

**“I Eat Boys”: Monstrous Femininity in *Jennifer’s Body***

Victoria Santamaría Ibor (vsantamaria@unizar.es)

Universidad de Zaragoza

**Abstract:**

The marketing strategy behind *Jennifer’s Body* capitalized on Megan Fox’s emerging status as a sex symbol. As a result of this, many reviewers criticised it for not fulfilling their male fantasies. Ten years after its release, *Jennifer’s Body* is now interpreted as a feminist story. This essay explores the limits and contradictions of these readings through an analysis of the depiction of female monstrosity in the film. It starts with the establishment of a theoretical framework on the representation of female monsters in horror cinema and of the monstrous teenage girl. The analysis will be structured in three parts. The first examines the use of irony and self-consciousness in the satanic ritual scene in relation to the film’s portrayal of male violence. The second part reads Jennifer’s monstrosity as a result of her neoliberal, over-sexualised femininity. The last section explores the relationship between Jennifer and her friend Needy, which makes both of them monstrous in their own distinctive manners. This essay posits *Jennifer’s Body* and its representation of the monstrous feminine as both a feminist denunciation of a patriarchal system and a perpetuation of the same clichés the film wants to subvert.

**Keywords:** horror cinema, gender roles, teenagers, female monstrosity, *Jennifer’s Body*.

**“Me como a los chicos”: Femenidad monstruosa en *Jennifer’s Body*****Resumen:**

La estrategia publicitaria detrás de *Jennifer’s Body* explotó el estatus emergente de la actriz Megan Fox como sex symbol. En consecuencia, muchos críticos descalificaron la película por no ajustarse a sus fantasías

masculinas. Diez años después de su estreno, *Jennifer's Body* se reinterpreta ahora como un relato feminista. Siguiendo una estructura en tres partes, este ensayo explora los límites y contradicciones de estas lecturas a través de un análisis de la representación de monstruosidad femenina en la película, empezando con un marco teórico sobre la representación de monstruos femeninos en el cine de terror y sobre la adolescente monstruosa. La primera parte analiza el uso de ironía en el ritual satánico en relación a la representación de violencia masculina. La segunda sección interpreta la monstruosidad de Jennifer como resultado de su feminidad neoliberal y sexualizada. La última sección explora la relación entre Jennifer y su amiga Needy, ambas monstruosas de distintas formas. El ensayo concluye que *Jennifer's Body* puede interpretarse simultáneamente como una denuncia feminista del sistema patriarcal y una perpetuación de los clichés del mismo género que intenta subvertir.

**Palabras clave:** cine de terror, roles de género, adolescentes, monstruosidad femenina, *Jennifer's Body*.

## 1. Introduction

*Jennifer's Body*, released in 2009, is a teen horror film directed by Karyn Kusama and written by Diablo Cody. It stars Megan Fox and Amanda Seyfried, playing Jennifer, the archetypal popular girl, and Anita "Needy," her co-dependent best friend, respectively. Jennifer is a manipulative and overly sexual teenager who, as the result of a satanic ritual, is possessed by a demon and starts devouring her male classmates. Aware that her friend is a menace, Needy decides she has to stop her.

The marketing strategy behind *Jennifer's Body* capitalized on Megan Fox's emerging status as a sex symbol after her role in *Transformers* (dir. Michael Bay, 2007), as can be seen in the promotional poster and in the official trailer, in which Jennifer is described as the girl "every guy would die for." The movie, which was a failure at the time of its release (grossing only \$31.6 million worldwide for a film made on a \$16 million budget) was criticised by some reviewers for not giving its (male)

audience what it promised. For instance, Jeffrey M. Anderson wrote for *Combustible Celluloid*: “*Jennifer’s Body* is not funny, nor is it sexy (the girls keep their clothes on), nor is it scary (it’s all just special effects).” Along the same lines, Peter Howell from *The Star* claimed: “Megan Fox is the girl, the non-bawdy Jennifer, and if you’re one of those bored and horny teens hoping to see her in something less than tight clothing, you’ll be swallowing a bitter pill.” The director herself has commented on the “failed” marketing campaign behind the film, claiming it was painful to see the film marketed to young male spectators when the audience she and the scriptwriter had actually intended were “young women the same age as the main characters played by Fox and Seyfried” (Sharf).

Ten years after its original release, feminist readings of the film have become more or less the norm. Anne Cohen, writing for *Refinery29*, claims that if the film was released today, “Fox could have been heralded as the feminist revenge hero of our time.” Similarly, Frederick Blichert, from *Vice*, argues that the way the film deals with “themes of abuse, empowerment, and accountability would likely be a winning formula with horror movie critics in the #MeToo era.” This relatively quick transition from the film’s former status as a (failed) product aimed at a male audience to its feminist recuperation deserves, in my opinion, further exploration.

This essay sets out to explore the limits and contradictions of existing readings of *Jennifer’s Body* through its representation of female monstrosity. It starts by looking at the representation of female monsters in both horror and rape-revenge films and, in particular, given the age of the main characters in *Jennifer’s Body*, the monstrous teenage girl. The analysis of the film itself is then divided in three parts. The first looks at the use of irony and self-consciousness in the satanic ritual scene in relation to the film’s portrayal of male violence against women. The second part is informed by postfeminist criticism and reads Jennifer’s monstrosity in the light of her neoliberal, individualist and oversexualised femininity. The last section explores the complex relationship between Jennifer and Needy, which makes both of them monstrous in their own distinct manners. It will be argued that the film’s specific use of the conventions of the horror genre regarding gender roles is both a feminist denunciation of a patriarchal system and a perpetuation of the same clichés the film wants to subvert.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

According to Barry K. Grant, the figure of the "monster" allows horror movies to explore that which is considered the "Other" in society, in opposition to the mainstream (283). Grant asserts that in normative films, dominant values are rationalised while the monstrous is excluded, whereas subversive films portray the horrors of the system and the defencelessness of the one who deviates (284). Yet, as this essay will argue, describing a film like *Jennifer's Body* (and by extension most horror films) as normative or subversive is not as clear-cut as Grant's observations would suggest. Like any monster, female monsters are usually filled with ambivalence, as critics examining the topic often contend.

Julia Kristeva describes the term "abject" as that which threatens the self, as it cannot be included in society or defies comprehension by rational thinking (1). The main feature of the abject for Kristeva is its ambiguity, since it elicits both attraction and repulsion (1). The abject is constantly challenging social norms and the unstable border between good and evil, the acceptable and the unacceptable (4). It is a menace for the status quo because it cannot be classified according to mainstream values. Instead, the abject uses socially approved rules for its own advantage, subverting them and undermining their significance (15).

The corpse, because of its liminal status between life and death, is for Kristeva a representation of the abject (109). Body wastes are considered a source of abjection as well, since they cast doubt on the purity of the human body (108). For Kristeva, femaleness is abject too, since it is frequently associated with the "irrational," emotional and hysterical; that is, with something that must be repressed, in opposition to a male "ordered view of society" (70). In this manner, femaleness can be read as something that defies male norms, a source of desire that can never be assimilated by patriarchy.

Barbara Creed, who adapts Kristeva's theory of the abject to the horror film genre, reads the representation of the "monstrous-feminine" in films as the product of male anxieties and desires towards women (1993: 7). She claims the female abject not only threatens mainstream distinctions between life and death, the natural and the uncanny, but

also between proper and improper femininity or normal vs. excessive sexuality (11).

In fact, gender plays an important role in the transformation of the woman into a monster (3). For Creed, the monstrous-feminine is usually embodied by a public and sexual woman holding an ambiguous position between fear and desire (10). For example, the lesbian vampire threatens society because she represents sexual attraction and pleasure between women (61). Another instance is demonic possession, a motif that allows female characters to adopt a masculine behaviour while at the same time depicting the female body as a vulnerable space for male forces, as happens in *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973) (31). For Creed, the horror genre classifies femininity outside the norm as a source of abjection, a threat for the self that cannot be assimilated into the mainstream, but the monstrous-feminine also undermines patriarchal conventions by means of gaining power and subjectivity (151).

According to Carol Clover, in the mid-1970s women became more prominent in the horror genre, not only in the role of victims, as was already the case, but also in that of murderers (1992: 16). As a result of the second wave of feminism, Clover argues, women were more likely to be portrayed in angry and violent moods (17). This could be interpreted as a backlash against women's rights, but, for Clover, such attention also implies the achievement of a more prominent place in popular culture (17). The female monsters Clover refers to usually vindicate their own suffering, becoming a complex amalgam of both positions: victim and avenger (17). Even if they defeat horrific forces, as does the protagonist of *Carrie* (dir. Brian de Palma, 1976) when facing her abusive classmates, a female monster cannot completely become a heroine because of her "demonic excesses" (4). She must be punished, although, Clover argues, she does achieve some sympathy and identification due to her new position as subject of the gaze (184).

For Clover, the archetypal female monster is embodied in the figure of the rape-avenger. This character appears as the protagonist of the rape-revenge narrative structure, which usually depicts the transformation of a normal and defenceless woman into a ruthless murderer (95). Such depictions include *Act of Vengeance* (dir. Bob Kelljan, 1974), *I Spit on Your Grave* (dir. Meir Zarchi, 1978) and *Ms. 45* (dir. Abel Ferrara, 1981), but

also more contemporary films like *Bad Reputation* (dir. Jim Hemphill, 2007), *Teeth* (dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2009), *American Mary* (dir. Jen Soska and Sylvia Soska, 2011) and *Promising Young Woman* (dir. Emerald Fennell, 2020).

As Casey Kelly argues, the more contemporary instances of rape revenge subvert patriarchal stereotypes (88). According to Rikke Schubart, in these movies, rape brings about the female protagonist's realisation that sexuality is a battle for power and that she must bewilder the enemy in order to win (96). Femininity is a façade for the rape-avenger, and she uses it in order to attract men towards her ultimate weapon: her body (97). In that manner, men, who were in a powerful position at the beginning, become the victims of a monstrous femininity that inverts gender relations (86).

However, within the ideology of these movies, the victim is transformed into a fierce torturer, as violent and evil as her perpetrators: a monster (123). In relation to the ideological remit of these narratives, Clover notes that most of them are created and watched by men who are likely to attribute male features to female characters (1992: 151). This results in ambiguity: while the rape-avengers' strength and hunger for power is enhanced, this does not diminish their sexualisation as fetishized objects of the gaze.

This ambivalence is also characteristic of another kind of female monster: the monstrous teenage girl. According to Katherine Farrimond, the portrayal of dangerous teenage girls oscillates between attraction and repulsion, since they are depicted as desirable objects and, at the same time, blamed for that very objectification (99-100). These representations became especially popular in the cinematic context of the 1990s and 2000s, as a result of the increasing visibility of female adolescence, as attested in the Riot Grrrl Movement and Girl Power discourse (96). In this milieu, consumerism and sexual desirability were depicted as the keys to female empowerment from a post-feminist stance (Genz 10).

Nonetheless, for Karen Renner, horror films about monstrous teenage girls represented the process of sexual maturation as painful and dangerous (34). Films like *Heathers* (dir. Michael Lehmann, 1988) and *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming, 1996) portray the murderous

nature of high school cliques, while others like *The Crush* (dir. Alan Shapiro, 1993) or *Devil in the Flesh* (dir. Steve Cohen, 1998) portray teenagers as evil seducers. Some films revolve around the changing female body, as is the case of *Ginger Snaps* (dir. John Fawcett, 2000), which connects menstruation and lycanthropy, or *Teeth*, which uses the motif of the *Vagina Dentata* as a main narrative premise. As happens in *Teeth*, sometimes the high school girl is a victim of her circumstances, and in others, she is simply a sadistic murderer, as in *The Loved Ones* (dir. Sean Byrne, 2009).

What all these representations have in common is the depiction of a group of young women painfully growing up in a society extremely concerned with regulating their bodies and their sexual activity (Farrimond 129). According to Timothy Shary, teenage anxieties such as not belonging, bodily changes, sexual maturation and uncertainty about adulthood are usually the central theme in teen horror movies (138). For Mary Celeste Kearney, given that adolescence is the period in which patriarchal pressures start constraining the female body, the figure of the fearful and violent female teenager accordingly becomes prominent in contemporary horror (99).

Additionally, there is a revisionist tendency in 1990s and 2000s teen horror cinema, as evinced in movies like *Scream* (dir. Wes Craven, 1996), *Scary Movie* (dir. Keenen Ivory Wayans, 2000), *Teeth*, and *Cabin in the Woods* (dir. Drew Goddard, 2011). These movies self-consciously play with horror genre conventions, showing them to be artificial constructions and subscribing to them solely in an ironical manner.

Casey Kelly argues that through camp, films are able to expose and subvert traditionally patriarchal cinematic constructions (88). She defines camp as “a playful, hyperbolic, and parodic style that deliberately draws attention to the constructedness of a text” (88). For her, camp horror’s artificial aesthetics inherently position a film as a transgressive critique of patriarchal horror conventions (88). However, as this essay will argue, self-aware horror movies are also ideologically ambiguous, since through irony, they repeat and participate in horror conventions while at the same time moving away from them and depicting them as artificial constructions.

### 3. *Jennifer's Body*

#### 3.1. A Woman's Sacrifice

According to Nicholas Schreck, in the 1980s and 1990s, popular visions of Satan shifted from a creature offering god-like knowledge to the elites to the last recourse for those who had failed to succeed in society, especially “heavy metal musicians” (217). In its general ironic tone, *Jennifer's Body* seems to align with this latter premise and features an all-male indie band, desperate to achieve fame, signing a pact with the devil. However, the ritual backfires (whether because the “virgin” they chose is not a real virgin, or the guidelines they found online turn out to be dubious) and Jennifer does not die, but becomes a monster instead.

Adopting camp aesthetics and an ironic, often humorous, tone, the satanic ritual that transforms Jennifer into a monster self-consciously relies on narrative and stylistic motifs from occultist films and rape-revenge movies. As in the cases of previous films parodying horror genre conventions, such as the *Scream* saga (Rowe Karlyn 104), *Jennifer's Body* uses parody and self-consciousness to lay bare the gender dynamics that horror films have traditionally taken for granted. Accordingly, as will be shown in the analysis of the sacrificial scene, the film uses horror genre conventions but, at the same time, creates an ironic distance that highlights the point of view of the female victim and the lack of importance that female suffering has for the male perpetrators in this tradition.

Within the film's structure, the sacrificial scene is not placed in its chronological order. We see Jennifer murdering her male classmates before an explanation for her behaviour is provided. Moreover, the satanic rite is not shown directly, but through Jennifer's subsequent narration of the episode to her friend Needy. Thus, the events are presented through flashbacks mediated by the demonized Jennifer, who recounts the events in an ironic manner. A close-up of Jennifer telling her story dissolves into a shot of the van in which the indie band abducted her. Jennifer describes the kidnappers as “agents of Satan with really awesome haircuts” (01:01:52), underscoring her (and the film's) ironic tone in the portrayal of her “murderers.”



Jennifer's ironic narration matches the band members' indifference towards her suffering in the sacrifice scene, which is filled with references to contemporary music. When band member Dirk (Juan Riedinger) is hesitant about sacrificing Jennifer, the lead singer Nikolai (Adam Brody) asks him, "Do you want to be rich and awesome like that guy in Maroon 5?" (01:03:58), a reference to a popular band from the era which instantly persuades Dirk.

Such a self-conscious reference not only connects the movie with its contemporary teen target audience—in a way that is supposed to elicit spectators' laughter—but, at the same time, it also links in a frivolous way female suffering to male success. Likewise, when Nikolai later shows his friend the knife with which he is going to murder Jennifer, Dirk tells him, "Dude, that's a hot murder weapon" (01:05:40) Nikolai's reply, "It's a bowie knife" (01:05:52), elicits his friend's admiration: "Bowie? Nice" (01:05:53). Even if the term "bowie knife" has nothing to do with the actual singer David Bowie, Dirk's reply is further evidence of the male characters' indifference towards Jennifer's suffering.

This indifference is confirmed by the editing pattern used to convey the conversation. Medium close-ups of Nikolai and Dirk together are interrupted by medium close-ups of Jennifer. The two male characters do not even look at her, confirming that a woman's life is no obstacle for their dream. This humorous and hyperbolic tone, in line with Casey Kelly's definition of camp, interrogates the perpetrator's claim on the female body in horror cinema tradition.

The contrast between the band members' attitude and Jennifer's becomes even more obvious at the end of the sacrifice scene. The band sings 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. Nikolai recites the lyrics, "Jenny, you're the girl for me. You don't know me but you make me so happy" (01:06:04), while a close-up of Jennifer shows her bewildered expression. The whole group subsequently starts singing "Jenny, I got your number, I got to make you mine" (01:06:17), while Nikolai uses the bowie knife as a microphone. As before, the cheerful tone of the music and the absurdity of the situation are supposed to serve as comic elements in the scene. And, once again, there is a link between female suffering and male

indifference. For the band, the situation is a game or a joke, and could even be defined as a bonding experience.

Nevertheless, the violence of Nikolai's stabbing and Jennifer's suffering is depicted in slow motion, highlighting the brutality of the moment in spite of the singing, which is overlaid with Jennifer's screams. Moreover, the lyrics about a man who idealises an unknown woman and wants to possess her mirror the attitude of the members of the band who use the body of Jennifer for their own means and, ultimately, a music scene in which women are treated as objects of the male gaze and constantly exploited for the production of male art.

According to Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, *Jennifer's Body* uses camp aesthetics in order to create a carnivalesque mood that exposes the complex relationship between gender and genre (80). That is, it exposes gender roles within the horror genre by drawing attention to the artificiality and constructed nature not only of horror tropes, but of gender itself (81). Thus, by portraying violence against women in an ironic and intertextual way, *Jennifer's Body* is self-aware regarding not only the conventions of the horror genre, but also the conventions associated with gender roles in a patriarchal structure.

The members of the band see Jennifer solely as an object. Nikolai tells her at the beginning of the scene that she does not need to talk if she does not want to and, when he finally asks her what her name is, this is only because the ritual requires it. He does not think of Jennifer as a person, but as a body. This positions *Jennifer's Body* in a long tradition of films in which men use women's bodies for their own ascendancy, such as *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1968), in which Rosemary's husband sells her body to the devil in exchange for fame, and *Satan's Cheerleaders* (dir. Greydon Clark, 1977), in which a janitor kidnaps a group of cheerleaders to sacrifice them in a satanic ritual. At the same time, *Jennifer's Body* also resonates with rape-revenge narratives. The film shows five men abducting a girl, as happens in rape-revenge films such as *I Spit on Your Grave*, in which murdering/raping a woman also becomes a source of male bonding.

Coincidentally, the name of *I Spit on Your Grave's* protagonist is also Jennifer. Both films likewise share the use of point of view shots from the victim's perspective. Jennifer is not sexually assaulted in *Jennifer's*

*Body*, but the use of reaction shots of Nikolai above her as he thrusts his knife inside her body while she suffers below him can be read not only as a murder but a metaphorical rape, after which she transmutes into both a monster and a female avenger, in keeping with rape-revenge narrative conventions. However, as will be argued below, Jennifer's monstrosity is not simply a consequence of a ritual that goes wrong: she is already a monster—of a different kind— even before the band abducts her.

### 3.2. "She is Actually Evil, Not High School Evil": Neoliberal Monstrous Femininity

According to Stéphanie Genz, from the 1990s onwards, "performative" femininity has been reclaimed as an aspect of women's empowerment (10). Movements such as Girl Power or "Girlie" feminism associate women's liberation with heterosexuality, fashion and freedom as consumers (83). Individualism supplants collective action, and the right to acquire goods related to femininity and sexuality replaces all radical opposition to neoliberalism (85). As an individualistic, consumeristic, sexually interpellated young woman, Jennifer is also a monster. However, as this section will argue, she becomes a monster not simply because of the ritual gone wrong, but also as a result of the pressures of patriarchy on teenage women to be thin, good-looking and sexually desirable. As Paszkiewicz argues, Jennifer's monstrosity is the result of an over-sexualized liberal femininity that can be read as a caricature of postfeminist obsessions with sexuality and consumerism (88).

Jennifer's fixation with sexuality is evident well before her transformation into an actual monster in the development of the story. According to Renner, the "normal" teenage Jennifer treats men as objects of consumption as much as she does when transformed into a demon (44). Before the satanic ritual takes place, Jennifer wonders if Ahmet (Aman Johal), the exchange student, is circumcised: "I always wanted to try a sea cucumber" (00:10:47), she claims. On two occasions, first as a normal girl, and then as a monster, she refers to boys she finds attractive as "salty."

Once she has been turned into a monster, she obtains nourishment from boys, which makes her "really pretty and glowy" (00:01:15) in Needy's words. In one scene, Jennifer declares to Needy that she

has not fed for a long time. "[M]y skin is breaking out, and my hair is dull and lifeless, it's like I'm one of the normal girls" (00:44:16). As Martin Fradley explains, Jennifer murders boys to preserve her attractive appearance rather than for revenge, following individualistic, postfeminist cues (2013: 214). Again, Jennifer is a victim of male violence, but she does not take revenge on those who abused her, choosing to victimise her innocent classmates instead. Jennifer selects male bodies for consumption as if they were beauty products in a neoliberal quest for the perfect appearance. In this way, *Jennifer's Body* revises the trope of the female avenger, maintaining its wiles of seduction and tenacious individualism, but changing its agenda, now reoriented towards a postfeminist consumerist context.

In line with the female avenger tradition, Jennifer's main weapon is her sexuality. As Genz explains, women's sexual freedom in a patriarchal system is always subject to ambiguity. Even when women take up an active role in sexual matters, the possibility of objectification is always at hand (31).

While Jennifer's predatory attitude towards boys can be interpreted as that of an assertive and independent woman, she is nonetheless always the object of the gaze that provides visual pleasure to male spectators, as in the scene in which she is seen walking along the high school corridors in slow motion after having attacked one of her classmates. She is dressed in bright colours in opposition to the dark shadows around her, and she is placed in the centre of the frame, suggesting that she is the centre of attention and the object of the gaze.

We later see Jennifer swimming naked in the lake. She is again portrayed in slow motion, which highlights her position as the object of the gaze. However, Jennifer is both an active agent *and* the object of that gaze, a combination that distinguishes her from the female condition described by Laura Mulvey in her article "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" (1975). According to Paszkiewicz, *Jennifer's Body* is not against offering visual pleasure to spectators, but exaggerates this in order to expose its artifice (82). *Jennifer's Body* accordingly replicates the way the female body has usually been portrayed in cinema in order to lay bare the patriarchal mechanisms that cinema has traditionally relied on. Notwithstanding, at the same time as it exposes, lays bare and even criticizes these mechanisms through parody and exaggeration, the

film becomes yet another instance of the objectification of women in contemporary cinema.

*Jennifer's Body* not only draws attention to the objectification of female characters in cinema, but also to the construction of the figure of the dangerous woman in both horror and teen movies. Regarding the latter, Christina Lee analyses what she calls the figure of the “bitch,” who performs excessive femininity, not by transgressing social rules, but by using the system to her advantage (94). Like Lee’s “bitch,” Jennifer needs to be the centre of male attention both before and after the ritual, underscoring what Paszkiewicz sees as an intertextual relation between Jennifer and the character of Regina George in *Mean Girls* (dir. Mark Waters, 2003), since both use their femininity for individualistic motives (86).

This image of the ‘Mean Girl’ is hybridized in *Jennifer's Body* with other types of female monstrosity such as the succubus, the possessed female body of *The Exorcist*, the lesbian vampire, and the *vagina dentata* Paszkiewicz decries in the visuals of Jennifer’s mouth (78). Jennifer’s monstrosity can also be analysed according to Kristeva’s theory of the abject: after the sacrificial scene, she goes to Needy’s house and vomits blood, her grotesque portrayal blurring the borders between the human and the non-human. She can additionally be associated with the ‘female castratrice’ figure that arouses fear and desire in male spectators (Creed 1993: 130). Thus, *Jennifer's Body* combines the neoliberal excessive femininity of high-school ‘mean girls’ with intertextual horror cinema tropes, suggesting that the former is part of her monstrosity as well.

In another scene, there is a clear reference to the construction of female monstrosity by culture and, specifically, the media, as Paszkiewicz notes (87). Needy says that the cause of Jennifer’s not feeling herself might be “PMS,” that is, Pre-Menstrual Syndrome. Jennifer responds that PMS “was invented by the boy-run media to make us seem crazy” (00:44:27). According to Paszkiewicz, here *Jennifer's Body* exposes the media’s role in spreading ideas about female monstrosity (87). When women behave in a manner that men cannot control, it is attributed to PMS, which can be interpreted as a form of female monstrosity, linked to the body, the irrational and the abject. This feminist criticism of media discourses highlights the self-conscious construction of Jennifer as a contemporary, consumerist female teenager whose monstrosity, like the femininity with which it is “essentially” associated, is also a media construct.

*Jennifer's Body* thus presents a female monster who is an incarnation of postfeminist concerns with sexuality, consumerism and individualism. The so-called girl power of the ‘Mean Girl’ is combined with intertextual conventions of female monstrosity, from the *vagina dentata* to the ‘female castratrice’. In this manner, Jennifer’s monstrosity is closely linked to her performative femininity as well as being a product of neoliberal patriarchy. As Paszkiewicz argues, Jennifer is not a marginal female character who is positioned as abject, but a hegemonic figure who uses other bodies as objects of consumption (89). Jennifer uses her sexuality as a tool for achieving her objectives, which is overstated when she literally feeds on boys in order to preserve her normative appearance. Such a depiction brings Renner to conclude that *Jennifer's Body* is not a subversive movie, since it portrays an over-sexualized girl as a monstrous threat (42).

### 3.3. Mean Monsters: Female Competition as a Source of Monstrosity

Jennifer’s friend Needy is also portrayed as monstrous. The complex and ambiguous relationship between Needy and Jennifer is a crucial component of the film’s representation of teenage monstrosity. These two characters share an ambivalent friendship, combining competition, homoeroticism and some elements of sorority. This relationship is not only a repetition and exaggeration of motifs present in previous movies, but also provides a critique of a system that encourages women to compete with each other while capitalising on female sexuality.

The film starts with a shot of a barred window in what looks like a jail or a mental institution. As the camera moves backwards, we see a woman with long blonde hair framed from the back. “Every day I get letters” (00:00:44), intones the voice-over of the character narrator. She describes herself as a violent and monstrous woman, even if the audience does not know her motives yet. After she attacks an orderly, she is put in solitary confinement. “I used to be normal. Well, as normal as any girl under the influence of teenage hormones” (00:03:01), she claims, already marking the direct relationship between female adolescence and monstrosity within the movie. In a close-up, looking directly at the camera, she recounts how she started to “feel loose around the edges” (00:03:12) after the killing started. She curls up on the floor, and then in voice-over, starts introducing the town, Devil’s Kettle, and the first of the two flashbacks that take up most of the film.

The first flashback starts with a point of view shot of a character (unseen to the audience) approaching an isolated house at night, a scene that replicates the opening of *Halloween* (dir. John Carpenter, 1978), now a staple of the “slasher” subgenre in horror cinema. The title *Jennifer’s Body* appears in “girlie pink” neon letters, radically disrupting the tradition of the slasher genre with which the film has initially associated itself. The camera moves slowly to show Jennifer, lying in bed but not paying attention to the television programme featuring a man doing exercise with the words “Butt Squeeze” on the screen. Such programming exemplifies the regulation of normative bodies by the media that saturates the lives of teenage girls like Jennifer.

The following shot shows Needy wearing a hood, eyes bloodshot, watching Jennifer through the window. Now revealed as the focalizer of the previous shot, Needy is situated in the role of the killer in a slasher film. At the end of the movie, we discover that this scene unfolds moments before Needy kills Jennifer in order to put an end to the murders, yet the spectators’ first impression is that Needy is the monster preying on Jennifer.

“Jennifer didn’t always look this rough” (00:05:25), says Needy, the character narrator. A change in the soundtrack marks the beginning of the second flashback, whose chronology is made clear by the narrator’s words: “Just two months ago, me, Jennifer and my boyfriend Chip were completely normal people” (00:05:36). We see Jennifer cheerleading while Needy looks at her from the bleachers. The physical differences between Jennifer, who is described as a “babe” by her friend, and Needy, who calls herself a “dork,” highlight the opposition between the two girls. Jennifer is portrayed moving in slow motion in the centre of the frame, standing while the other cheerleaders are kneeling beside her. While Jennifer is the centre of attention, Needy goes unnoticed as part of the audience. Paszkiewicz sees Needy’s glasses as a symbol of her intellect and her position as an observer (87). On the other hand, Jennifer’s role as a cheerleader foregrounds her body as an object of the gaze. Both Jennifer’s cheerleading uniform and Needy’s glasses follow the conventions of the teen film genre, coding the two friends as the popular pretty girl and her intellectual best friend, respectively.

A girl sitting next to Needy says to her: “You’re totally lesbi-gay” (00:06:18). Paszkiewicz notes that partly because of Megan Fox’s

statements about her bisexuality, the marketing of the movie was centred on expectations regarding her kissing scene with Amanda Seyfried (71), a kiss that is longer and more sensual than any of the kisses between Needy and Chip. A bisexual subtext can also be found near the end of the film when Jennifer says, “I go both ways” (1:30:44), before trying to attack Needy.

According to Farrimond, bisexuality is presented in many movies about dangerous women as symbolic of their ambiguity and disloyalty (136). She posits two possible explanations: such a depiction might be aimed at attracting a male gaze influenced by pornography featuring women who experiment with their sexuality while remaining heterosexual, or it might be a film’s way of indicating that these characters are dangerous for everyone, male and female (135-6).

Both notions relate to *Jennifer’s Body*. The movie was initially marketed as a sexual fantasy for young men. It was nonetheless a commercial failure at the time of its release, which could be due to the fact that the film revolves around the toxic relationship between two female characters.

Kearney’s analysis of films in which teenage girls similarly form intense but toxic bonds highlights the potential of such relationships to resort to murderous extremes when faced with any threat of separation (99). This is the case of both *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994) and *Fun* (Rafal Zielinski, 1994) in their portrayals of a homoerotic relationship between two monstrous teenage girls. Although not strictly applicable to *Jennifer’s Body*, this film certainly borrows some elements from the toxic, homoerotic and co-dependent female relationship conventions in this tradition.

Immediately after Jennifer’s cheerleading scene, the two girls talk in the high school hallways. This is the first conversation between Jennifer and Needy, and it promptly establishes the toxicity of their relationship. Jennifer decides for both of them that they are going out that night. Needy has already made plans with her boyfriend Chip, but she changes them in order not to disappoint her friend.

Whenever Needy does not comply with Jennifer’s demands, Jennifer cries, “Boo, cross out Needy” (00:06:56), an intertextual reference to the popular quote “Boo, you whore” (00:53:41), originating with



Regina George in *Mean Girls*, who uses such words, like Jennifer, to manipulate her friends. For Alison Winch, *Mean Girls* is the film that best exemplifies the hostility commonly occurring in groups of women, in which cruelty and social belonging go hand in hand (9). *Jennifer's Body* consequently repeats and amplifies some of the elements of female envy present in *Mean Girls*, this time exposing them not only as socially harmful, but monstrous as well.

Another indicator of the toxicity of Needy and Jennifer's friendship is revealed when Needy, as narrator, explains to spectators what it means to "wear something cute" in Jennifer's language: "It meant I could not look like a total zero, but I couldn't upstage her either" (00:07:20). Jennifer thus establishes control over Needy's body so her friend fits normative parameters while she herself remains the centre of attention.

Winch uses Foucault's idea of the panopticon to explain how girlfriends regulate each other's normative feminine and sexual conduct through what she calls the "gynaeopticon" (10). Albeit to a lesser extent than the characters in *Mean Girls*, Jennifer and Needy also compete for the attention of boys. Jennifer not only manages to seduce Needy's boyfriend, but kills him, her only motive being her jealousy towards Needy. In *Jennifer's Body*, as in *Mean Girls* and other teen films about girls, women sabotage each other because of the insecurity derived from pressures to fit into canonical standards. Jennifer and Needy's relationship is based on this ambivalent mixture of regulation and sabotage, since, as Winch argues, in neoliberalism, femininity is presented as a competition with a winner and losers (157).

Despite its evident toxicity, their relationship also has an element of sorority. At the end of the movie, after Jennifer bites Needy and thereby infects her with demonic powers, the latter escapes from prison with the sole purpose of avenging her friend. Needy can thus be interpreted as Clover's final girl of the "slasher," who is significantly different from the other girls because of her smart vigilantism, masculine appearance and sexual restraint (39). The sexually inexperienced Needy, while lacking in "feminine" wiles, is nonetheless suspicious of Jennifer's crimes before anyone else. However, the fact that both girls are monstrous by the end of the movie is paradoxical. The dichotomy between these two female characters dissolves by the end of the film. As Paszkiewicz argues, Needy embodies a less sexualized and less feminine version of monstrosity than

Jennifer, using her power for revenge on the actual male perpetrators (in opposition to her friend who attacks innocent classmates). Hence, as Paszkiewicz claims, Needy's transcendence of gender barriers is more compelling (93).

The relationship between Jennifer and Needy is so ambiguous and toxic that it highlights the monstrosity of both teenagers. This relationship is another instance of the movie's intertextuality, evoking female rivalry, homoeroticism and co-dependency, all of which are ubiquitous in cinematic portrayals of relationships between teenage girls. *Jennifer's Body* repeats and exaggerates such conventions in its depiction of the highly competitive, individualistic and homoerotic friendship between Jennifer and Needy. It can be read not as mere imitation, but rather a self-conscious discourse on how these conventions transform teenage girls into female monsters. Both of the film's protagonists are monstrous in different ways. Jennifer's neoliberal and hypersexual femininity makes her monstrous, but Needy, who is supposedly more innocent and less sexualised, also becomes demonic. Thus, *Jennifer's Body* ultimately highlights that the two girls are not that different after all, and there is no 'right' way to be a teenage girl in a patriarchal society that inevitably pits women against each other in competition for status.

#### 4. Conclusions

This essay has explored the ways in which *Jennifer's Body* repeats and amplifies the conventions of the horror genre regarding the monstrous feminine. As has been argued, the movie lays bare the gender ideology behind the horror tradition, as well as the workings of a patriarchal and neoliberal society that exploits the female body and puts women into competition with one another. The essay starts with a contextualization of the tradition of female monstrosity in the horror genre and the ambiguity that surrounds these figures as sources of desire and repulsion, defying norms and, at the same time, positioning female sexuality as abject. The rape avenger and the monstrous teenage girl are especially relevant for the purposes of this essay, considering Jennifer's and Needy's respective transformations into predators.

As has been argued, the satanic ritual in *Jennifer's Body* self-consciously draws on the motifs of rape-revenge narratives and previous films about sacrificed women, highlighting the links between the objectification of the female body and male ambition. Jennifer's monstrosity is a result of the harassment of her body by male perpetrators, but also of the pressures that neoliberal society places on young women.

*Jennifer's Body* re-presents both the figure of the 'Mean Girl' and different forms of female monstrosity, transforming the archetypal popular teenager into a monster driven by her postfeminist sexuality and consumerism. Needy, whose femininity does not fit into the postfeminist canon, is also constructed as a monster. The ambiguous relationship between the two, which is competitive, co-dependant and homoerotic, exposes the monstrosity of conventions present in both the horror genre and teen movies. Although representing different types of femininity, both Needy and Jennifer are monsters, which suggests that the dictates of horror conventions and the pressures of patriarchal society affect them similarly.

As noted early in the article, *Jennifer's Body* was first read as a failed attempt to attract male audiences because of its marketing emphasis on Megan Fox's star persona and the kiss scene between the protagonists. More recently, in a 'Me Too' context, critical opinion has started to see Jennifer as a feminist revenge hero: a survivor of male violence and an active female avenger. In this analysis, the limitations of both interpretations have been discussed. *Jennifer's Body* self-consciously imitates some conventions of the horror genre in order to expose the gender politics that link the horror genre and a patriarchal and neoliberal society. However, in the process, it also partakes of that very tradition, raising questions about, on the one hand, the limitations of parody, and, on the other, the apparently unescapable link between female subject positions and objectification.

### Works Cited

- Act of Vengeance*. Directed by Bob Kelljan, American International Pictures, 1974.
- American Mary*. Directed by Jen Soska and Sylvia Soska, American Mary Productions and Evolution Pictures, 2011.

- Anderson, Jeffrey M. “Jennifer’s Body (2009): Demon Deeds.” *Combustible Celluloid*, [www.combustiblecelluloid.com/2009/jennbody.shtml](http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/2009/jennbody.shtml) Accessed 7 January 2020.
- Bad Reputation*. Directed by Jim Hemphill, Maverick Platinum, 2007.
- Blichert, Frederick. “‘Jennifer’s Body’ Would Kill if It Came Out Today”. *Vice*, [www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/qv99y3/jennifers-bodywould-kill-if-it-came-out-today](http://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qv99y3/jennifers-bodywould-kill-if-it-came-out-today). Accessed 5 January 2020.
- Cabin in the Woods*. Directed by Drew Goddard, Lionsgate and Mutant Enemy, 2011.
- Carrie*. Directed by Bryan de Palma, Two Pines Entertainment, 1976.
- Clover, Carol. *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Cohen, Anne. “Jennifer’s Body & The Feminist Revenge Hero Who Came Too Early”. *Refinery 29*, [www.refinery29.com/enus/2018/08/206237/jennifers-body-review-defense-female-revenge-movie](http://www.refinery29.com/enus/2018/08/206237/jennifers-body-review-defense-female-revenge-movie) Accessed 10 January 2020.
- The Craft*. Directed by Andrew Fleming, Columbia Pictures, 1996.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, 1993.
- The Crush*. Directed by Alan Shapiro, Warner Bros, 1993.
- Devil in the Flesh*. Directed by Steve Cohen, Le Monde Entertainment, 1998.
- The Exorcist*. Directed by William Friedkin, Warner Bros Pictures and Hoya Productions, 1973.
- Farrimond, Katherine. *Beyond Backlash: The Femme Fatale in Contemporary American Cinema*, New Castle University, 2011.
- Fradley, Martin. “‘Hell is a Teenage Girl?’: Postfeminism and Contemporary Teen Horror.” *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 204-221.
- Fun*. Directed by Rafal Zielinski, Greycat Films and Neomodern Entertainment, 1994
- Genz, Stéphanie. *Postfeminities in Popular Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Ginger Snaps*. Directed by John Fawcett, Artistan Home Entertainment, 2000.
- Grant, Barry Keith. “‘When The Woman Looks’: *Haute Tension* (2003) and the Horrors of Heteronormativity.” *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, edited by

- Hillary Radner and Rebecca Stringer, Routledge, 2011, pp. 283-295.
- Halloween*. Directed by John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.
- Heathers*. Directed by Michael Lehmann, Cinemarque Entertainment, 1988.
- Heavenly Creatures*. Directed by Peter Jackson, Fontana Productions, New Zealand Film Commission, Senator Film Produktion and Wingnut Films, 1994.
- Howell, Peter. "Jennifer's Body: Not Much Life to This." *The Star*, www.thestar.com/opinion/2009/09/18/jennifers\_body\_not\_much\_life\_to\_this Accessed 15 January 2020.
- I Spit on Your Grave*. Directed by Meir Zarchi, Cine Tel Films, 1978.
- Jennifer's Body*. Directed by Karyn Kusama, Fox Atomic and Dune Entertainment, 2009. "Jennifer's Body (2009)." *IMDb*, www.imdb.com/title/tt1131734/ Accessed 12 January 2020.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Girls Just Want to Have Fun?: Female Avengers in 90s Teenpics." *Pictures of a Generation on Hold: Selected Papers*, edited by Murray Pomerance and John Dakeris. Media Studies Working Group, 1996.
- Kelly, Casey Ryan. "Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence: Subverting the Monstrous-Feminine in *Teeth* (2007)." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, pp. 86-106.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lee, Christina. *Screening Generation X: The Politics and Popular Memory of Youth in Contemporary Cinema*, Ashgate Publishing, 2010.
- The Loved Ones*. Directed by Sean Byrne, Paramount Pictures, 2009.
- Mean Girls*. Directed by Mark Waters, SNL Studios, 2003.
- Ms. 45*. Directed by Abel Ferrara, Warner Bros, 1981.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.
- Paszkievicz, Katarzyna. *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Promising Young Woman*. Directed by Emerald Fennell, Focus Features, 2020.
- Renner, Karen J. "Monstrous Schoolgirls: Casual Sex in the Twenty-First-Century Horror Film." *Red Feather Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2012, pp. 34-50.

- Rosemary's Baby*. Directed by Roman Polanski, William Castle Productions, 1968.
- Rowe Karlyn, Kathleen. *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*, University of Texas Press, 2011.
- Satan's Cheerleaders*. Directed by Greydon Clark, World Amusement Company, 1977.
- Scary Movie*. Directed by Keenen Ivory Wayans, Wayans Bros Entertainment, Gold-Miller and Brad Grey Pictures, 2000.
- Schreck, Nicholas. *The Satanic Screen: An Illustrated Guide to the Devil in Cinema*, Creation Books, 2001.
- Schubart, Rikke. 2007. *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema. 1970-2006*, McFarland & Company, 2007.
- Scream*. Directed by Wes Craven, Dimension Films and Woods Entertainment, 1996.
- Sharf, Zack. "Karyn Kusama: Watching 'Jennifer's Body' Only Get Marketed to Teen Boys Was Painful." *Indie Wire*, [www.indiewire.com/2018/12/karyn-kusama-jennifers-body-marketin-gmisogynistic-1202026860/](http://www.indiewire.com/2018/12/karyn-kusama-jennifers-body-marketin-gmisogynistic-1202026860/) Accessed 20 January 2020.
- Shary, Thimothy. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*, University of Texas Press, 2004.
- Teeth*. Directed by Mitchell Lichtenstein, Lionsgate, 2009.
- Transformers*. Directed by Michael Bay, Paramount Pictures, Dreamworks Pictures and Hasbro Inc, 2007.
- Winch, Alison. *Girlfriends, and Postfeminist Sisterhood*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.