strategically employs her sexuality to achieve personal objectives. She articulates this strategy explicitly when she tells Needy while grabbing her breasts, "These things—these are like smart bombs. Okay? You point them in the right direction, and shit gets real" (11:20). Furthermore, Jennifer uses her sexual appeal to fulfil immediate desires, such as gaining access to alcohol despite being underage, by playing "Hello Tiddy" (12:34) with the bartender. Through these actions, Jennifer exemplifies a form of agency rooted in her sexuality, yet it is one that is ultimately shaped by societal objectification and the commodification of her body.

Critics such as Karen J. Renner contend that *Jennifer's Body* is fundamentally antifeminist in its portrayal of casual sex. In her eyes, Jennifer's sexual behaviour is portrayed as deviant, with her demonic possession serving as a metaphorical punishment for "girls who desire where they do not love" (Renner 41). Jennifer's preference for casual sex is portrayed as abnormal, and her death at the film's conclusion suggests she is deserving of her fate. Renner rejects any interpretations that view the film as a critique of a patriarchal culture which reduces women's worth to their sexual desirability, because in its demonisation of female sexual liberation, the film upholds rather than subverts patriarchal values (Renner 39).

While Renner's claims are reasonable, her interpretation of *Jennifer's Body* also reflects Kooyman's observation that feminism is not a unified movement, encompassing diverse and often conflicting ideas of what constitutes a feminist or antifeminist agenda (181). The concept of the 'gazed gaze' aligns with feminist cinema's aim to expose not only how patriarchal structures govern society but also how these structures actively harm women who live within them. This harm manifests in multiple ways, highlighting the contradictions women navigate

in a patriarchal system. For example, a woman may engage in casual sex as an expression of her agency while simultaneously internalising societal pressures that equate her self-worth with male validation. What Renner overlooks in her analysis is the satirical and self-aware tone of *Jennifer's Body*, which functions to subvert rather than reinforce patriarchal structures. By employing a hyperbolic portrayal of female sexuality and offering a pointed critique of the male gaze, the film challenges societal norms and compels viewers to critically examine the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression rather than passively accept them.

For instance, Jennifer demonstrates an acute awareness of social constructivism of gender, as evidenced by her remark that “PMS was invented by the boy-run media to make us seem crazy” (41:37) (Paszkievicz 87). She understands how to weaponise her sexuality for power, yet this does not grant her true agency or freedom. Instead, her tragedy lies in her entrapment within hegemonic structures: she adheres to societal standards to maintain power but remains subjugated by the same system. Katarzyna Paszkievicz identifies this paradox as central to Jennifer’s character. Her monstrous appetite serves as a metaphor for the relentless and unsustainable demands placed on women to meet patriarchal ideals. Jennifer’s survival depends on the very men who objectify her, as she must consume them to preserve the beauty and allure that they prize. Her attempt to wield her sexuality as a source of empowerment ultimately reinforces her dependence on the validation it brings, revealing how the system ensures that even those who attempt to subvert it remain complicit and trapped within its boundaries (Paszkievicz 88). This internalised objectification is epitomised during the film’s climax when Jennifer is stabbed by Needy. Upon being struck in the chest, Jennifer exclaims, “my tit,” to which Needy corrects, “no, your heart” (1:28:25). This exchange highlights the extent to which Jennifer herself has come to reduce her identity to her physicality and desirability.

Jennifer's Body thus offers a nuanced portrayal of Jennifer as both a product of and a participant in the male gaze. Her behaviour is shaped by a culture that links her worth to her physicality and sexual desirability, creating a tension between external pressures and self-sabotage. While interpretations of Jennifer’s character may vary—whether she is a “superficial girl who becomes monstrous when she seeks self-value in casual sexual relationships and allows her competitiveness over men to ruin her friendships with women,” (44) as Renner suggests, or a victim of systemic oppression—her story undeniably critiques the very structures that commodify women’s bodies. In doing so, the film exposes another harmful effect of the male gaze: the way it distorts women's sense of self-worth and contributes to the cycles of validation and insecurity that define their lives.

5.2.3. The Divided Feminine

Another aspect of Soloway's description of the feminist gaze is the concept of the 'divided feminine.' Soloway uses this concept to define the ways in which the male gaze fragments women into binary archetypes: "Men divide us for their storylines. They divide us so they can tell stories about us to other men. They call us the Madonna and the Whore. The one I want and the one I want to fuck. The one I married and the one who I can't get off my mind" (32:08). This reductionist framework confines female characters to roles that exist solely to support male-driven plots, stripping them of depth and agency.

One prevalent manifestation of this division is the virgin/whore dichotomy, which Martin Fradley identifies as a central theme in *Jennifer's Body* (213). Harrington asserts that virginity functions as a socially constructed concept that reinforces patriarchal ideals. It reduces sexual activity to a narrowly defined framework of heterosexual penetrative intercourse, framing virginity as a state or commodity subject to alteration through personal agency and self-control. She further contends that this construct is inherently gender-biased, serving as yet another mechanism through which women's value is determined by their relationships to men. It establishes normative expectations of female behaviour, delineating what is deemed socially acceptable and perpetuating the regulation of women's sexuality within patriarchal structures (Harrington 37-38).

The intersection of female sexuality and morality has served as a central topic in cinema, especially within the horror genre (Harrington 38). Harrington notes that characters who engage in sexual activity are often met with punishment, typically death, while the final girl who survives the narrative is almost invariably portrayed as a virgin (13). She further suggests that virginity embodies a form of sexuality that is idealised within patriarchal systems, precisely because it is perceived as controllable (Harrington 38). In contrast, female sexuality that is unrestrained or uninhibited is constructed as monstrous, a deviation that invokes societal anxieties and thus requires punishment (Harrington 34-35).

As previously discussed, the virginal and non-virginal statuses of Needy and Jennifer align closely with the high school stereotypes they embody. Jennifer, as the archetypal popular girl, is portrayed as sexually confident, engaging in casual relationships with multiple men, while Needy represents the stereotypical nerd, characterised by her reserved demeanour and a stable, monogamous relationship with her long-time boyfriend, Chip. The film establishes this dichotomy early on, particularly through Low Shoulder's debate about Jennifer's perceived virginity:

NIKOLAI I'm talking about the one who went to get me a drink. The State Fair Butter Princess. That's the one."
 DIRK I don't know. Are you sure she's—"
 NIKOLAI Listen, I grew up in a town like this, okay? There's always that girl. They love to show it off, but they do not give it up. (12:53)

This exchange illustrates the classification and objectification of women under the male gaze. Jennifer is not referred to by name; instead, she is reduced to “that one” or “that girl.”. Her individuality is erased, and her perceived virginity becomes the sole determinant of her worth. In addition, it is shown how Low Shoulder project onto Jennifer a false image of virginal purity based on superficial markers like her appearance and confidence. Ironically, Jennifer’s actual sexual agency starkly contrasts their assumptions, suggesting that the virgin/whore dichotomy operates less on reality and more on the male gaze’s imposed classifications of women.

Within the conventional framework in horror films, Jennifer and Needy initially appear to conform to traditional tropes of the virgin/whore dichotomy. Jennifer is subjected to brutal violence and undergoes a monstrous transformation, aligning her with the trope where sexually autonomous women are vilified. Conversely, Needy, embodying traditional notions of innocence and monogamy, is positioned as the final girl, the one to stop Jennifer’s reign of terror. However, *Jennifer’s Body* does not simply reinforce these traditional binaries; it complicates them through the evolving dynamic between Jennifer and Needy.

Santamaría Ibor has described Jennifer’s and Needy’s relationship as “highly competitive, individualistic, and homoerotic” (162). This tension is further emphasised by Fradley, who identifies mutual jealousy as a defining feature of their friendship: “Just as Needy is envious of Jennifer's confident, postfeminist display of sexuality, so too does Jennifer's insecurity and narcissism lead her to covet her friend's intelligence and understated sexuality” (214). Santamaría Ibor expands on this dynamic by referencing Alison Winch’s analysis of *Mean Girls*, which applies Michel Foucault’s concept of the panopticon to explain “how girlfriends regulate each other’s normative feminine and sexual conduct” (Winch 10 qtd. in Santamaría Ibor 161). This notion of mutual regulation manifests in Jennifer and Needy’s relationship as both characters, consciously or unconsciously, sabotage and manipulate each other in response to societal pressures.

Jennifer’s regulation of Needy is particularly pronounced, stemming from her internalised insecurity and dependency on the male gaze. Viewing herself primarily as an object of voyeuristic desire, Jennifer becomes increasingly desperate to preserve her popularity, resorting to belittling Needy to affirm her own worth. Her condescending remarks, such as “Please don't talk to yourself. It's one of your more freakish Needy behaviours and it makes us both look like

total gaylords,” (26:20) illustrate how Jennifer polices Needy’s behaviour to maintain her own status and femininity. On the other hand, Needy’s admiration for Jennifer blinds her to this manipulation. Needy is too enamoured by Jennifer’s confidence and allure to recognise the inequality in their dynamic, and her deference to Jennifer only serves to exacerbate the latter’s insecurities, perpetuating a cycle of jealousy.

The dynamics of female rivalry under the male gaze are made particularly evident through Chip. Jennifer’s continuous need for validation, with Needy as her primary source, is destabilised by Chip’s presence in Needy’s life. Chip does not merely represent a romantic competitor for Needy’s affections; he signifies a challenge to Jennifer’s sense of control and her dependency on Needy’s unwavering affirmation. This tension manifests early on, as Jennifer and Chip engage in a passive-aggressive tug of war over Needy. When Jennifer insists Needy accompany her to Melody Lane, forcing her to abandon plans with Chip, she asserts dominance through biting remarks such as “Eat my ass, Chip” (09:08). By belittling Chip, mocking his concerns and trivialising his objections, Jennifer undermines his role in Needy’s life. Meanwhile, Chip experiences frustration at Jennifer monopolising his girlfriend’s time, “Stop kidnapping my girlfriend” (09:21). In response, Jennifer accuses Chip of jealousy—“You’re just Jell-O ‘cause you’re not invited” (09:09)—shifting attention from her own envy of Chip’s growing significance in Needy’s life.

Chip not only forces Jennifer to confront the reality of sharing Needy with someone else, but his awareness of Jennifer’s manipulative behaviour toward Needy also positions him as a threat to expose her. For Jennifer, Needy’s affection for others represents a betrayal, as she is both dependent on Needy for validation and possessively attached to her. Her seduction of Chip can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to maintain control over Needy by asserting dominance over those who threaten her place in Needy’s affections. Jennifer’s jealousy and possessiveness culminate in her decision to kill Chip, a tragic act that serves as the moment Needy recognises Jennifer’s manipulation. Ironically, Needy becomes the one person whom Jennifer cannot fully dominate in the end.

Needy’s eventual killing of Jennifer marks her reclamation of agency within their friendship. Jennifer’s death signifies the ultimate collapse of the possessive and manipulative control she had exerted over Needy, and it is through this violent act that Needy finally severs the destructive bond that had kept her trapped. As depicted in Figure 33, the act of tearing off their friendship necklace serves as a visual representation of the dissolution of their friendship. In this moment, Needy breaks free of the role that Jennifer had constructed for her, ultimately emerging as a more autonomous individual who is no longer ‘needy.’



Fig. 33. Needy tears off Jennifer's friendship necklace (1:27:48)

However, Needy's transformation goes beyond the act of killing Jennifer. What differentiates *Jennifer's Body* from teen comedies like *Mean Girls* is its refusal to offer a conventional happy ending (Paszkiewicz 86). While Needy successfully kills Jennifer, the loss of both her best friend and her boyfriend leaves her emotionally shattered. In the end, she is the one held responsible for the chaos that ensued in Devil's Kettle, with her murder of Jennifer leading to her imprisonment and the loss of her sanity. Through this, *Jennifer's Body* also subverts the trope of the final girl. Unlike traditional slashers, where the final girl emerges as a heroic survivor through moral purity (Harrington 43), Needy inherits some of Jennifer's powers after their climactic confrontation, which she uses to escape prison and seek revenge on Low Shoulder. Interestingly, the revenge sequence unfolds without being shown directly. The film's closing credits feature snapshots of the aftermath, depicting the members of Low Shoulder found dead. Over this montage, the song "In the Flesh" by Blondie plays, featuring lyrics such as "Darlin' darlin' darlin', I can't wait to see you. Your picture ain't enough. I can't wait to touch you, in the flesh." (1:33:12) The film ends with a black-and-white surveillance camera shot of Needy leaving the crime scene.

Needy's descent into monstrosity is what ultimately dismantles the virgin/whore dichotomy in *Jennifer's Body*. Neither Jennifer nor Needy is depicted in an idealised or wholly villainous manner, an ambiguity that, as Paszkiewicz observes, has caused some critics to misinterpret the film's feminist intentions (95). While Jennifer's actions are manipulative, sexually objectifying, and murderous, her behaviour is not without context. She is depicted as a victim of sexual violence whose transformation into a monstrous figure is shaped by her internalisation of the male gaze. Her sexuality, which is commodified and ultimately weaponised, reflects how patriarchal structures exploit and distort female agency. In contrast, Needy begins as a virginal, innocent, and passive character but as the narrative unfolds, she

undergoes a profound transformation. She loses her virginity, sheds her passivity, and embraces her own capacity for violence. By the time we see Needy in prison, she has fully embraced her monstrous identity. She is shown picking fights with other inmates, even being thrown into solitary confinement as a result. Her narration provides a crucial insight into this change: “I wasn’t always 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” (04:06).

Like Santamaría Ibor claims, *Jennifer’s Body* exposes how patriarchal conventions harm women by pitting them against each other. The film’s portrayal of both Jennifer and Needy as monstrous figures challenges the traditional narrative of female competition, emphasising that the societal expectations imposed on women create a harmful cycle of rivalry and internalised misogyny. By rendering both characters monstrous in their own way, the film highlights the impossibility of conforming to rigid, predefined roles of femininity. Under the male gaze, there is no singular, correct way to be a teenage girl (162).

6 The Monstrous-Feminine in *Jennifer’s Body*

6.1 “She’s Eating Boys!” — Returning the Gaze

In this final part of my analysis, I build on existing scholarship that interprets the film through the lens of the monstrous-feminine, often drawing on Barbara Creed’s conceptualisations or other representations of female monstrosity (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine*; Creed *Return*; Paszkiewicz; Harrington; Chusna and Mahmudah; Kooyman; Wills and Roberts; Renner; Fradley). While a portion of this chapter will examine how *Jennifer’s Body* aligns with definitions of the monstrous-feminine, particularly the vagina dentata and femme castratrice, my primary contribution lies not in merely reiterating these readings but in investigating how the film’s engagement with these concepts furthers its feminist agenda. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate the extent to which the use of the monstrous-feminine in *Jennifer’s Body* aligns with what Joey Soloway terms ‘returning the gaze’, the third and final aspect of the feminist gaze.

The reason I argue that Soloway’s concept can be articulated through the monstrous-feminine lies in its emphasis on transformation and transgression. Soloway explicitly asserts that returning the gaze is not merely a “gender reversal thing”(23:42) but rather a radical act of reclamation: “it’s not the gazed gaze. It’s the gaze on the gazers. It’s about how it feels to stand here in the world having been seen our entire lives. [...] It says we see you, seeing us. It says, I

don't want to be the object any longer, I would like to be the subject, and with that subjectivity I can name you as the object" (23:05).

The return of the gaze, therefore, necessitates a transformation at the midpoint of the narrative, wherein the object becomes the subject and subsequently objectifies those who previously held the power to objectify her. Soloway emphasises that this form of the gaze is both daring and revolutionary precisely because it actively deconstructs the established norms of voyeuristic pleasure before the audience's eyes. *Jennifer's Body* appropriates monstrosity to fulfil this aim, transforming Jennifer from an objectified victim to an empowered, autonomous subject.

6.2 "I'm Going To Eat Your Soul and Shit It Out" — The Abject Body

Monstrosity as a concept foregrounds the fluidity of subjectivity and challenges the presumed stability of human identity. As Wills and Roberts argue, horror films often "challenge the presumed homogeneity of human identity by confusing or transgressing boundaries between the human and the nonhuman" (2). Historically, as discourses around the rational human subject emerged during the Enlightenment, monstrosity became a marker of deviation from normative standards, signalling not only a failure to adhere to rationality but also a threat to the very ideal of human subjectivity (7-8). *Jennifer's Body* illustrates how this thinking continues to inform contemporary horror cinema. After being sacrificed and subsequently resurrected as a demon, Jennifer no longer conforms to the norms of submissive femininity but instead becomes a creature of unrestrained appetite and desire.

However, to fully grasp the extent to which Jennifer transgresses these boundaries, one must also turn to the concept of abjection. Following Julia Kristeva's formulation, Barbara Creed identifies the abject as that which threatens the symbolic order by blurring the line between subject and object, self and other, human and animal (*Monstrous-Feminine* 13). As Wills and Roberts point out, references to abjection in *Jennifer's Body* manifest through the representation of bodily wastes and the portrayal of unstable, unruly bodies. Even before Jennifer's transformation, the film alludes to anxieties surrounding bodies that "expand, ooze, leak, and become messy" through Jennifer and Needy's use of nicknames such as "vagisil" and "monistat"⁵ (10). These hints become explicit after her assault, when Jennifer appears in Needy's kitchen covered in blood, devours a raw chicken, and vomits a black, tar-like ooze depicted in Figure 34. This visceral display exemplifies both types of abject fluids Creed

⁵ Both nicknames reference over-the-counter medicinal products for vaginal health. Vagisil is used to relieve itching and irritation, while Monistat is an antifungal treatment for vaginal yeast infections.

identifies, with the blood symbolising menstrual and the black vomit representing excremental waste (Chusna and Mahmudah 13).

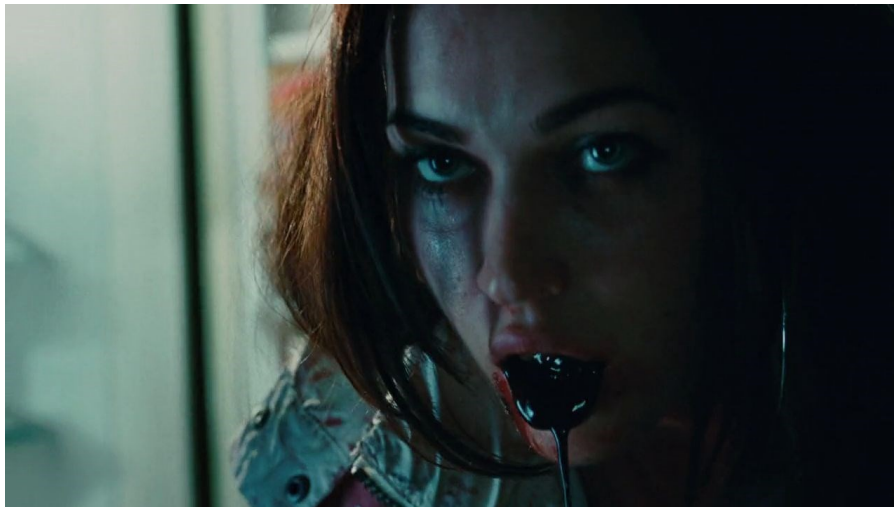


Fig. 34. Jennifer covered in blood and black ooze (23:16)

Furthermore, Harrington notes that Jennifer's feeding operates akin to a menstrual cycle on a monthly basis, with her withdrawal symptoms mimicking menstrual symptoms. When deprived of flesh, her skin breaks out, her glow fades, and she becomes fatigued and irritable, prompting Needy to ask whether she is "PMS-ing" (Harrington 53). The reference to menstruation culminates when Jennifer, bleeding out from being impaled by Chip with a pipe, mockingly asks, "Do you have a tampon? Thought I'd ask. You seemed like you might be pluggin'" (1:23:32). This remark blurs the boundary between non-menstrual and menstrual blood, emphasising how natural bodily functions such as menstruation are culturally framed as grotesque and antithetical to feminine beauty. Patriarchal norms mandate that these bodily processes must be regulated, concealed, and sanitised to maintain the illusion of feminine purity. The abject body, however, subverts this expectation by forcing the viewer to confront what is typically repressed.

According to Pulliam, adolescence is when girls first become aware of the need to regulate and discipline their bodies, their relative powerlessness compared to boys, and the social pressure to conform to gender norms (13). This stage is also marked by many of the processes central to abjection, such as unstable bodies, transgressing boundaries (child/adult), or menstruation. It is therefore unsurprising that the horror genre frequently features iterations of the monstrous teenage girl. In *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), for instance, the teenage girl Carrie's first menstruation coincides with her awakening of monstrous, telekinetic powers. When pushed to her limits after a cruel prank, her abilities culminate in a violent outburst that has

frequently been interpreted as her failure to suppress her newly discovered sexuality within the rigidly controlled social framework her femininity is subjected to (Stamp 338).

Jennifer's Body similarly links supernatural abilities to the social rupture that occurs when an adolescent girl exceeds societal control. However, whereas Carrie is punished for her sexual difference, Jennifer embraces it. She is not an innocent girl punished for her awakening sexuality but someone already aware of her desirability and skilled at using it to her advantage. Following her transformation, Jennifer weaponises the source of her monstrosity, turning her sexuality into a means of reclaiming her subjectivity.

One could, of course, make a case that this subjectivity is brought into question when considering the aspect of possession. Within occult horror, possession functions as a device of the transgression of boundaries between self and other, as a human subject becomes inhabited and controlled by a supernatural or demonic force (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 32). As Clover observes, women are disproportionately represented as the victims of possession, a tendency she links to cultural constructions of the female body as penetrable (via the vagina) and inhabitable (via pregnancy) (80). This logic is exemplified in Friedkin's widely acclaimed *The Exorcist* (1973), in which the possessed twelve-year-old Regan becomes a "playground for bodily wastes," (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 40) expelling blood, urine, vomit, and other fluids in violent excess. Her body becomes capable of performing levitation, extraordinary strength, contortions, and other forms of inhuman feats, while her speech and actions become filled with sexual obscenities. Possession thus functions as a vehicle for the display of abject behaviour, constructing what Creed identifies as a "graphic association of the monstrous with the feminine body" (*Monstrous-Feminine* 37). Jennifer's possession is similarly marked by the grotesque display of bodily fluids, acts of self-mutilation, and the manifestation of supernatural abilities such as accelerated speed, extraordinary strength, and levitation. When Needy envisions Jennifer's demonic form during sex with Chip, as shown in Figure 35, her features are visibly distorted as though she was possessed by an inhuman entity.



Fig. 35. Jennifer appears possessed (51:54)

However, the film notably resists explicitly referring to ‘possession,’ instead describing Jennifer’s state as a demonic transference (Wills & Roberts 15-16). Needy uncovers that Jennifer is inhabited by a flesh-eating demon, specifically a succubus. The occult book she consults reads: “The demon will forever reside in the soul of the victim. She must forever feed on flesh to sustain the demon” (1:09:44). Even though the language used in this explanation suggests a form of possession, the film diverges from traditional possession narratives by allowing Jennifer to retain a marked degree of agency. In conventional portrayals such as in *The Exorcist*, possession is characterised by the complete subjugation of the human host by the demonic force. Regan’s autonomy is virtually erased, the appearance of the words ‘help me’ etched into her skin signifying a desperate plea from her disembodied soul (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 41). In contrast, Jennifer appears to remain firmly in control of her actions. She continues to speak in her own voice, selects her victims with intentionality, and never displays signs of internal struggle or distress typically associated with demonic possession. Furthermore, the film makes no mention of exorcising or killing the demon independently of Jennifer; the only resolution offered is her own death, suggesting a collapse of boundaries between host and entity, or perhaps an absence of the distinction altogether.

Thus, Jennifer’s subjectivity remains discernible even within the presumed possession framework. While occult horror often depicts the possession of young girls to emphasise a stark contrast between innocence and the grotesque (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 42), Jennifer is never portrayed as innocent. Her transformation does not mark a form of abject corruption but rather amplifies pre-existing tendencies in her character such as her manipulative behaviour and sexual objectification of men. In this way, the film subverts the traditional possession arc by presenting monstrosity not as an external imposition upon purity, but as an extension of

subjectivity. Crucially, this subjectivity is gendered, with her femininity rendered monstrous even more explicitly through the tropes of the vagina dentata and femme castratrice.

6.2.1 Devouring the Patriarchy

Moving into the more concrete iterations of the monstrous-feminine, *Jennifer's Body* constructs Jennifer as a sexually deviant, dangerous other via the figure of the vagina dentata. Even prior to her transformation, Jennifer is depicted as alluring and promiscuous, representing an unrestrained form of female sexuality compared to Needy's restrained virginity. Jennifer's transformation into a literal man-eating monster then marks the point at which her sexuality, once merely excessive, becomes overtly threatening.

Unlike *Teeth*, which depicts the vagina dentata literally, *Jennifer's Body* offers a more symbolic interpretation by displacing the site of threat from the vagina to the mouth. Even before Jennifer's transformation is made explicit, the film draws repeated attention to her mouth. The camera lingers on close-up shots of Jennifer applying lipstick, and she is frequently depicted touching or biting her lips. The film's introductory shot, as shown in Figure 36, features an extreme close-up of Jennifer chewing on her hair. After her transformation, Jennifer's mouth becomes a fetishised projection of castration anxiety, especially through the emergence of sharp, shark-like teeth shown in Figure 37. This grotesque feature is deliberately juxtaposed with her hyperfeminine appearance; particularly striking is the merging of her bright red lipstick with the blood that spills from Jennifer's mouth (Harrington 53). Through such imagery, the film dissociates femininity from conventions of birth and reproduction, instead aligning it with danger, violence, and death.

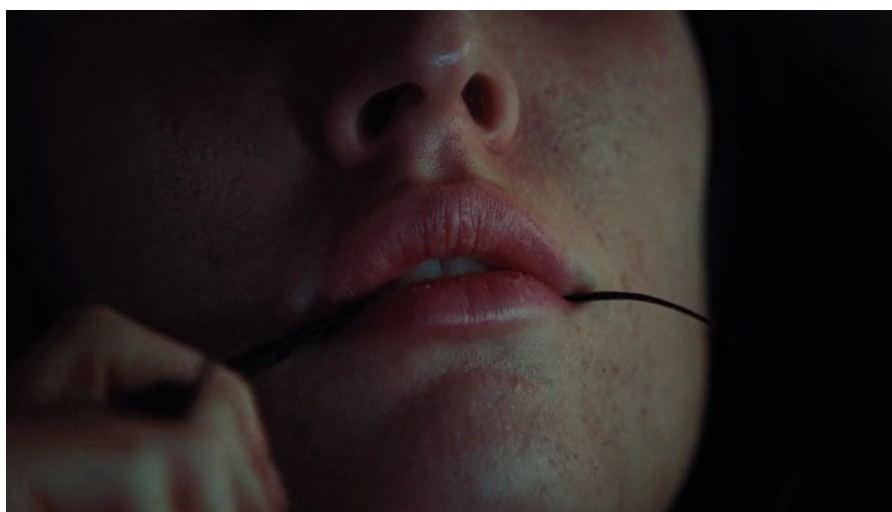


Fig. 36. Jennifer's mouth is emphasised (00:47)



Fig. 37. Jennifer's mouth as the teethed vagina (32:34)

In addition, as Barbara Creed has argued, the *vagina dentata* often manifests in horror cinema through imagery of long corridors, deep voids, or other endless holes (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 118). In *Jennifer's Body*, this metaphor is most clearly articulated through the Devil's Kettle waterfall, the town's most notable and enigmatic landmark: an abyss that swallows all objects thrown into it without return (Paszkievicz 77). "Nothing ever surfaces. Maybe it's another dimension. Or, you know, just really deep," (03:49) Needy remarks as the audience watches scientists dropping plastic balls into the void. Notably, Jennifer's sacrifice takes place against the backdrop of this waterfall. After stabbing Jennifer to death, Low Shoulder discards the phallic knife into the abyss, its submersion foreshadowing Jennifer's transformation into a devouring feminine force. Crucially, the waterfall later expels this knife, allowing Needy to wield it in her revenge against the band. The weapon that once wounded Jennifer is thus repurposed as a tool of castration. In this way, the *vagina dentata* shifts from a patriarchal projection of castration anxiety to a defence mechanism against male objectification, aligning with Harrington's claim that the myth can be reframed as emancipatory (65).

In this light, Jennifer's monstrosity is not a manifestation of innate feminine deviance but a response to the sexual assault she endured at the hands of Low Shoulder. Her desire ceases to be oriented toward pleasure and instead becomes instrumentalised: a vehicle through which she asserts control, reclaims bodily autonomy, and reverses the objectifying male gaze. One of the film's most famous moments involves Jennifer burning her own tongue with a lighter, only for it to heal instantly. Her subsequent declaration—"I am God" (37:08)—signals her transformation from victim to a powerful, invincible subject.

Central to this newfound subjectivity is her turn to cannibalism. Creed argues that cannibalism constitutes the most brutal form of abjection, as it transgresses what she terms the "founding taboo of human civilisation", i.e. the consumption of human flesh (*Return* 127).

Within Western discourse, cannibalism has historically been construed as a morally abhorrent, primitive practice, a perception that locates cannibals not only within uncivilised nature but also with animality (*Creed Return* 130). In *Jennifer's Body*, this becomes particularly evident when forest animals gather around Jennifer as she corners Jonas in the woods, seemingly drawn to her similar presence (*Creed Return* 113). Jennifer's animalistic traits are further illustrated in Figure 38, where she is shown scooping blood from Colin's corpse and drinking it in a disturbing parallel to an earlier scene in which a deer is shown licking from Jonas's corpse.



Fig. 38. Jennifer's cannibalism (53:14)

According to Flockhart, the cannibal is marked as different from the human by their desire to consume human flesh and yet challenges this very notion of difference by consisting of the same flesh they consume (68). This sameness between victim and perpetrator then draws attention to the distinction between subject and object. The cannibal attains subjectivity through the ultimate objectification of others by literally consuming them until nothing remains (*Creed Return* 128). In *Jennifer's Body*, this process is vividly depicted in a scene where Jennifer examines her high school yearbook, circling the faces of male students and writing the word “YUM” in bold capital letters beside them. In doing so, these boys lose their subjectivity, reduced to mere sources of pleasure and nourishment (Wills & Roberts 31). This rhetoric persists throughout the film, for instance, as Needy describes the upcoming formal dance as an “all-you-can-eat buffet” (1:10:04) for Jennifer.

Cannibalism takes on even more radical connotations when enacted by a female character. Unlike their male counterparts, the female cannibal not only challenges the boundaries of humanity but also subverts conventional femininity. Cannibalism, as Flockhart argues, represents the antithesis of stereotypically feminine qualities such as birth, maternity, and nurture (*Creed Return* 128). In this light, the female cannibal embodies a form of feminine subjectivity that transgresses the limits imposed by the symbolic order. While the toothed

vagina symbolises castration anxiety, cannibalism embodies it. By consuming the male body at its centre, Jennifer thus devours the patriarchal order from within (Creed, *Return* 128). This is best epitomised when, in response to Needy's question about whether she is eating people, Jennifer retorts, "No. I'm eating boys" (Deleted Scene: Needy confronts Jennifer 0:50).⁶

6.2.2 Feminist Vengeance Reframed

If the motif of the vagina dentata in *Jennifer's Body* symbolises Jennifer's bodily resistance against sexual objectification, the figure of the femme castratrice represents a more deliberate, intellectual revolt against the male gaze. The characterisation of the femme castratrice as reminiscent of sirens who lure men to their doom through seduction (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 137) implies a calculated performance designed to achieve her goal. While Jennifer weaponises her sexual allure, her power also lies in her intelligence and manipulative capacity. Her seductions are not merely physical; rather, they are intricately constructed performances of emotional manipulation and rhetorical persuasion.

A key example for this strategy is her encounter with Jonas. Just as the band Low Shoulder exploits Jennifer's vulnerability in the aftermath of a traumatic event, Jennifer adopts similar tactics by targeting Jonas in a moment of emotional distress following the death of his best friend. She feigns empathy to lower his defences, casually remarking that "Craig said you and me would make a banging couple" (30:18). She then bridges emotional intimacy and physical seduction by placing his hand on her chest and softly insisting, "Feel my heart, it's broken" (30:36). She concludes the exchange with the line, "Come with me... it's what Craig would have wanted" (30:51), which ultimately persuades Jonas to go with her. Even Jennifer's first chronological victim, foreign exchange student Ahmed, shown briefly in a flashback, follows this pattern of emotional exploitation. Jennifer finds him lost and disoriented after the fire and offers false reassurance, "Come with me, we're gonna sort this out," (1:04:41) before killing him.

Her manipulation reaches a peak in her seduction of Chip. Throughout the film, Chip is portrayed as highly insecure in his masculinity, jealous whenever Needy interacts with or compliments other men, and preoccupied with his body image. During their first time, when Needy begins to cry, Chip assumes with a grin, "Am I too big?" (52:43) as though his physicality has finally validated his masculinity. Aware of Chip's insecurities, Jennifer fabricates a narrative that Needy has been unfaithful, further feeding Chip's doubts. She then

⁶ Although this quote originates from a deleted scene, it has become the film's most iconic line due to its virality on social media during the film's cultural renaissance. Its continued relevance may also be attributed to its reference in pop singer Halsey's 2020 track "killing boys."

declares her love for him, adding “Needy doesn’t deserve you” (1:16:48), which boosts his fragile sense of self-worth and ultimately pushes him into hooking up with her.

Alongside intellect, the femme castratrice also embodies a distinct sense of purpose through her association with rape-revenge narratives. Jennifer is raped and killed by Low Shoulder, yet she returns imbued with supernatural powers and a newfound subjectivity that enables her to seek violent retribution against her aggressors. In this sense, the film exemplifies Soloway’s concept of ‘returning the gaze’, positioning Jennifer as the subject rather than the object. Her sharpened teeth function as a substitute for a knife, while the mutilated bodies of her victims represent the castrated and destabilised masculine form. Colin’s corpse, for instance, is rendered so unrecognisable it is described as “lasagna with teeth” (1:07:32).

Even though she does not physically castrate them, Jennifer symbolically castrates her victims by stripping them of their capacity for masculine performance, dominance, and control. As Henry observes, MeToo cinema-inspired rape-revenge narratives feature more personal and deliberately staged forms of retribution. In such cases, revenge functions not as a repetition of violence, but as a ritualised mirror, reflecting the harm back to both the perpetrator(s) and the audience (52). *Promising Young Woman* (2020) follows this logic through its protagonist, who ritualistically confronts self-proclaimed ‘nice guys.’ By feigning intoxication and luring them into revealing their predatory behaviour, she exposes the dissonance between their self-image and their actions. These encounters redirect the gaze, compelling the viewer to confront the lived realities of existing under a phallogentric male gaze (Creed, *Return* 55).

While *Jennifer’s Body* includes moments of graphic violence, Jennifer also enacts revenge by subjecting male characters to intimidation and degradation, positioning them in roles that mirror her own victimisation through Low Shoulder. She lures men by appealing to their desire and vulnerability, drawing them into secluded settings under false pretences, only to kill them in ways that strip them of both agency and subjecthood. This dynamic is not only a literal reversal of power but also a deliberate mimicry of the conditions of her own assault.

For instance, Jonas’s confusion and futile attempts to understand the situation mirror Jennifer’s unanswered pleas during the sacrificial ritual. Her command “shutties” (31:22) parallels how Low Shoulder dismissed her questions and interruptions. Similarly, the moment Colin asks whether Jennifer even knows his last name strongly echoes Nikolai forgetting Jennifer’s name. During Colin’s murder, Jennifer dehumanises the boy by merely referring to his emo aesthetic, “I thought boys like you were really into vermin and death and shit” (50:37), mimicking the ways Low Shoulder reduced her to the “State Fair Butter Princess” (12:54) stereotype, and taunting him with, “What? Are you scared?” (50:35). The men thus become

voiceless, infantilised figures whose cries are ignored, mirroring Jennifer's own helplessness during her assault. As Chusna and Mahmudah observe, "Jennifer's character either challenges or confronts the patriarchal view towards gender identity—on how males become predators through the helplessness of their victims" (12).

Situated within Soloway's theorisation of the feminist gaze, *Jennifer's Body* does more than grant Jennifer agency; it portrays Jennifer as actively reproducing the gaze, reorienting its direction and reconfiguring its power. Her vengeance is not simply about killing men, but about naming them as objects, positioning them in the same frame of helplessness, dehumanisation, and disposability she once endured. In this sense, Jennifer does not merely regain control, but she reconstructs the entire voyeuristic framework, inverting the traditional subject-object dynamic in a way that feels unsettling precisely because it breaks away from the normative male gaze. In Soloway's terms, the audience is forced to confront what it means for those who have been seen their entire lives to finally gaze back. The men Jennifer kills are not simply punished; they are narratively flattened into the roles of victims, functions, and stereotypes, mirroring the reductive treatment female characters so often receive under the male gaze.

What differentiates *Jennifer's Body* from traditional rape-revenge narratives, and what lies at the centre of controversy concerning its feminist reading is the fact that Jennifer does not target her actual rapists, the band Low Shoulder, but instead directs her violence toward other, largely innocent men. While it is not unusual for a femme castratrice to victimise men who did not directly assault them, such men are typically implicated in broader structures of misogyny. In contrast, Jennifer's victims appear to be innocent bystanders rather than perpetrators, with no overt sexual intent toward Jennifer, aside from Colin, whose interest in her is portrayed as a relatively harmless crush.

This has led some critics to question the film's feminist agenda. Within a feminist framework, retributive justice against rapists can be read as a form of resistance or reclamation of agency. However, when a female character enacts violence against men without a clear connection to sexual violence or systemic oppression, it risks reinforcing a belief of men as inherently guilty or deserving of punishment. Kooyman, for example, argues that this dynamic compromises the audience's capacity to sympathise with Jennifer: "slaying the Breakfast Club does not endear Jennifer to viewers, who cannot root for her to slay these innocents the same way they can root for the protagonist of *I Spit on Your Grave*" (191). As a result, *Jennifer's Body* can be seen as complicating, or even undermining its potential as a feminist text by seemingly suggesting the equation "killing boys=feminism" (Kooyman 191).

However, viewed through the lens of MeToo cinema and the feminist gaze, *Jennifer's Body* offers a more nuanced portrayal of revenge that focuses on feminine subjectivity. Jennifer is not intended to represent all survivors of sexual violence, nor does she function as a universal symbol of female vengeance. Rather, she is portrayed as a distinct and psychologically complex character whose actions are shaped by her own experiences and emotions. Her choice of victims reflects deeply personal motivations: jealousy, insecurity, and possibly repressed homoerotic desire for Needy. Her decision to target Chip, for instance, can be interpreted as an assertion of power and control within her relationship with Needy, while her killing of Colin, whom Needy had expressed interest in, suggests a reaction rooted in competition and jealousy. The killing of Jonas appears less reasonable at first but makes sense when situated within the context of Jennifer's suppressed trauma. In the aftermath of the fire, the community of Devil's Kettle is publicly grieving a tragedy that affected the town as a whole. Yet Jennifer, who was assaulted that same night, is left to process her trauma in isolation. Therefore, her attack on Jonas may stem from a sense of resentment or alienation: while others are allowed to mourn, her suffering remains invisible. Jonas, as someone who openly expresses grief, may serve as both a proxy for her own unacknowledged pain and a target of her envy. In this sense, Jennifer's violence is not random but intimately tied to her subjectivity, trauma, and a fractured sense of agency.

Moreover, the refusal to centre a rape-revenge narrative around a morally pure character is in line with MeToo cinema's effort to challenge victim-blaming. MeToo cinema critiques the reductive framework that deems only women who conform to patriarchal ideals of morally sanctioned femininity as worthy of protection, while implicitly positioning those who deviate from these norms as deserving of punishment (Keating 84). A notable example is Michaela Coel's television series *I May Destroy You*, which features a protagonist who, as Keating observes, "is a recreational drug user, she was a bully in high school, she procrastinates in her work, and engages in casual sex" (83-84). Despite these traits, the series insists on her right to both justice and empathy in the aftermath of sexual assault. As Keating argues, "by including greater variation in who is shown to experience sexual violence and to be deserving of justice, the harmful perceptions of what constitutes a real rape, or a real rape victim can be eroded" (84). Rather than celebrating only 'good' women, MeToo cinema insists that all women, especially those whose desires, traumas, and choices lie outside socially sanctioned femininity, are entitled to subjectivity, visibility, and narrative importance.

Jennifer's Body similarly resists such binaries by presenting Jennifer as a character who engages in sex transactionally, objectifies men, exhibits both narcissism and insecurity, manipulates those around her, and consistently exploits Needy to affirm her own superiority.

Yet, despite these characteristics, the film frames her death as tragic rather than triumphant. The use of a melancholic musical score, combined with Needy's visibly pained expression following the killing refutes any interpretation of the scene as a moment of victory. Most significantly, Needy's later quest for revenge in Jennifer's name further complicates audience expectations, positioning Jennifer not as a villain who deserved her end, but as a victim of forces beyond her control. Jennifer may not be a traditional heroine, but her pain is undeniable, and the film insists that it be acknowledged.

7 Conclusion

Whether *Jennifer's Body* was truly ahead of its time is, of course, debatable. Although its MeToo-prompted renaissance has drawn attention to the film's themes of the systemic silencing of survivors, male abuse of power, and reclamation of female agency, it nevertheless bears the marks of its 2009 production context.

Soloway (8:05), Benson-Allott (69), and Keating (64) have, for instance, all emphasised the importance of diversifying representations of feminine experience through an intersectional lens. Although *Jennifer's Body* does offer an acclaimed queer subtext, its representation of race remains notably limited. The film features only one non-white character, the exchange student Ahmed, whose minimal screen time relies on reductive stereotypes.

Moreover, from the perspective of feminist horror theory, *Jennifer's Body* aligns more closely with Barbara Creed's original formulation of the monstrous-feminine than with the revised framework she later developed in response to MeToo cinema. While male abjection is present in the film, the depiction of female sexuality as dangerous and threatening bears more resemblance to the representation of female abjection in classic horror films such as *Carrie*.

Spatially, too, the film diverges from the MeToo-era. Rather than the urban settings typical of films like *Promising Young Woman*, *Jennifer's Body* is situated in a small-town environment. This setting is much more reminiscent of traditional rape-revenge films such as *I Spit on Your Grave*, which reinforce a dichotomy that positions rurality as a site of danger (Réti 197).

Ultimately, *Jennifer's Body* presents a complex interplay of elements that both anticipate and diverge from the concerns of MeToo cinema. However, expecting a film from 2009 to fully reflect the sensibilities of a movement that emerged a decade later is an aspirational, yet unattainable standard. While the reinterpretation of *Jennifer's Body* as a rape-revenge narrative positions the film more firmly within the realm of feminist critique, this alone is insufficient

evidence of its advanced feminist politics as rape-revenge has been proven to often reinforce misogynistic tropes under the guise of female empowerment.

Throughout this thesis I have emphasised Claire Johnston's assertion that feminist cinema must operate as a counter-cinema, challenging dominant cinematic conventions that have historically sidelined women on screen including the male gaze, narrative passivity, and stereotyped representation (37). MeToo cinema has embraced this imperative in radical ways, not simply inserting feminine subjectivity into pre-existing forms of filmmaking but actively exposing and dismantling the patriarchal structures that underpin cinematic representation itself. As my analysis has shown, *Jennifer's Body* may be considered ahead of its time in terms of feminist filmmaking precisely because it enacts such destabilisation. Specifically, I have argued that this effect is achieved through a combination of genre hybridity, the feminist gaze, and the monstrous-feminine.

For instance, in my discussion of genre hybridity, I examined the film's use of recognisable character stereotypes and narrative elements from the American high school film. Yet by merging these aspects with comedy and horror, *Jennifer's Body* satirises the genre's tendency to romanticise girlhood. Exaggerated and ironic dialogue exposes the absurdity of norms placed on adolescent femininity, while horror sequences dramatise the dangers inherent in its policing.

The film's subversion of patriarchal cinematic language becomes even more evident in the spectatorial framing of the two central female characters, Jennifer and Needy. Jennifer exemplifies the film's self-reflexive engagement with the male gaze, confronting the spectator with their own complicity in cinematic objectification by reproducing familiar modes of looking but withholding voyeuristic gratification. Needy, by contrast, is framed in a way that privileges her inner life such as her traumatic experience at the fire, her conflicted attachment to Jennifer, and her gradual growth into agency. In this shift, the gaze itself is reclaimed: the audience is invited to respond to Needy with empathy rather than desire, aligning spectatorship with subjectivity rather than objectification.

Through these strategies alone, *Jennifer's Body* already establishes itself as a film that centres women and their experiences, positioning them as active agents in their own narratives. Yet to move beyond a merely feminine gaze and toward a feminist gaze, the audience is offered a place of objectification. Most explicitly, *Jennifer's Body* stages objectification in the horrific depiction of Jennifer's sexual assault, forcing the spectator to witness the injustice of a system that silences women like Needy and Jennifer while glorifying abusers like Low Shoulder. On a more implicit level, the film reveals subtler operations of the male gaze through Jennifer's

internalised dependence on male validation and the dysfunctional dynamics of female friendship under patriarchy.

However, the film transforms this place of objectification into one of subjectivity through Jennifer's embodiment of the monstrous-feminine. Drawing on figures such as the vagina dentata and the femme castratrice, Jennifer enacts an abject revolt, transgressing the boundaries of socially regulated femininity. Her acts of violence are staged reflections of her prior objectification, enacting a reversal where she gains the power to objectify those who once objectified her. Crucially, this transformation also destabilises spectatorship itself, inviting the audience to share in her reclamation of agency and to reconsider their own alignment with female subjectivity.

I have labelled *Jennifer's Body* "horror cinema's feminist intervention," because these three strategies converge to produce a self-conscious, formally innovative critique that foregrounds feminine subjectivity in a way that is rarely seen within the genre. Through its dual protagonists, Jennifer and Needy, the film creates space for complexity, contradiction, and emotional depth. Neither character is wholly virtuous nor irredeemably monstrous; instead, they are shaped by personal motivations, desires, and trauma. In doing so, the film resists the reductive characterisation commonly imposed on female characters in mainstream Hollywood cinema, particularly at the time of its release.

Although having women behind the camera is by no means a guarantee of feminist content, the collaboration between director Karyn Kusama and screenwriter Diablo Cody should certainly be acknowledged. As Mulvey argues, female filmmakers may bring thematic and aesthetic perspectives often absent in male-authored texts (Mulvey *Afterimages* 10-11, cited in Creed *Return* 6), and *Jennifer's Body* reflects this potential. However, the film's male-oriented marketing campaign and initial lukewarm reception highlight the cultural unpreparedness for such feminist storytelling in 2009. The foundations for these narratives may have existed earlier, but it was through the emergence of MeToo that Hollywood's structural inequities were sufficiently challenged to allow feminist filmmakers greater access to mainstream platforms. Within this context, the critical renaissance of *Jennifer's Body* is both justified and significant: MeToo provided the critical tools to affirm what films like *Jennifer's Body* had long gestured toward.

While *Jennifer's Body* was easily identified in this regard because of its renaissance, additional scholarship is necessary to uncover other films whose feminist potential may have been overlooked due to the cultural and industrial constraints of their time. Imperative to such re-evaluations is the need for a clearer theoretical articulation of the female, or as I have argued,

feminist gaze. While the male gaze has been firmly defined and repeatedly used to critique misogynistic representations on-screen, feminist film criticism still lacks an equivalent conceptual counterpart. Soloway's formulation offers a promising starting point as I have illustrated, yet further research is required to establish a rigid academic framework capable of identifying what feminist filmmaking looks like when it succeeds.

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10 Appendix

10.1 Abstract (English)

The #MeToo movement has not only created the conditions to expose patriarchal structures underlying Hollywood's productions both on-screen and off-screen but has also encouraged a critical re-evaluation of earlier works by female filmmakers through a contemporary feminist lens. One such example is the 2009 horror-comedy *Jennifer's Body*. Initially disregarded at the box office, the film has been reassessed as a feminist cult classic in the wake of #MeToo. This thesis investigates the claim that *Jennifer's Body* was ahead of its time through an examination of three key features: genre hybridity, the feminist gaze as theorised by Joey Soloway, and the monstrous-feminine coined by Barbara Creed. Through a feminist analysis, I argue that the film functions as a self-aware satire of the gendered norms of girlhood in the American high school film. By foregrounding feminine subjectivity in the characters of Jennifer and Needy, the film critiques sexual objectification, the pressures of patriarchal standards of femininity, and their effects on female friendship. Central to this critique is Jennifer's embodiment of the monstrous-feminine. Figures of female monstrosity, long used to stigmatise female sexuality, are reconfigured to craft a rape-revenge narrative that effectively subverts Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. Overall, this thesis demonstrates that *Jennifer's Body* develops a cinematic language closely aligned with feminist cinema of the #MeToo-era, and thus proves itself ahead of its time.

10.2 Abstract (Deutsch)

Die #MeToo-Bewegung hat nicht nur die Möglichkeit eröffnet, patriarchale Strukturen innerhalb der Filmindustrie sichtbar zu machen, sondern auch vergangene Werke aus einer neuen Perspektive zu betrachten. Ein markantes Beispiel hierfür ist die Horror-Komödie *Jennifer's Body* (2009), die zunächst an den Kinokassen scheiterte, jedoch im Zuge der #MeToo-Bewegung den Status eines feministischen Kultklassikers erlangte. Die vorliegende Masterarbeit untersucht die These, dass *Jennifer's Body* seiner Zeit voraus war, anhand von drei Aspekten: Genre-Hybridität, dem feministischen Blick (nach Joey Soloway), und der monströsen Weiblichkeit (nach Barbara Creed). Im Rahmen einer feministischen Analyse wird gezeigt, dass der Film als selbstreflexive Satire der Geschlechternormen des amerikanischen High-School-Films gelesen werden kann. Durch die Betonung weiblicher Subjektivität in den Figuren Jennifer und Needy kritisiert er sexuelle Objektifizierung, den Druck patriarchaler Weiblichkeitsideale sowie deren Auswirkung auf weibliche Freundschaften. Besonders bedeutsam ist dabei die Inszenierung der monströsen Weiblichkeit. Traditionell zur Stigmatisierung weiblicher Sexualität eingesetzte Figuren werden hier umgedeutet, um ein Rape-Revenge-Motiv zu etablieren, welches den von Laura Mulveys beschriebenen männlichen Blick destabilisiert. Insgesamt zeigt diese Arbeit, dass *Jennifer's Body* eine filmische Sprache entwickelt, die eng mit dem feministischen Kino der #MeToo-Ära verbunden ist und sich heute als seiner Zeit voraus erweist.