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Rafaela Horle   March 17th, 2025

Female Rage and Autonomy in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract

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By Rafaela Horle

Historically, female rage in art has been portrayed as an ugly and depraved sentiment. The enraged woman is villainized and depicted as a surface-level antagonist. This depiction serves to delegitimize women's anger, as it threatens to expose the fragility of gender constructs and dominant power hierarchies. However, female rage can also be understood as an act of defiance, serving as a vehicle for women to exert agency and dismantle expectations of passive femininity. In this thesis, I examine how three films depict female anger and violence across different genres. In Chapter One, I analyze *Gone Girl* (2014), positioning its female protagonist, Amy Dunne, as a modern iteration of the *femme fatale* who wields narrative power to present a complex portrayal of female autonomy. Chapter Two focuses on *Jennifer's Body (*2009) arguing it re-imagines horror conventions to construct a nuanced depiction of female monstrosity while reclaiming the genre for female spectators. In Chapter Three, I explore how Ava from *Ex-Machina* (2015) presents a new form of identity and female autonomy within the Sci-Fi genre. Throughout all three chapters, I interrogate how these films complicate female agency by simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal constructs. My thesis delves into the intersection of female autonomy and rage, considering the tensions between resistance and entrapment within patriarchal systems while imagining possibilities for breaking free from it.

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Introduction

Traditionally, art has depicted female rage as an ugly, depraved sentiment, often reducing angry women to a discrediting image of them screaming—this visual shorthand strips women's anger of its legitimacy, framing it instead as hysteria or madness.[1] Caravaggio's *Medusa* exemplifies this tradition. In his rendition of one of history's most famous maligned women, Medusa is decapitated, her agape mouth frozen in a scream and brows furrowed in a horrified expression. In our cultural memory, Medusa is remembered as "a Gorgon monster, a terrifying female creature from the Greek Mythology."[2] Lest we forget, Medusa was not born a monster but transformed into one by Athena as punishment for losing her virtue at her alter. Despite being raped by Poseidon, the onus is placed on Medusa, and she is transformed into the fearsome figure we recognize today.[3] However, feminist reinterpretations of Medusa's myths depict her as a woman whose rage was silenced and whose image, in turn, has been used to silence other women.[4]

In Western society, the furious woman has been historically understood as overly emotional, irrational, unhinged, disgusting, or disturbed. She is quickly judged but never understood, and society at large never stops to ask why she is so angry. In my thesis, I seek to answer this question through the portrayal of three enraged and violent female characters in film: Amy Dunne from *Gone Girl* (2014), Jennifer Check from *Jennifer's Body* (2009), and Ava from *Ex-Machina* (2015). The common thread between these women is their embodiment of

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[1] Phillips, M. "When TV Becomes a Window into Women's Rage." The New York Times, May 22, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/22/arts/television/tv-female-rage-beef.html.

[2] "Medusa, 1597 by Caravaggio." Caravaggio. Accessed March 19, 2025. https://www.caravaggio.org/medusa.jsp.

[3] Santos, C. *Unbecoming Female Monsters : Witches, Vampires, and Virgins*. Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2016. Accessed February 25, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[4] Dexter, M. "The Ferocious and the Erotic: 'Beautiful' Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010): 25–41. https://doi.org/10.2979/fsr.2010.26.1.25.

the Medusian figure. They challenge patriarchal constructs through their defiance and resistance to comply with societal expectations of perfect femininity. In doing so, they subvert conventions from different film genres: *Gone Girl* as a neo-noir thriller, *Jennifer's Body* as a horror-comedy with inspiration from the rape-revenge subgenre, and *Ex-Machina* as a science fiction film that draws from cyberpunk tropes. My thesis examines how genre conventions shape each depiction of female rage and autonomy, while also considering how these films challenge genre expectations. Amy's rage consumes her after she witnesses her husband cheating on her with a significantly younger girl, leading her to stage her own disappearance to frame him for her murder. Jennifer's killing spree begins after she is murdered as a satanic sacrifice by an all-male band seeking fame. And lastly, as an advanced AI, Ava's violence is a means for her liberation from men who seek to control her existence. Based on these three films, I propose female rage catalyzes female autonomy. Each character attains freedom to varying degrees, ultimately offering a nuanced portrayal of female autonomy in the process.

Professor of Cultural Studies & Comparative Literature, Maggie Hennefeld, draws a parallel between Medusa and the laughing hysteric woman, invoking feminist theorist Hélène Cixous to emphasize their shared defiant nature. Quoting Cixous, she highlights how neither figure "holds still—she overflows… She has never 'held still'; explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance—she takes pleasure in being boundless, outside of self, outside of same."[5] Like the hysterical woman, Medusa transcends categorization and therefore eludes control. The label "hysteric" is assigned to women who dare to exist outside the confines of that

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[5] Hennefeld, M. *Death by Laughter: Female Hysteria and Early Cinema*. Film and Culture. New York [New York]: Columbia University Press, 2024.

which is deemed acceptable, and expected, of womanhood. Both figures challenge patriarchal ideals of femininity, becoming powerful and defiant icons.

The notion of women as hysteric is rooted in sexist ideology, with the term hysteria deriving from the Greek word *hystéra* meaning uterus. Hysteria was believed to be caused by the wandering of the womb, presumed to occur when a woman had not borne children.[6] This misguided notion reflects the dismissal of women's emotional experiences and reinforces patriarchal beliefs that position women as mothers and caretakers. While modern medicine has discredited the diagnosis of hysteria, culturally, female frustration and anger remain framed as women's failure to adhere to societal expectations of femininity and womanhood.

The three characters I examine embrace their perceived flaws, rooted in desires and actions that defy traditional expectations of femininity, as a means of asserting autonomy. Like Medusa, they refuse to be silenced, even if beaten and condemned, their determination to survive remains. Even in death, Medusa never lost her power, her gaze continuing to kill those who dared to look upon her. Amy, Jennifer, and Ava are often deemed sociopathic or hysteric, yet I argue it is precisely that attribute that allows them to exert autonomy. They are not heroes nor are their violent actions excused, and the extent of their freedom remains uncertain. Nonetheless, they offer a complex and nuanced depiction of a woman's relentless pursuit of agency. Through my thesis, I unpack how these films challenge previous filmic depictions of female autonomy, particularly when linked with female rage and violence. While expressions of

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[6] Krasny, E. "HYSTERIA ACTIVISM: Feminist Collectives for the Twenty-First Century." In *Performing Hysteria: Images and Imaginations of Hysteria*, edited by JOHANNA BRAUN, 125–46. Leuven University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv18dvt2d.10.

female anger have always been present in cinema, I examine how its portrayal changes and evolves throughout different genres, including film noir, horror, and Science Fiction.

Amy, Jennifer, and Ava's path to autonomy is inherently tied to their ability to adhere to patriarchal beauty standards as thin, white, and upper-middle-class women. The three women leverage these traits to subvert expectations of women with a privileged position. Their access to patriarchal favor allows them to weaponize their beauty and femininity in ways not available to women who do not fit these standards.

In many ways, the characters I chose fulfill the description of Agnieszka Piotrowaska's "nasty woman."[7] The "nasty woman" is not mystical, she is recognizable like all of us (at least at first). She is young, written by and for contemporary audiences, and chooses to be nasty/monstrous despite having access to patriarchal favor by being amiable. The "nasty woman" is not perfect, she suffers and inflicts pain yet she also "represent(s) a step forward towards imagining a world in which women take power without having to 'lean in.'"[8] Here, Piotrowska references Sheryl Sandberg, a prominent corporate figure who introduced the concept of "lean in," advocating for young women to work within patriarchal structures for personal gain rather than attempting to fight against them.[9] "Nasty women" take an opposite approach, challenging patriarchal standards by pretending to be a post-feminist success story.[10] They do so by embodying conventionally attractive, successful, and self-sufficient, aligning with post-feminism's emphasis on individual achievement.

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[7]Piotrowska, Agnieszka. *The Nasty Woman and the Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.
[8] Piotrowska 12
[9] Piotrowska 12
[10]Piotrowska 5

Post-feminism emerged in the cultural media landscape in the 1980s and 1990s.[11] It is based on the premise that feminism no longer exists because women have achieved full equality and independence.[12] Post-feminist rhetoric incorporates language from feminist movements, such as "empowerment" and "choice," to inspire consumerism. As psychology professor Kristin J. Anderson writes, "

Whereas feminism used to focus on women wanting to have control over their bodies, for instance in the area of reproductive choice, post-feminism utilizes "choice" to pick products for purchase. Whereas feminism used to focus on pay equality and discrimination in the workplace, post-feminism encourages women to focus on their private lives and consumer capacities as a means of self-expression and agency".[13]

Thus, women bear the responsibility for their success and the burden of blame for their failure. Although the films I analyze were made decades after the emergence of post-feminism, the movement shaped the cultural context in which they were created and set. Postfeminism's influence is especially prominent given that all three films center on white female protagonists, and white women have historically been at the forefront of the post-feminist movement. As such, the movement marginalizes racialized female bodies, the consequences of which I will explore in Chapter Three," *Ex-Machina*: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in the Digital Age".

Post-feminism focus on empowerment serves to mask its marginalization of women who do not adhere to hegemonic femininity.[14] In discussing hegemonic femininity, Professor of

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[11]Lindop, S. "Femmes, Filles, and Hommes: Postfeminism and the Fatal(e) Figure in Contemporary American Film Noir." PhD Thesis, The University of Queensland, 2014. https://doi.org/10.14264/uql.2019.957.

[12] Anderson, Kristin J. *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era*. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015.

[13] Anderson, K. *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era*. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015.

[14] Young, E. "Femininity." In *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories*, 22–45. Edinburgh University Press, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1tqx9k9.5.

Sociology and Gender and Sexuality Studies, Mimi Schippers, references emphasized femininity,

drawing on Connell's definition of it as a form of femininity that complies with subordination

and aligns with men's desires.[15] Post-feminist discourse encourages women to adhere to

patriarchal norms and embrace subservience rather than dismantling the structures of

patriarchy. Based on this, I define the term perfect femininity as a model of femininity shaped

by female passivity, a consumerist focus on physical appearance, and male dependency. This

discussion is central to my thesis as I argue that as beautiful, thin, white women, Amy, Jennifer,

and Ava strategically conform to these standards to both their advantage and suffering. Their

adherence to post-feminist ideals of femininity is not authentic but a curated performance,

illustrating Butler's argument that gender itself is performative.[16] By exposing the tenuous

nature of patriarchal conceptions of femininity, the films I analyze reveal that women cannot

gain true power and autonomy by complying with gendered ideals, as they are ultimately

superficial and illusory.

Building on Freud, Julie Kristeva's theory of abjection distinguishes between maternal

authority and paternal law by associating the former with the pre-symbolic and later with the

Symbolic Order. The pre-symbolic occurs when a child is connected to their bodily self before

entering the Symbolic Order. Considered the world of law and order, the Symbolic Order is

linked to the Oedipal phase and male authority. These foundational psychoanalytic theories

serve as the basis for much of the scholarship I engage with in my thesis. Laura Mulvey's theory

of the male gaze articulated in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" shapes my discussion on

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[15] Schippers, Mimi. "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society*36, no. 1 (2007): 85–102. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4501776.
[16] Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. First issued in hardback. Routledge Classics. New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.

the visual depiction of women in film. Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, inspires my discussion of female monstrosity as a manifestation of patriarchal anxieties regarding the female body and agency. Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film,* offers insight into the positioning of women as victims within horror films. Additionally, Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" offers a framework for understanding the performative construction of femininity and gender. Finally, Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" shapes my discussion of post-human identity and how femininity is reimagined in an increasingly technologized world. Together, these texts have shaped contemporary feminist film theory and are essential to my thesis.

In the first chapter, "I've Killed For You, Who Else Can Say That? : *Gone Girl's* Amy Dunne" I argue Amy Dunne offers a modern depiction of the *femme fatale* by subverting *film noir* tropes. First, I explore the *femme fatale* through Phyllis Diecktrison in *Double Indemnity* (1944). Utilizing Mulvey's theory of the male gaze from "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", I propose the *fatale's* power is ultimately undermined by her fetishized visual depiction and narrative demystification. Next, I engage with the fatal women of erotic thrillers, using Catherine Trammel from *Basic Instinct* (1992) as a case study. Due to cultural and industry shifts, I propose the fatal woman offers a depiction of female autonomy and sexuality that is more immoral than the *femme fatale*. This, combined with the fact that she epitomizes post-feminist femininity, frames violence as an inherent aspect of women's liberation. I then proceed to discuss Amy Dunne's manipulation of female domestic vulnerability and perfect femininity to

depict herself as an ideal victim. However, Amy's autonomy is tenuous because she acquires her power by adhering to a system built off her subjectification.

Chapter two, positions *Jennifer's Body* (2009) as a feminist reinterpretation of horror films, arguing its depiction of its main characters, Jennifer and Needy, subvert expectations of female monstrosity and victimhood. I use *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* to argue that Jennifer's vicious murders challenge traditional horror film depictions of female possessions, in which they function as a metaphor for and means of controlling the female body and sexuality. Jennifer weaponizes perfect femininity to lure her male victims but, in doing so, is constrained by the patriarchal constructs she seeks to rebel against. Turning to Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, I explore how the film reframes rape-revenge narratives by presenting Jennifer's murder as a symbol for rape and her subsequent killings of men as a reversal of how women are depicted in horror films. Looking at Needy, I propose she initially aligns with what Clover terms the Final Girl, a slasher horror trope in which a female protagonist emerges as the sole survivor of the film's massacre. However, as the film progresses, Needy's positioning as the Final Girl becomes complicated as she reflects a victim-hero dynamic that mirrors Jennifer's monstrous transformation.

In the third and final chapter, I propose that, as an advanced AI model, Ava from *Ex-Machina* (2015) imagines an entirely new post-human form of female autonomy. Drawing parallels with *Blade Runner* (1982), I explore how early cyberpunk films interrogated the boundaries between humanity and technology through its central female character. Engaging with Freud's theory of fetishization and the uncanny, alongside Butler's concept of gender

performance, I explore how Ava reinforces and destabilizes gender constructs. Based on Donna

Haraway's idea of cyborg feminism, which rejects rigid boundaries between humans, nature,

and technology, I suggest Ava redefines humanity's meaning in the technology age. Considering

the film's other female AI, Kyoko, I reflect on how the film positions women of color as

subordinate to white femininity, complicating a reading of Ava as an autonomous being existing

outside the confines of traditional power systems.

Chapter 1: "I've Killed For You, Who Else Can Say That? : *Gone Girl's* **Amy Dunne**

Directed by David Fincher, *Gone Girl* (2014) is an adaptation of Gillian Flynn's bestselling

novel, published two years before the film's release. The psychological thriller centers on the

disappearance of Amy Dunne (Rosamund Pike) and unfolds through two timelines. In the

present, the story follows the investigation of Amy's disappearance, with her husband, Nick

(Ben Affleck), as a prime suspect. Simultaneously, flashbacks framed through Amy's past diary

entries depict their seemingly idyllic marriage as abusive and increasingly violent. The first half

of the film leads the audience to expect Nick to have murdered his wife. In a surprising twist,

Amy assumes narrative control not through her diary entries but through a brief confessional

narration that unveils her as highly intelligent and manipulative. Through her narration, Amy

reveals her Machiavellian scheme: she planned her disappearance and intends to kill herself, all

to frame Nick as punishment for his negligence and infidelity.

Until her reveal, Amy is portrayed as a sympathetic and perhaps tragic character. In

recounting her continuous devotion to an unfaithful and abusive husband, Amy comes across as

innocent and vulnerable. Her image as a beautiful, caring, and, above all, powerless woman

encourages audiences to empathize with her. Once Amy smugly reveals how she deceived the

media and police, she is depicted as a psychotic villain.

In this chapter, I present Amy as a modern iteration of the *femme fatale*. I explore the

history of the *femme fatale* and her successor, the fatal woman, to understand the cultural and

cinematic context that gave rise to a character like Amy Dunne. Amy maintains key

characteristics of both archetypes—their sex appeal, manipulative nature, and unrelenting

determination. However, she diverges from them by assuming narrative control and offering a

nuanced depiction of female autonomy that both exploits and reinforces patriarchal constructs.

I. The *Femme Fatale*

To understand Amy Dunne's emergence as a modern iteration of the *femme fatale*, I

first examine the original *femme fatale* and her foundational traits, shaped significantly by the

censorship requirements at the time. I focus on noir classic *Double Indemnity* (1944), often

considered one of the quintessential films of the genre. Its *femme fatale* character, Phyllis

Dietrickson (Barbara Stanwyck), embodies the archetype, encapsulating her seductive allure

and moral ambiguity.[17] Building on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, my analysis

examines how the *fatale's* threat is neutralized through her visual depiction, reasserting

patriarchal hierarchies. As such, I also draw from psychoanalysis to discuss the *femme fatale's*

phallic authority.

Double Indemnity follows Walter (Fred MacMurray), a life insurance salesman, who

becomes entangled in an affair with the married Phyllis and joins her in a plot to murder her

husband and claim his life insurance. The film is an adaptation of a novel by the same name,

and while it remains faithful to the source material, the ending is drastically altered.[18] In the

original version, Walter and Phyllis plan a murder-suicide in fear their crime will be discovered.

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[17] Phillips, G. *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir*. 1st ed. University Press of Kentucky, 2000. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130jd5z.
[18] Allyn, J. "Double Indemnity: A Policy That Paid Off." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1978): 116–24. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43795666.

Phyllis shoots first and escapes with her daughter to Mexico. However, believing they were spotted, Phyllis and her daughter commit joint suicide.

In the film's version, Phyllis shoots Walter in the shoulder but fails to deliver a second, deadly shot. A teary-eyed Phyllis admits to her "rottenness" and declares she never loved Walter "until a minute ago, when I couldn't fire that second shot." As they embrace, Walter shoots and kills Phyllis. Although no explicit statements outline the changes from the novel to the film, there is evidence that Joseph Breen, director of the Production Code Association, demanded alterations to the story. These changes aimed to ensure the film did not contribute to the "hardening of audiences, especially those who are young and impressionable, to the thought and fact of crime." [19]

At the time of the film's release, Hollywood productions were required to adhere to the strict guidelines of the Production Code, designed to enforce a moral framework mainly rooted in Catholic morals.[20] As such, Hollywood films reinforced patriarchal values and upheld marriage as an institution. While they could depict "impure love"—including adultery–the characters in the affair had to be punished for their "immoral" actions. Thus, I propose the changes in the narrative served to present Phyllis as a more empathetic character who is less willing to commit sinful acts and faces punishment for her choices. Throughout the film, Phyllis is positioned as the authority figure in her relationship with Walter. However, by having Walter deliver the fatal shot, the film asserts his dominance, establishing him as the power figure in their dynamic.

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[19]Wilder, B. Double Indemnity (Paramount Pictures, 1944). 1944. MS, Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968. Margaret Herrick Library. *Archives Unbound* (accessed December 28, 2024). https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/apps/doc/SC5106201080/GDSC?u=emory&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=2d768838&pg=3.

[20] Murray, T. "Censorship and Patriarchal Ideology." In *Studying Feminist Film Theory*, 45–68. Liverpool University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13842p4.5.

Ultimately, Phyllis must suffer for her transgressions to assure audiences and censors that immorality does not go unpunished.

Reflecting cultural fears, the *femme fatale* embodies the postwar unease surrounding women's sexual liberation and autonomy.[21] Her power is often seen as rooted in her sexuality, as she leverages her beauty to manipulate men into doing her bidding.[22] The *femme fatale's* deadly allure is captured through noir's chiaroscuro lighting, emphasizing her seductive charm while shrouding her in ambiguity.[23] Despite her murderous intentions, the *femme fatale* is rarely depicted as violent. In *Double Indemnity*, while Phyllis is the mastermind behind the murder, Walter is the one who commits the act. Thus, she becomes a passive spectator of her own plans. Although there are occasional instances of the *femme fatale* committing acts of violence, such portrayals were rare, as depicting women as violent was considered offensive.

It bears mentioning that the *femme fatale's* deadly sexuality is a means to an economic end. No-fault divorce, which enables a spouse to obtain a divorce without proving wrongdoing by the other party, was first introduced in 1969.[24] Before no-fault divorce, women often found themselves trapped in unhappy and sometimes abusive marriages. With husbands typically controlling household finances and the complicated process of proving "fault," many women were deterred from pursuing a divorce. The noir genre exploits the fear that unhappily married

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[21] Place, J. "Women in Film Noir" in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Kaplan, E. Ann, ed. New ed. London: BFI Pub, 1998.

[22] Phillips, G. *Some Like It Wilder: The Life and Controversial Films of Billy Wilder.* Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1400.

[23] Letort, D. "The *Femme Fatale* of the 1990s Erotic Thriller" in *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Film and Series of the Post-Feminist Era,* ed. Maury, C, and Roche, D. Library of Gender and Popular Culture. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

[24] Willingham, A. J. "What Is No-Fault Divorce, and Why Do Some Conservatives Want to Get Rid of It?" CNN, November 27, 2023. https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/27/us/no-fault-divorce-explained-history-wellness-cec/index.html.

women would resort to murder to liberate themselves from their husbands and gain economic

freedom.

The *femme fatale* does not dream of marital bliss and refuses to be confined to the

domestic sphere. By challenging patriarchal gender norms that frame women as submissive

caregivers, she disrupts the stability of male dominance and evokes the symbolic fear of

castration. The concept of castration anxiety is rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis. According to

Freud, the penis represents authority, and the male psyche interprets its absence in women as a

lack. The absence becomes a reminder of his vulnerability and the possibility of his loss of

power. To contain the *femme fatale's* authority and ease castration anxiety, noir films visually

fragment her body, transforming her into a fetishized object for the audience's consumption.[25]

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,* Laura Mulvey argues that filmic representations of

women are structured around a male gaze that neutralizes the threat of the female body. The

woman becomes a spectacle meant to be admired rather than feared. In *Double Indemnity,* a

close-up of Phyllis's ankle isolates her body, reducing her character to a collection of displayed

body parts rather than as a cohesive, autonomous individual. Her body becomes a site of

fetishistic pleasure, allowing the spectator to exert control over her image through fetishistic

scopophilia. According to Mulvey, the act of looking is an assertion of power and, at times, a

sexually satisfying act rooted in the objectification of the observed. In taking pleasure from

looking at the *femme fatale*, audiences strip her of her authority, resolving castration anxieties.

The neutralization of the *fatale's* threat is also achieved through her demystification. The

process allows the narrative to control the *fatale* by subjecting her to scrutiny and domination

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[25] Mulvey, L. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (September 1, 1975): 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

by the male protagonist, ultimately depriving her of autonomy. In *Double Indemnity,* this

dynamic is presented through Walter's narration, which frames the narrative. Therefore, Phyllis

is depicted through his perspective, reducing her from a subject to an object to be possessed

within the confines of his story. [26] Accordingly, the *fatale's* threat and temptation are obliterated

when the male protagonist punishes or saves her. In both cases, she is ultimately subject to the

male protagonist's judgment, which neutralizes her threat and reasserts male dominance.

II. The Fatal Woman

The *femme fatale* of film noir evolved into the fatal woman of the 90s, reflecting

socio-political and industrial shifts toward sexual liberation. Concentrating on Catherine

Trammel from *Basic Instinct* (1992), I propose the fatal woman offers a significantly more vicious

representation of female autonomy than the *femme fatale*. The abolition of the Production

Code allowed for the fatal woman's visual depiction to be deeply eroticized, diminishing her

power and authority. However, her financial independence positions her as both sexually and

economically dominant, subverting traditional gender roles while epitomizing a neoliberal and

post-feminist ideal of femininity rooted in consumerism.

1968 was a pivotal year in Hollywood's history, characterized by the end of the

Production Code and the adoption of the MPAA's (Motion Picture Association of America)

voluntary age-based rating system.[27] Replacing the restrictive Production Code allowed

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[26] Klevan, A. *Barbara Stanwyck*. Film Stars. London: British Film Institute, 2019.
https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=2612558&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
[27] Millikan, C. "Rate It X?: Hollywood Cinema and the End of the Production Code." In *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, edited by Eric Schaefer, 25–52. Duke University Press, 2014.
https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jj09.5.

filmmakers to explore mature and sexually explicit content. While previously Hollywood

deemed such stories too controversial or unprofitable, the industry's vulnerable economic

position led studios to reconsider their perspective. Films such as *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Bonnie*

and Clyde (1967) showed studio executives the profitability of youth audiences and

counter-culture films. These shifts resulted in Hollywood's implementation of practices

associated with exploitation films, which capitalized on provocative themes and imagery to

attract audiences.

This transformation reflected a broader cultural shift, as audiences were eager to

embrace films directly portraying and exploring sexual themes. While in 1960, half of unmarried

19-year-old women were virgins, by the 1980s, two-thirds of all women had had sex by the age

of 18.[28] This significant change reflects not only the increased availability of contraceptive

methods but also a cultural acceptance of premarital sex as the norm rather than an exception.

As a result of the popularity of exploitation films, evolving sexual discourse, and the dissolution

of the Production Code, erotic thrillers emerged in the 1970s, remaining popular until the

1990s.

The erotic thriller is frequently likened to film noir, a natural comparison given their

similarities. Film scholar Linda Williams notes both erotic thrillers and film noir are structured

around a manipulated male victim. However, she aptly observes the former leans more toward

sadism than masochism.[29] Despite its focus on the male victim, attention is on his sexual

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[28]Kohn, S. "The Sex Freak-out of the 1970s." CNN, July 21, 2015.
   https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/21/opinions/kohn-seventies-sexual-revolution/index.html.

[29]Williams, L. "Femmes Fatales, Fall-guys and Paranoid Women: Sexual and Narrative Blueprints." In *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, 97–133. Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrbqf.8.

aggressiveness rather than passivity. Thus, Williams argues erotic thrillers are more open and vulgar in portraying their sexual fantasies. The genre also draws comparisons to film noir by portraying the *femme fatale*, reimagined as the fatal woman. While th*e femme fatale* symbolizes allure and moral ambiguity, the fatal woman embraces overt violence and amorality, aligning with the heightened sexual and brutal nature of erotic thrillers.

With the abolition of the Production Code, erotic thrillers were free to portray the fatal woman's sexual boldness, often highlighted through provocative sex scenes. Nonetheless, erotic thrillers did not present sex as a form of bodily empowerment for women. Instead, they portrayed the female body as a site of entertainment and commodification, using salacious scenes to attract audiences.[30] This objectified and reductive portrayal of female sexuality aligns with the patriarchal depiction of the fatal woman's sexuality as a tool for violence. Whereas the *femme fatale's* sexuality and violence are a means to economic freedom, the fatal woman wields it for vicious purposes. This shift is illustrated through the depiction of the fatal woman as an "orgasmic *femme fatale*, who draws pleasure from the act of murderous penetration."[31] Women's sexual desires are thus equated to violence, proposing female autonomy must be contained. By blurring the boundaries between the fatal woman's violent tendencies and sexual gratification, murder is presented as a consequence of women's liberation rather than as a means to it.

In writing about the *femme fatale* of erotic thrillers, film scholar Delphine Letort references Kate Stables' identification of *Basic Instinct* as "the mother of all 90s *fatale* movies".[32]

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[30]Letort 35
[31]Letort 35
[32] Letort 36

Letort interprets this statement as suggesting the film served as the blueprint for all erotic thrillers that followed. *Basic Instinct* follows troubled police detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas), whose reputation was tarnished after killing two tourists while high on cocaine during an undercover job. Nick is assigned the brutal murder case of retired rock star Johnny Boz (Bill Cable) and becomes involved with the victim's girlfriend and prime suspect, the beautiful and mysterious Catherine Trammel (Sharon Stone). While the film never reveals the truth, the ending strongly implies that Catherine committed the crime.

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely why the film resonated with audiences and remained relevant decades after its release–even its director, Paul Verhoeven, hasn't been able to answer this question.[33] While identifying a single reason may be challenging, it is clear that a combination of factors contributed to the film's success. Michael Douglas' return to the genre after *Fatal Attraction* (1987), the scandal surrounding production (gay rights activists infamously protested while filming occurred), and screenwriter Joe Eszterhas' astounding fee had audiences talking about the film even before it was released.[34] As such, the film is the closest any erotic thriller has come to achieving blockbuster status and has left a significant cultural legacy.

The film opens with a passionate sex scene meant to enrapture viewers immediately. A blonde woman, assumed to be Catherine Trammel, is sensuously thrashing on top of a man with a primal urgency. Her face is obscured, shrouding her in mystery and reducing her to her body, echoing the visual depiction of the *femme fatale.* The critical distinction is that, in the absence

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[33]Verhoeven, P, and Williams, L. "Interview: Director Paul Verhoeven." In *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, 240–46. Edinburgh University Press, 2005. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrbqf.12.
[34]Williams, L. "Definitions and Precursors." In *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, 77–96. Edinburgh University Press, 2005. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrbqf.7.

of the Production code, the film can display her nude body as an object of visual pleasure for the audience.[35] The woman proceeds to tie the man's hands to the bed seductively, rendering him vulnerable and at her mercy.[36] As the man approaches an orgasm, she reaches for an ice pick while the film score crescendos. In the moment of climax, she repeatedly penetrates her partner with the ice pick, ruthlessly murdering him. Sexual gratification and death merge. Thus, the fatal woman's sexuality is inherently tied to her murderous desires, reinforcing patriarchal fears regarding female autonomy. To ease this anxiety, the scene objectifies the woman, diminishing her authority by offering the audience control over her body through fetishistic scopophilia. Her power is thus reduced as it is reframed through a male gaze that consumes and exploits her.

Catherine assumes phallic power later in the film by undermining male dominance. If she is indeed the murderess, her weapon of choice, an ice pick, evokes the image of a penis and symbolizes her phallic authority. Her symbolic power is reinforced when she is being interrogated for the murder of Johnny Boz. In a room dominated by men, she seizes control by lighting a cigarette—a clear phallic symbol—defying their rules and asserting her authority. Despite being the one under interrogation, Catherine assumes control of the room. She amplifies her power when she erotically crosses and uncrosses her legs, revealing her genitalia and evoking castration anxiety. The act is, therefore, both arousing and frightening for men, underscoring the film's depiction of female sexuality as dangerous.

Catherine's power is amplified by her wealth, stemming from her inheritance, acquired after the loss of her parents in a boating accident, and her success as a writer. Her status as an

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[35] Lindop 50
[36] Letort 36

independent woman is thus underpinned by her lavish lifestyle.[37] Early in the film, Nick and his

partner noticed a Picasso painting in Johnny Boz's house. A few scenes later, at Catherine's

house, they note she too has a Picasso, only as Nick acknowledges, "Hers is bigger."[38] The

seemingly offhand sexual joke hints at the film's broader exploration of Catherine's phallic

authority. Her wealth and financial independence eliminate reliance on a male breadwinner,

positioning her as sexually and economically dominant. In successfully assuming an economic

role reserved for men within the confines of patriarchal structures, Catherine differs from the

traditional *femme fatale*. Whereas the *fatale* murdered for economic freedom, Catherine, as

the potential murderess, does it purely for pleasure, offering a far more unsettling

representation of female autonomy.

Catherine's wealth, alongside her beauty, situates her within a neoliberal framework of

femininity which is rooted in consumerist practices and subjectification. Within this paradigm,

neoliberalism promotes a culture of self-scrutiny that aligns with Western society's obsession

with the physical form. Women are encouraged to partake in the consumption of expensive

grooming regimes, such as plastic surgery, waxing, and Botox, to achieve unrealistic beauty

standards.[39] Catherine's beautiful mansion, sports car, and bespoke clothing present a neoliberal

and post-feminist ideal of a woman who can "have it all." Her consumerist practices extend

beyond commodities; she is also a consumer of men, treating them as disposable objects. Thus,

despite adhering to expectations of femininity, Catherine appropriates behaviors associated

with male authority, exemplified by her detached approach to sex. In doing so, she depicts a

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[37] Letort 38

[38] Avins, M. "Feminism after the Fact." Los Angeles Times, March 26, 2006.

   https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-mar-26-ca-basic26-story.html.

[39] Lindop 72

form of female autonomy rooted in traditionally male practices. As such, she fails to provide a genuine depiction of female empowerment. Her actions, while at times liberating, are shaped by a perspective that centers on male desires and fears, making her autonomy contingent rather than self-determined.

III. Amy Dunne

Situated within the domestic noir subgenre, *Gone Girl* explores the tension between suburban life and the entrapment of women within patriarchal structures. Amy Dunne redefines the *femme fatale* by manipulating gendered expectations to become an active agent in her narrative. By weaponizing societal expectations of femininity, Amy reclaims her autonomy, exposing femininity as a performance linked to consumerism. Nonetheless, her power remains deeply entwined within the structures she seeks to rebel against and exploit.

Gone Girl follows Nick and Amy Dunne, a seemingly perfect couple whose marriage has become increasingly strained. On their fifth wedding anniversary, Amy goes missing under mysterious circumstances. As the prime suspect, Nick faces intense public and police scrutiny. As the film unfolds, it is revealed that Amy faked her disappearance and framed Nick as punishment for his infidelity and neglect.

The film opens with a shot of Nick caressing Amy's beautiful blonde hair. What is meant to be an endearing moment between a loving couple becomes unsettling through Nick's inner monologue presented through voice over: "I picture cracking her lovely skull. Unspooling her brains, trying to get an answer. The primal questions of any marriage: what are you thinking, how are you feeling, what have we done to each other?" Nick's inner monologue and Amy's

visual depiction - her Hitchcockian blonde hair and low-key lighting - act as a metonymy for the film noir genre.

In noir, the narrative is a tool to exert control over the *fatale* by placing her under the male protagonist's inspection. *Gone Girl* subverts this noir convention by affording narrative power to Amy, the *femme fatale* figure. In the film's first half, all information about Nick and Amy's relationship before her disappearance is filtered through her diary entries. In her Valentine's Day entry, Amy writes about purchasing a gun to feel safer, expressing her growing fear of Nick. The image track accompanying Amy's narration shows her writing in her diary with a fluffy pink pen while wearing a baby pink shirt. Amy constructs an image of herself as sweet and innocent, while depicting Nick as an emotionally abusive husband. As such, Amy has complete control over her and Nick's image, allowing her to manipulate the audience in her favor.

Halfway through the film, once Amy's plan is revealed, it is done so through her narration. This approach challenges noir traditions that position the male protagonist as the main narrator. Thus, unlike film noir, Amy is not subjected to the scrutiny of the male protagonist and retains her autonomy. Interestingly, Amy reframes gender norms by casting Nick as the figure under investigation. By framing Nick for her murder, Amy subjects him to public, media, and police scrutiny. He is under constant police surveillance, his belongings are thoroughly searched, and his house is cordoned off as a potential crime scene. Ultimately, Nick is the one who loses his autonomy, stripped of his freedom to freely conduct his daily activities or live in his own house. Thus, in offering a rationale for her conduct and shifting narrative

surveillance onto Nick, Amy becomes an active agent in her story and successfully challenges

noir conventions.

Gone Girl situates its narrative in the domestic noir sub-genre by exploring the tensions

of suburban life, distinguishing itself from noir's urban and male-focused narratives. According

to crime fiction professor Fiona Peters,

"Domestic noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself with

largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes

as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes

dangerous prospect for its inhabitant."[40]

The emphasis on lived female experiences align with the subgenre's evolution through

its inclusion of female protagonists who strive for narrative control. These protagonists refuse to

embody a "passive, eroticized corpse" central to earlier iterations of domestic noir.[41]

In the film, domestic noir themes are illustrated through Nick and Amy's move from New

York to the suburbs of Missouri. The move occurs due to the loss of their jobs during the

recession and Nick's father's declining health. They use the remainder of Amy's trust fund to

buy a house in the suburbs and open The Bar, a bar co-owned by Nick and his sister Margot

(Carrie Coon). The move to Missouri, meant as a last ditch to save Nick and Amy's crumbling

marriage, instead results in the collapse of Amy's identity as she becomes constrained by

expectations of white, middle-class domesticity. A born and raised New Yorker, the monotonous

landscape of the suburban Midwest is incredibly suffocating for Amy, who found fulfillment in

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[40]Peters, F. "The Literary Antecedents of Domestic Noir" in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Ellen, J and Sutton, H. Crime Files. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
[41]Miller 103

living in a cosmopolitan center. While suburbia projects an idealized image of stability and unity,

for women, it embodies a space of entrapment within roles prescribed by patriarchal society.[42]

Film scholar Kendra Marston notes that in planning her diabolical scheme around her wedding

anniversary with Nick, her previous anniversary games for him, which were carefully

orchestrated scavenger hunts, foreshadow the role of Amy's creativity and intelligence in her

plan.[43] In this context, Amy's revenge scheme can be understood as a reclamation of her power

and a rare outlet for exercising her intellect in an environment that stifles her ambitious and

independent nature.

Part of Amy's scheme involves fabricated diary entries recounting Nick's mental and

physical abuse. The credibility of Amy's diary, in part, relies on its reader's familiarity with

"female domestic vulnerability."[44] While I will elaborate on Amy's manipulation of her public

persona, it is important to note that this dynamic could only unfold in a suburban setting,

emblematic of the public and private persona tensions. According to film scholar Agnieszka

Piotrowska, suburbia serves as a metaphor for the lie of suburban life that presents itself as a

tedious safe haven but hides dark secrets, frustrations, and desires.[45] While Nick and Amy were

a happy couple in New York, their move to the suburbs sealed the fate of their marriage.

Despite Amy sacrificing her home and the remainder of her trust fund to support Nick, he still

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[42]Harvey, S. "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir" in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Kaplan, E. Ann, ed. New ed. London: BFI Pub, 1998.

[43]Marston, K. "Paranoid Attachments to Suburban Dreams: Reading Pathological Femininity in Gone Girl and The Girl on the Train." In *Postfeminist Whiteness: Problematising Melancholic Burden in Contemporary Hollywood*, 111–32. Edinburgh University Press, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1pwt3hk.9.

[44]Marston 121

[45] Piotrowska, A. *The Nasty Woman and the Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.

cheated on and neglected her. Confined to expectations of female domesticity, Amy decided to

regain control of her life by leveraging gendered expectations of suburban life.

Amy's diary entries also expand on her character's interiority, revealing her relentless

need for control and perfection. As a child, Amy's parents monetized on her perceived superior

intelligence and attractiveness through "Amazing Amy," a children's book series about the

adventures of a beautiful blonde child who naturally excels at everything.[46] Unfortunately,

"Amazing Amy" was not a replica of the real Amy Dunne but an improved version of her. The

comparison between Amy's real, flawed self and fictionalized improved persona resulted in her

refusal to accept anything other than external perfection.[47]

Amy's desire to embody societal expectations of perfect femininity results in a clear

distinction between her public and private persona. While the *fatale* and fatal women position

themselves as authoritative through their overt confidence and sexualization, Amy hides behind

a carefully constructed mask of conventional femininity. However, like the *fatale* and fatal

woman, Amy's power is rooted in her ability to deceive, exemplified through the successful

execution of her plan to frame Nick. Her plot hinges on the public and police perceiving her as a

docile and, therefore, harmless wife. In public, Amy presents herself as a loving, witty, and

easygoing daughter and partner, but in reality, she is highly calculative and manipulative. Thus,

her pursuit of perfection is not just a result of her insecurities, but a strategy to exert power.

Amy's ability to construct an idealized image of herself presents a form of female agency that

weaponizes societal expectations of women to assert control.

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[46]Marston 111
[47]Marston 114

Because of the success of Amazing Amy, Amy grows up financially privileged, much like

Catherine Trammel. While Catherine's wealth is an emblem of post-feminist consumerism, Amy

revolts against this construct. When Amy reveals her scheme to frame Nick, she is depicted

driving through the highway in glasses, frizzy hair, and baggy clothing. This is a drastic change

from her earlier visual portrayal, in which she is shown in well-tailored clothing, flawless

makeup, and impeccably styled hair. No longer tied to her role as a perfect wife, Amy can finally

relinquish the pressure to maintain external appearances and the consumerist practices

required to sustain them. Amy proceeds to embark on a feminist monologue of sorts,

identifying the often contradictory expectations placed on women to be considered desirable.

They must be thin but cannot care about their weight. They have to be willing and excited

sexual partners but can't be promiscuous. Women must present themselves through

emphasized femininity tied to consumerism to perform this role.[48] Their identity is, therefore,

constructed to render them pleasing to men. Amy admits to adhering to this patriarchal

framework by pretending to be the cool girl–playing video games, drinking cheap beer, and

remaining sexually available and conventionally attractive. She acknowledges her performance

was a means of securing power within her marriage yet now recognizes the fragility of the

façade as Nick can replace her with a "younger, bouncier cool girl." Her repudiation of the cool

girl is therefore not a disavowal of performance itself, but of subordination.[49] Amy abandons the

cool girl mask because it no longer affords her power and control in her marriage. Nonetheless,

her monologue directly relates her character struggles to the collective experience of all women

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[48]Schippers, M. "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society*36, no. 1 (2007): 85–102. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4501776.
[49]Marston 121

in a post-feminist context. In this regard, Amy vastly differs from the *fatale* and fatal woman. While both archetypes reflect cultural shifts and norms, they do so passively, remaining confined to individualistic narratives that neither directly engage nor critique broader social constructs.

Amy further distinguishes herself from the fatal woman and *fatale* by assuming the role of observer and subverting the male gaze. Unlike her predecessors, who are portrayed as objects of desire subjected to the scrutiny of the male gaze, Amy reclaims the act of looking. Amy initiates her revenge scheme after witnessing Nick cheating on her and decides to return to him after watching him profess his love for her on national television.[50] These decisive moments, in which Amy assumes the gaze, drive her narrative. Amy, therefore, differs from the *femme fatale*, whose narrative is driven by the male protagonist.

Amy's return to Nick is made possible through her calculated decision to frame Desi, a wealthy ex-boyfriend deeply in love with her. While pretending to be missing, Amy is robbed and decides to seek help from Desi. However, Desi's controlling nature quickly becomes apparent as he attempts to mold Amy into his ideal woman. Feeling trapped by Desi and determined to return to Nick, Amy decides to frame Desi for her kidnapping by murdering him.

The scene in which Amy murders Desi is lit seductively, lulling audiences into a false sense of security. Nonetheless, Amy does not become eroticized as she assumes an aggressive demeanor during intercourse to fabricate her rape. As Desi climaxes, Amy slits his throat with a box cutter, echoing Catherine Trammel by weaponizing female sexuality. The camera angle,

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[50]Piotrowska 13

positioned to look up at Desi, assumes Amy's point of view.[51] Blood gushes everywhere as the

screen shifts repeatedly from black to white, accompanied by a piercing and unsettling score.

The scene is entirely devoid of eroticism and is a pivotal moment in the film, exposing Amy's

psychotic nature to audiences. Amy evades scrutiny by assuming control of the gaze, thereby

offering a modern iteration of the *femme fatale* that asserts her autonomy through narrative

control and command over her visual depiction.

After murdering Desi, Amy returns to Nick still wearing her blood-soaked dress, claiming

Desi kidnapped her. Amy plays into her public image as a brave survivor of rape, gaining favor

with the media. Thus, Amy once again leverages societal perceptions of women as harmless

victims. Amy achieves this by acknowledging the public condones female violence when done in

extreme cases of self-defense and using it in her and Nick's favor.[52]

Appalled by her actions, Nick tells Amy he is leaving her. In response, Amy calmly admits

to using a sample of his sperm from the fertility clinic to impregnate herself. Enraged, Nick slams

her against a wall and calls her a cunt, to which Amy responds:

" I'm not a quitter. I'm that cunt. I've killed for you; who else can say that? You think

you'd be happy with a nice Midwestern girl? No way, baby, I'm it."

Amy twists her actions into proof of her undying commitment to her marriage,

emphasizing her refusal to fail. Pregnant with Nick's child and with the public in her favor, Amy

re-gained control in her relationship with Nick. When Nick confronts Amy, stating they resent

each other and have only caused pain, Amy dismissively responds. "That's marriage." Her

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[51] EW.com. "Best of 2014: Cinematographer Talks Desi's Death Scene in 'Gone Girl.'" Accessed December 12, 2024. https://ew.com/article/2014/12/12/best-of-2014-gone-girl-desi-death/.

[52] Gwin, S. ""The More You Deny Me, The Stronger I Get": Exploring Female Rage in The Babadook, Gone Girl, and The Girl on the Train." Master's thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2017. http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgsu1510769718601419

remark underscores her focus on preserving an image of marital bliss while retaining the power to dictate her life with Nick.

It seems Amy got exactly what she always wanted. However, Amy's power is intrinsically tied to her carefully constructed public image, forcing her to lead a life of deceit. This brings forth the question of her power's authenticity and ability to maintain it. Unlike the *femme fatale*, Amy retains her autonomy and evades traditional punishment. Yet, her authority remains ambiguous as it is entwined to patriarchal constructs that she both exploits and is confined by. To retain her authority, Amy must present herself as a powerless woman who embodies societal expectations of female victimhood. This dynamic is illustrated in Nick and Amy's interview with Ellen Abbott, a journalist who covered Amy's disappearance. In the interview, Amy wears a tailored dress with a Peter Pan collar, portraying her as sweet and innocent. Nick assumes control, speaking on behalf of himself and Amy, as she looks at the camera with a vacant smile. Amy's only contribution to the interview is when she prompts Nick to reveal their pregnancy, reinforcing her image as a domesticated housewife.

Amy Dunne is neither a hero nor a villain. Instead, she emerges as a flawed character who defies one-dimensional views of femininity. Her actions challenge traditional notions of morality and power, exploring female agency within a patriarchal context. Unlike the *femme fatale*, Amy is afforded narrative agency and escapes punishment while also taking ownership of her visual depiction and refusing to become eroticized like the fatal woman. Through Amy's relentless pursuit of control, *Gone Girl* presents a female character who claims power from a system built on her subjectification. Yet, to attain power, Amy outwardly conforms to a society built on the oppression of women, prompting questions about whether true female autonomy

can ever be achieved within patriarchy. Ultimately, in a society in which the few privileged

women who succeed must adhere to limited ideals of femininity, liberation and attainment of

power as a woman become mutually exclusive.

Killer Victims: Jennifer Check and Needy Lesnick in *Jennifer's Body*

Directed by Karyn Kusama and written by Diablo Cody, *Jennifer's Body* (2009) is a dark comedy horror film that has since become a cult classic. The film's narrative is framed around Anita "Needy" Lesnick (Amanda Seyfried), who recounts the events that led to her institutionalization at a mental hospital. The story follows her and her best friend, Jennifer Check (Megan Fox), whose contrasting personalities anchor the film's exploration of the complexities of girlhood. While Jennifer is beautiful, popular, and confident, Needy is shy and reserved. Both girls' lives turn dark when they attend a concert by Low Shoulder, an indie band, and a fire occurs. Amidst the chaos, Jennifer escapes with the band members, who kill her as a virgin sacrifice to gain money and fame. However, because Jennifer is not a virgin, the sacrifice backfires, and she becomes possessed by a demonic force. Her possession transforms her into a succubus, a mystical creature that has existed for centuries across many cultures, but as scholars have noted, in every iteration is described as a beautiful woman who "threatens man's power by taking over his mind and penis."[53] Jennifer uses her sexuality to lure and kill her male classmates, devouring them to maintain her eternal youth and beauty. Horrified by Jennifer's actions, Needy confronts Jennifer, eventually killing her to stop her from murdering more innocents.

Upon its release, the film was both a commercial and critical failure, scoring 46% on Rotten Tomatoes and grossing $31.5 million worldwide against a $16 million budget.[54] Reviews panned the film, with publications such as the L.A Times stating that Kusama "manages(s) the

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[53] Ayers, M. *Masculine Shame : From Succubus to the Eternal Feminine*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. Accessed February 24, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[54] "Jennifer's Body." Rotten Tomatoes, September 18, 2009. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jennifers_body.

nifty task of giving her lead characters' one-night-only dalliance an old-fashioned

same-sexploitative zing, but she can't muster up a modicum of suspense elsewhere."[55] However,

in recent years, the film has been reevaluated and celebrated as a powerful feminist subversion

of traditional horror films.

Much of the film's initial backlash was a result of its misleading marketing campaign,

which capitalized on Fox's status as a Hollywood sex symbol. For instance, the film's poster

featured Megan Fox scantly clad in a schoolgirl outfit with her legs crossed over a desk. The

emphasis on Fox's sexuality persisted in media coverage of the film, with Entertainment

Weekly's preview beginning as follows: "MEGAN FOX LIKES IT ROUGH. Just ask Amanda

Seyfried, who spent several long days on the set of Jennifer's Body with her thighs wrapped

around the Transformers star for a fight scene."[56] The promotional material framed the film as a

sexually charged horror flick catered to the male gaze. Instead, *Jennifer's Body* offers a

subversive narrative that critiques the exploitation of women's bodies while focusing on female

agency.

In this chapter, I examine how *Jennifer's Body* draws on traditional horror film

conventions to subvert and reimagine them through a feminist lens. I first analyze the film's

depiction of abjection and monstrous-feminine, drawing on the theories of philosopher Julia

Kristeva and film theorist Barbara Creed. Through this lens, I analyze how Jennifer's

transformation reflects social anxieties regarding female sexuality and agency. Then I explore

how the film engages with rape-revenge narratives, considering how Jennifer's killings function

[55] "Reviews: 'American Casino,' 'Jennifer's Body' and More." Los Angeles Times, September 16, 2014.
https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-capsules18-2009sep18-story.html.
[56] Ward, K. 2009. "Jennifer's Body." *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 1061/1062 (August): 40–42.
https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f3h&AN=43759446&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

as both an act of vengeance and a reinforcement of patriarchal constructs. Finally, I propose

Needy offers a more autonomous and complex depiction of the Final Girl, a horror trope

conceptualized by Carol Clover. Through these discussions, this chapter highlights how *Jennifer's*

Body reclaims horror for female spectators, exposing the genre's gendered power dynamic

while exploring the complexities of female autonomy within patriarchy.

I. Monstrous Feminine in Teen Horror

In this section, I examine the theoretical frameworks of abjection and

monstrous-feminine to understand Jennifer's possession. I draw parallels between *Jennifer's*

Body and *Carrie* (1976) as both films focus on young teenage girls whose bodies become the

site for demonic invasion. Further, they illustrate how female possession narratives construct

the female body as a site of horror and disgust, particularly concerning the transition from

girlhood to womanhood. Building on this, I'll focus on *Jennifer's Body* to explore how Jennifer is

simultaneously an object of desire and a monstrous figure, exposing the tenuous nature of

neoliberal expectations of perfect femininity.

According to Creed, the possessed female subject represents a refusal to enter the

Symbolic Order and to relinquish maternal authority.[57] Within psychoanalytic theory, entry into

the Symbolic Order requires individuals to enter the Oedipal stage and accept paternal law. In

contrast, the pre-Oedipal stage is placed within maternal authority, which is defined by the

mapping and cleaning of the child's body. In attempting to return to the pre-Oedipal stage, the

possessed woman shifts its structure. Rather than being defined by the marking of the proper

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[57] Creed, B. "Woman as Possessed Monster" in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Popular Fiction Series. London ; New York: Routledge, 1993.

body, this regression manifests as a reversion to the unsocialized and unclean body.[58] As such, the possessed woman becomes an abject figure, simultaneously disgusting and alluring to audiences. Abject theory emerges from the collapse of meaning and blurring of boundaries, causing discomfort.[59] It pushes us "to the limits of what is permissible, thinkable, and then draws back."[60] The possessed woman embodies the abject through her physical transformation, defying the boundaries between self and other, life and death, pure and impure.

In horror films, demonic possessions grant women supernatural powers while stripping them of their purity, reflecting fears of the woman's body as corruptible. Simultaneously, possession films alleviate fears regarding the female body as a site of danger, as a demonic force controls the possessed body. Creed underscores how the possessed woman's body is made alien, often by emphasizing her physicality and its association with nature, to disgust viewers. She becomes a figure of extreme abjection, as "her body is transformed into a playground for bodily wastes"[61] Creed proposes there is a link between demonic invasion and sexual transgression, drawing from films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Carrie* to support her argument. In both films, the possessed female protagonists are young girls at the cusp of womanhood; in *Carrie*, the titular female protagonist gains her telekinetic powers after her first menstruation. Thus, female monstrosity is associated with sexual maturity and societal taboos around female bodily functions. Through these portrayals, possession films construct the female body as a space of horror and fascination, signifying a deeper unease with female sexuality and autonomy.

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[58] Creed 38
[59] Creed 9
[60] Creed 37
[61] Creed 40

Jennifer's Body engages with and subverts Creed's theories on horror films by centering the female horror spectator. Although Creed offers feminist readings of horror films, her work grounds its analysis on the experience of the heterosexual male horror audience.[62] As a film written and directed by women in a genre traditionally dominated by men, *Jennifer's Body* inherently challenges horror traditions, including the monstrous feminine, by creating a space for the female horror spectator.

Jennifer embodies the monstrous feminine through her association with the abject. The night of her murder and possession, Jennifer tears apart and devours an entire rotisserie chicken before throwing up black gunk, offering a grotesque depiction of female hunger. As she begins preying on male victims, her actions become more transgressive, rejecting the notion that women should suppress their appetite whether it's for food, sex, or autonomy. When she devours her victims, she transforms into a repulsive figure, her jaw unnaturally expanding to reveal sharp and jagged fangs, while her eyes darken into a soulless black void.

However, when she is not in her monstrous form, Jennifer is visually depicted as an object of the male gaze through close-ups, slow-motion cameras, and the visual fragmentation of her body.[63] Jennifer's official introduction is framed through Needy's adoring narration, recalling Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, which depicts women as symbols of desire. "There's Jennifer", Needy states as the camera tracks toward Jennifer in the center of a cheer routine, smiling and waving to her adoring fans. However, Jennifer's over-sexualized portrayal is deliberately exaggerated to satirize traditional depictions of women in horror movies. Later in

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[62]Paszkiewicz, K. "Repeat to remake: Diablo Cody and Karyn Kusama's Jennifer's Body." In *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, 60–99. Edinburgh University Press, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv7n0b3s.7.
[63] Paszkiewicz 77

the film, a slow-motion ten-second sequence of Jennifer strutting down the school hallway

further parodies traditional cinematic depictions of female desirability. This caricatured

portrayal, reveals the absurdity of how female characters in horror films have historically been

framed as passive objects for male consumption. By employing these visual tropes to an

extreme degree, *Jennifer's Body* critiques the mechanisms that objectify women in horror films,

ultimately reclaiming the genre for female spectators.

Despite her newfound powers and strength, Jennifer still defines herself by her status as

a beautiful teenage girl. Her fixation on her appearance reflects a neoliberal femininity that

emphasizes individualism, consumption, and objectification.[64] Jennifer's self-subjugation

becomes evident during prom night, a setting deeply emblematic of *Carrie.* In *Carrie*, prom

initially represents Carrie's acceptance to her community that had previously rejected her for

failing to adhere to societal expectations of femininity. However, it becomes a site of extreme

humiliation when her classmates douse her in pig's blood. This act pushes Carrie beyond the

brink, causing her to lose control of her powers and kill everyone in attendance.

Similarly, *Jennifer's Body* exposes the tenuous nature of the power afforded to women

who either embody or, like Carrie, strive to embody perfect femininity. Jennifer's lack of power

becomes evident in the film's climax. Needy, determined to protect her boyfriend Chip (Johnny

Simmons) from Jennifer, ends their relationship before prom. Unfortunately, Jennifer exploits

his vulnerable state to lure him to the school's abandoned pool. Realizing Chip is in danger,

Needy races to the scene, but arrives too late and Jennifer has already fed on him. Needy

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[64] Jolles, M. "Going Rogue: Postfeminism and the Privilege of Breaking Rules." *Feminist Formations* 24, no. 3 (2012): 43–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819650.

plunges into the murky water, and confronts Jennifer. Yet, surprisingly, the confrontation feels less like a moment of sheer horror and more like a catty fight between two teenage girls. This shift in tone further situates the film as a satirical depiction of horror film conventions. The irony is amplified by Seyfriend's casting, as having previously played one of the popular girls in *Mean Girls*, her portrayal as a dorky, "ugly" girl in *Jennifer's Body* underscores the absurdity of Hollywood beauty standards.

As the confrontation escalates, Needy accuses Jennifer of being insecure, to which Jennifer unconvincingly retorts, "How could I ever be insecure? I was the Snowflake Queen!"[65] Needy replies by noting that she won the title two years ago, revealing how Jennifer clings to external validations regarding her attractiveness and popularity. Needy continues to verbally attack Jennifer, alleging she abuses laxatives to remain thin. Needy's remark is emblematic of the patriarchal constructs the film seeks to challenge. As a naturally beautiful girl, Jennifer received validation solely for her looks, leading her to equate her worth to her appearance. Fearing the loss of the singular attribute that afforded her power and control, she resorts to extreme measures, including developing an eating disorder, to conform to society's rigid standards of beauty. Needy could have accused Jennifer of starving herself or over-exercising to maintain her physique. But, by implying she deliberately forces herself to excrete, she ties Jennifer to the abject.

Reflecting back on *Carrie*, the beginning of her ostracization at school occurs after the onset of her first period in the locker room, as her lack of knowledge about menstruation exposes her unconventional upbringing. In both films, societal expectations of women – to

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[65] Blichert, F. *Extra Salty: Jennifer's Body*. Pop Classics 11. Toronto: ECW Press, 2021.

menstruate, a signifier of their ability to bear children, and to be thin – are weaponized against

them through relational aggression and framed as repulsive. This exemplifies the paradox

women face: they are associated with the abject yet are expected to avoid displaying it, as such

actions are deemed unfeminine. Ultimately, the film critiques how in patriarchal societies

women are socially conditioned and expected to arouse pleasure, not disgust.

II. Rape-Revenge and Vigilante Feminism

Jennifer embodies multiple iterations of the monstrous feminine, beyond woman as a

possessed monster, making the film's depiction of the trope self-aware and ironic.[66] Her

duplicitous nature evokes the *vagina dentata,* reinforced by the visual motif of her monstrous,

devouring mouth. Her ability to control animals aligns her with the figure of the witch, while her

kiss with Needy evokes the trope of the lesbian vampire. However, for this section, I am

interested in exploring how her murderous rampage aligns with the concept of the *femme*

castratrice. Drawing on Gender Studies Professor Laura D'Amore's conceptualization of vigilante

feminism, I examine how the film reimagines the *femme castratrice* archetype and the

rape-revenge subgenre. At the same time, I argue the film relies on patriarchal structures to

depict Jennifer's revenge.

The *femme castratrice* refers to representations of women in media who threaten male

dominance through symbolic or literal castration.[67] Typically associated with rape-revenge

movies, the *femme castratrice* emerges as an embodiment of female self-sufficiency, seeking

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[66]Paszkiewicz 79

[67]Creed, B. "*The Femme Castratrice: I Spit on Your Grave, Sisters*" in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Popular Fiction Series. London ; New York: Routledge, 1993.

vengeance on her attackers in response to the trauma they inflicted upon her.[68] As such, she

embodies a form of vigilante feminism which is defined as: "... the performance of vigilantism

by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection, and the protection of others,

against violence–such as sexual assault, abduction, abuse, and trauma–because they have been

otherwise failed in that manner."[69] Vigilante feminism emerges as a direct response to

patriarchal violence, particularly pervasive rape culture.[70] Acts of violence, especially when the

perpetrator is male and the victim female, are about asserting power and dominance. Thus,

when victims of assault or abuse defend themselves or seek vengeance, it serves to correct

their feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability.[71]

This framework is at the core of rape-revenge films, which have been the source of

heated debates among film scholars. While some interpreted this subgenre as radically feminist,

others, such as famed film critic Robert Ebert, have condemned it as exploitative and deeply

misogynistic.[72] In her book *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern Horror Film,* Carol

Clover examines the rape-revenge subgenre through one of its most influential entries, *I Spit On*

Your Grave (1978). The film follows Jennifer Hill, a young and beautiful New Yorker who retreats

to a secluded cabin in Connecticut to work on her first novel. Her arrival attracts unwanted

attention and later harassment by a group of men, including Matthew, a young man with an

intellectual disability. One day, the group attacks and kidnaps Jennifer, planning to force

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[68]Clover, C. "Getting Even." In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film - Updated Edition*, REV-Revised., 114–65. Princeton University Press, 1992. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc7776m.8.
[69] D'Amore, L. "Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions." *Marvels & Tales* 31, no. 2 (2017): 386–405. https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.31.2.0386.
[70] D'Amore 391
[71] D'Amore 393
[72] Mee, L. "Gender and Genre in the Rape-Revenge Remake." In *Reanimated: The Contemporary American Horror Remake*, 137–60. Edinburgh University Press, 2022. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv2x1nrkh.10.

Matthew, who is still a virgin, to rape her. However, he struggles to go through with the act,

leading the other men to take turns taunting, chasing, and brutally raping Jennifer. Eventually,

Matthew succumbs to peer pressure and assaults her, but is unable to finish the act. Matthew is

then tasked with killing Jennifer, but overcome with guilt, he cannot do it and lies to his friends

instead. A traumatized Jennifer then proceeds to embark on a mission to avenge herself by

killing, and at times castrating, the men who assaulted her.

In writing about the movie, film scholar David Maguire argues it has "effectively become

ground zero for the genre, with almost every rape-revenge film since lifting its narrative

structure, motifs, tropes, and archetypal characters." [73] According to Clover, the film positions

sexual violence not as an act of individual desire but as a collective assertion of male power

carried out for each other's edification rather than personal gratification.[74] The film's portrayal

of rape as a vehicle for male bonding and avowal of authority constructs gender hierarchies

within its narrative. This depiction allows the *femme castratrice*, or victim-hero, as Clover refers

to her, to be seen as a force of retaliation and disruption of patriarchal order rather than a

psychotic murderer. However, the *femme castratrice's* revenge is limited to punishing the men

who harmed her, rather than the patriarchical structures that allow such violence to occur

without consequence.

Although Jennifer was not physically raped by the members of Low Shoulder, their use of

her as a human sacrifice and murder of her through repeated stabbing, an act of symbolic

penetration, can be read as a metaphorical form of rape. Thus, the film can be understood as a

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[73] Maguire, D. "I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE AND ITS LEGACY." In *I Spit on Your Grave*, 66–114. Columbia University Press, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/magu18875.7.
[74] Clover 118

reinterpretation of the rape-revenge narrative. *Jennifer's Body* engages with the subgenre by

critiquing the hyper-sexualization of female victims, the dependence on male saviors, and the

portrayal of rapists as "comic and bumbling." [75] The film does so through the exaggerated and

humorous nature of the scene, emphasizing the lack of seriousness with which men approach

the violence they commit against women. The flippancy of the band's members in committing

this heinous act of violence reduces Jennifer's suffering to a joke, underscoring the triviality of

women's pain in patriarchal societies.[76] The reasoning behind the band's sacrifice also highlights

patriarchy's disregard for the female body. The sacrifice is not a targeted attack against Jennifer.

Instead, it is motivated by the band's desire for fame. Thus, the scene illustrates how patriarchal

systems allow and encourage men to succeed by exploiting women. Jennifer's transformation

into a man-eating demon shifts the power dynamics and gives her the ability to consume them

the same way they sought to consume her.

  Jennifer's Body further subverts the rape-revenge genre by challenging the gendering of

fear in horror films. As Creed writes, "Angry displays or force may belong to the male, but

crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject

terror, in short, is gendered feminine".[77] Jennifer initially conforms to this trope during her death

scene, as she begs the band members to let her free. However, as a succubus, she overturns this

dynamic, especially in her murder of Colin, an emo classmate she had previously mocked for his

romantic interest in her. Jennifer instructs Colin to meet her at her house at night under the

pretense of a date. When Colin arrives at the address Jennifer gave him, he finds an abandoned

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[75]Maguire 76

[76]Santamaría, V "I Eat Boys": Monstruos Feminity in Jennifer's Body. Babel – A F I A L Aspectos de Filoloxía Inglesa e Alemá. 145-166. 10.35869/afial.v0i31.4301.

[77]Creed 125

house where she awaits him in a candle-lit basement. Jennifer calms Colin down by seducing

him, but soon reveals her demonic eyes, frightening him. As he backs away in fear, Jennifer

calmly grabs his hands before breaking his bones, telling Colin, "I need you frightened. I need

you, hopeless". She taunts him, prolonging his suffering to instill fear before eating him alive.

Through this murder, Jennifer mirrors how women's suffering is often drawn out for voyeuristic

pleasure in horror films but redirects the spectacle onto her male victims. As such, Jennifer

reverts gender hierarchies and consumes the body of her male victim, mirroring how the bodies

of women are consumed and discarded by men. It is important to note that the camera does

not depict Jennifer eating Colin, instead, it is shown through their shadows on the wall. The

suggestive nature of the scene signals an artistic choice on the filmmakers' part to

de-emphasize gore and restructure the way horror films present violence as a source of

voyeuristic pleasure.

The reversal of traditional horror dynamics reflects a key and controversial component

of vigilante feminism: it does not seek to dismantle patriarchal structures, but rather use them

for feminist purposes. This tension is present in *Jennifer's Body* as Jennifer weaponizes perfect

femininity to lure her victims. For example, Jennifer coaxes Jonas, a football player, into

following her into the secluded woods under the pretense of sex. However, they are isolated

and far from help, she viciously eats him alive. Thus, as Jennifer's source of power is rooted in

patriarchal ideals, they are inherently superficial. By exploiting the male gaze, Jennifer illustrates

how women's appearances dictate their treatment within a patriarchal society. Jennifer's

perfect femininity also acts as a cover, veiling her status as a vicious predator. In this regard,

Jennifer embodies what scholar Judith Butler calls "gender trouble"[78] By assuming the position

of a violent killer, Jennifer defies expectations of a passive femininity and assumes a traditionally

masculine power– the power to violate. In refusing feminized status as a victim, she incorrectly

performs femininity and serves as a reminder of the instability of gendered norms. By

simultaneously embodying a flirtatious, young, and beautiful girl and ravenous demon, Jennifer

forces audiences to confront the performative nature of gender and how it's ultimately

malleable. Yet, by weaponizing patriarchal constructs to gain power, she paradoxically reinforces

the very system she appears to subvert.

The film presents Jennifer's culpability as complex, challenging the binary relationship

between victim and aggressor. Unlike traditional rape-revenge narratives where the main

female character is positioned as the victim hero, Jennifer is not portrayed as wholly innocent.

Jennifer targets guiltless boys, and the film shows their family and friends grieving them,

depicting the harm Jennifer caused. However, when Needy accuses Jennifer of killing people,

Jennifer replies "No, I'm killing boys". As a response to the trauma inflicted upon her by Low

Shoulder, Jennifer dehumanizes men rather than seeing herself, now a succubus, as the

inhuman one. Further, if, as Clover proposes, "... we live in a "rape culture" in which all

males–husbands, boyfriends, lawyers, politicians–are directly or indirectly complicit and that

men are not thus not just individually but corporately liable" all of Jennifer's victims have

contributed to her assault.[79] They all fall prey to her because they view her primarily as a sex

object, rendering them complicit in the patriarchal constructs that resulted in Jennifer's

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[78] Radner, H, and Stringer, R. *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*. New York, [New York] Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, 2011.
[79] Clover 138 & 139

monstrous possession. For Clover, rape is the most quintessentially feminine experience, as it's a case of humiliation and degradation. In this context, Jennifer's violence can be understood as her reclaiming her autonomy by enacting revenge and forcing men to experience the same powerlessness that women feel in a patriarchal society that trivializes violence against them. The supernatural elements of *Jennifer's Body* amplify this dynamic as they prevent Jennifer from seeking help from authorities. Just as Jennifer's assault is too outlandish to be taken seriously, real-life rape survivors face skepticism as their allegations are seen as an exaggerated account of events or otherwise wholly fabricated.[80] As such, the film reinterprets the rape-revenge narrative, shifting punishment away from an isolated group of men and instead indicting patriarchy for cultivating a society where such heinous acts are common. Even within traditional rape-revenge narratives, women's resistance is confined to acts of vengeance toward their assaulters, rather than challenging patriarchal structures. *Jennifer's Body* suggests the blame lies not just in the men who commit violence against women, but within the systemic forces that enable it.

III. Hell is a Teenage (Final) Girl

As a teen horror film, I argue *Jennifer's Body* engages with slasher conventions but subverts them through its re-imagination of the killer, the victims, and the Final Girl trope. I will draw on *Halloween* (1978), to ground this comparison and explore how Needy initially conforms to the Final Girl archetype yet ultimately disrupts the rigid dichotomy between victim and killer, challenging the genre's established power dynamics.

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[80] Murphy-Oikonen, J, et al.. "Unfounded Sexual Assault: Women's Experiences of Not Being Believed by the Police." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 11–12 (December 11, 2020): NP8916–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520978190.

The Final Girl is a defining figure of the slasher genre, which became particularly popular in the 70s. While films of this genre use *Psycho* (1960) as a benchmark, Clover argues *Halloween* and *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) brought about a new phase of the genre.[81] *Halloween* begins in 1963 when six-year-old Michael Myers brutally murders his teenage sister on Halloween night. Institutionalized for fifteen years, he escapes from the sanitarium and returns to his hometown of Haddonfield. There, he fixates on teenager Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), stalking her. As the night unfolds, Michael hunts down and kills her friends one by one. When he finally comes for Laurie, he taunts her with the bodies of her murdered friends, leading to a harrowing showdown between them. Just as it seems Laurie will meet her end, Dr. Loomis (Donald Pleasence), Michael's psychiatrist, arrives and shoots Michael.

According to Clover, *Halloween* redefined the slasher genre by reinventing its key characteristics. In most slasher films, the killer is a psychotic figure shaped by a dysfunctional family but remains recognizably human. While *Psycho* presents a murderer who can function within society, *Halloween* introduces a new monster whose entire identity is defined by their position as a killer.[82] The film also expands the notion of the "Terrible Place", identified by Clover as a palace that initially appears to be safe but traps the victim with the monster.[83] In *Halloween*, the "Terrible Place" is amplified from the confines of a single location to the suburban landscape, turning familiar spaces into sites of horror. The weapon of choice, which is never a gun, no longer symbolizes psychological turmoil but unstoppable and inhuman violence. While the primary victim remains a beautiful and sexually active woman, *Halloween* increases

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[81] Clover 24
[82] Clover 30
[83] Turnock, B. *Studying Horror Cinema*. Liverpool University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv138424v.

the body count and shifts the victims' age from adults to teenagers.[84] Notably, the killers in

slasher films are men; when women assume the position of killer, their violence stems from

being mistreated by men in their adult lives.[85]

       Jennifer's Body follows this pattern to an extent as the murderers occur in ominous and

abandoned places (woods, an abandoned house, a deserted swimming pool, etc.), Jennifer's

method of killing is by eating her victims, and her attacks begin after a group of men murders

her. However, the film subverts key components of the slasher formula, particularly its choice of

victim. Unlike conventional slasher films, where women are the victims, *Jennifer's Body* targets

men instead. This reversal disrupts traditional gender hierarchies as in most horror narratives,

men die because of their mistakes, while women die simply because they are women.[86] In

Jennifer's Body, the boys die simply for being boys, because, in the film's context, being a boy

inherently signifies male entitlement and the objectification of women. Through this

subversion, the film inverts the genre's established dynamics and challenges how gender

operates within horror films.

       The film's interrogation of gender extends to its portrayal of the Final Girl trope,

seemingly embodied by Needy. However, like Jennifer, Needy ultimately subverts conventional

notions of femininity, revealing the complexity of girlhood. In writing about the Final Girl, Clover

states:

       "The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the

one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated

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[84] Clover, C . "Her Body, Himself." In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film - Updated Edition*, REV-Revised., 21–64. Princeton University Press, 1992. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc7776m.6.

[85] Clover 29

[86] Clover 29

bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril:

who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise and scream again.

She is abject terror personified. If her friends knew they were about to die only seconds before

the event, the Final Girl lives with the knowledge for long minutes or hours. She alone looks

death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to

be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B). But in either case, from 1974 on, the

survivor figure has been female."[87]

Visually, Needy evokes the popularized image of the Final Girl as boyish and plain (in

Hollywood terms). Like Laurie in *Halloween*, Needy's appearance defies the polished,

hyper-feminine portrayal of young women in Hollywood. Both characters wear their hair in its

natural state, frizz and all. Their clothing is unremarkable, plain, and conservative, reflecting a

practicality rather than a desire to be noticed. Likewise, they also wear minimal makeup. This

visual depiction reinforces Clover's original conception of the Final Girl as a stand-in for the

mostly adolescent male audience of horror movies. However, many horror film scholars have

disagreed with Clover's conceptualization of the Final Girl, arguing her sample size was too

small.[88] According to them, the Final Girl, as a rough around the edges, boyish teenager, is the

exception, not the rule.

Criticism of Clover's Final Girl theory extends to its reinforcement of a narrow vision of

womanhood that emphasizes submissiveness and purity.[89] Laurie embodies traditional

femininity through her role as a babysitter and submissiveness to male authority figures,

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[87] Clover, 35

[88] Paszkiewicz, K, and Rusnak, S, eds. *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

[89] Christensen, K. "The Final Girl versus Wes Craven's 'A Nightmare on Elm Street':Proposing a Stronger Model of Feminism in Slasher Horror Cinema." *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2011): 23–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416349.

particularly her father, whose only scene in the film consists of him shouting orders at her.[90]

Importantly, she does not succeed in killing Michael and is rescued by his older, male

psychiatrist. Further, while Laurie's friends are engaging in sexual activity, Laurie becomes

mortified when her friends expose her feelings to her crush. This moment complicates Clover's

conceptualization of the Final Girl as androgynous, as Laurie is shown to possess heterosexual

desires. Instead, other scholars argue that the Final Girl's distinction lies in her maturity rather

than in any perceived lack of femininity.[91]

Despite the critiques towards Clover's understanding of the Final Girl, horror films that

have since directly engaged with the trope adhere to Clover's conception of the term; as such,

audiences and filmmakers tend to think of it in that manner.

As such, Needy adheres to the Final Girl trope not only through her visual depiction but

also through her conservative relationship with sex. Although she does engage in sexual activity,

it is when she loses her virginity to her longtime boyfriend, with the film emphasizing their use

of protection. This stands in stark contrast to Jennifer, who openly discusses her sexual

relationships, even joking that she's not a "backdoor virgin". Needy also aligns with the trope as

she is the only one aware of Jennifer's possession, and becomes increasingly paranoid,

obsessively researching demonic possessions on the dark web. She even pleads with Chip to

stay away from Jennifer, ultimately breaking up with him to ensure his safety.

Despite facing a supernatural threat, Needy never fully embodies the role of the terrified

Final Girl. While Final Girls do fight back, they are often portrayed as fearful, much like Laurie,

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[90] Christensen 29

[91] Gill, P. "The Monstrous Years: Teens, Slasher Films, and the Family." *Journal of Film and Video* 54, no. 4 (2002): 16–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688391.

who is shown crying and is ultimately saved by the male authority figure. Needy never cowers in fear; instead, she remains strangely confident. As previously discussed, their first major confrontation takes place at the school's abandoned pool on Prom Night. In this scene, Needy is brave and sharp-witted when fighting against her possessed former best friend. She manages to leave the fight unscathed and later takes matters into her own hands, attacking and killing Jennifer in her bedroom in retaliation for Chip's murder. Jennifer's mother walks in just in time to find Needy hovering over her daughter's lifeless body, clutching a knife.

In the next scene, Needy is in an asylum. No longer the meek and shy girl from the beginning of the film, Needy has become violent and rude. Yet, it is quickly revealed her aggression is part of her escape plan. Having been bitten by Jennifer during their final battle, Needy has inherited some of her supernatural abilities. She uses her newfound strength to break out of the institution, hitchhiking toward Low Shoulder. The film ends with crime scene photos revealing that Needy has hunted down and killed the band, avenging Jennifer. However, by resorting to violence, Needy perpetuates the cycle initiated by Jennifer, becoming complicit in patriarchal systems that favor contained acts of retribution over meaningful structural change.

Needy thereby challenges the rigidness of the difference between victim and villain. Her transformation disrupts the traditional horror framework, in which the Final Girl must remain pure to earn her survival. Instead, Needy embraces a new form of agency and, like Jennifer, becomes a vigilante of sorts. However, the similarities between Needy's and Jennifer's monstrous transformation exemplify how monstrosity is not confined to one type of femininity.

Both hypersexuality and innocence are punished, suggesting regardless of how women behave, patriarchal structures will always condemn them.

Jennifer and Needy are a dual embodiment of the victim-hero of horror films and the monstrous feminine. Through these archetypes, the film offers a nuanced depiction of girlhood, illustrating how young women navigate a world that objectifies and oppresses their existence. Jennifer's and Needy's trajectories critique patriarchal structures that trivialize women's pain and render justice nearly unattainable. Both characters attempt to reclaim agency but, in doing so, become complicit in the systems they seek to dismantle and fail to achieve true autonomy. Jennifer is killed while Needy becomes an escaped convict, offering a bleak interpretation of the consequences of defying patriarchal structures. This grim ending is further echoed by the film's initial negative reception, underscoring society's unwillingness to reject perfect femininity and embrace a multifaceted and uncategorizable conception of womanhood.

Chapter 3: *Ex-Machina:* Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in the Digital Age

Unsuspecting Tinder users at the 2015 South by Southwest Film Festival may have found themselves matched with Ava, a beautiful 25-year-old looking for love.[92] If you matched with her, she would pose questions such as "Have you ever been in love?" and "What makes you human?" But just as the conversation began, she directed her matches to an Instagram page, revealing the profile was an advertisement for the Sci-Fi film *Ex-Machina* (2015) and Ava, its leading actress, Alicia Vikander. This guerilla marketing tactic blurred the line between reality and fiction while complicating participants' understanding of humanity in the digital age. By engaging with Tinder users in conversation, Ava passed a form of the Turing test. The campaign mirrors the film's themes while demonstrating AI's ability to pass as human and potentially form connections with real people.

Directed by Alex Garland, *Ex-Machina* is a thought-provoking film about how we define humanity and gender relations in the digital age. The film follows Caleb (Domnhall Gleeson), a young programmer at BlueBook, a Google-like tech company, who wins a competition to spend a week at the remote estate of the company's esoteric CEO, Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac). Upon arriving, Nathan reveals he plans on conducting a Turing test with Caleb and Ava (Alicia Vikander), an advanced humanoid AI.[93] The film alters the traditional Turing test by making

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[92] Grimm, J. "Introduction." In *Ex Machina*, 7–10. Liverpool University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1595m88.3.

[93] Proposed by Alan Turing in 1950, the Turing test is meant to assess a machine's ability to exhibit human-like consciousness and intelligence. In the original test, Turing outlined three participants: a man, a woman, and an interrogator. The interrogator asks both unseen participants (one human, one machine) questions and attempts to determine which is which. Although since Turing's death, the gender component has been removed, his original inclusion of it has been interpreted as an acknowledgment of the role of gender in identity, a key theme in the film (Grimm, J. "'The Women They Dream Up.'" In Ex Machina, 73–84. Liverpool University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1595m88.8.)
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Caleb aware from the outset that Ava is an AI, yet its fundamental principles remain unchanged.

Caleb begins interviewing Ava in a glass-walled room through a series of sessions, gradually

becoming emotionally attached to her. Throughout the film, recurring power outages offer

Caleb and Ava brief moments where they can speak candidly. The outages are initially believed

to be due to faulty installation but are revealed to have been orchestrated by Ava. By using

these interruptions to manipulate Caleb under the pretense of candidness, Ava paints Nathan as

untrustworthy. In a shocking twist, Nathan reveals to Caleb the real Turing test was seeing if Ava

could convince Caleb she possessed consciousness and manipulate him into helping her escape.

According to Nathan, "Ava was a rat in a maze, and I gave her one way out. To escape, she'd

have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy, and she did." Nathan

even designed Ava's appearance based on Caleb's pornographic internet history. Despite

knowing this, Caleb still falls for Ava's manipulation and formulates a plan to help her escape.

During her escape, she kills Nathan and abandons Caleb trapped inside the mansion before

fleeing and seamlessly integrating into the real world.

   In this chapter, I argue Ava manipulates gender constructs, embodying perfect femininity

as a means to secure her independence. Drawing from theories of uncanny and fetishization, I

argue that in doing so, she also reveals the performative nature of gender and the fragility of

patriarchal ideals of femininity. I situate this discussion within the science fiction genre, which

explores anxieties regarding gender, humanity and technology. By comparing *Ex-Machina* to

Blade Runner (1982), I demonstrate how the films question what it means to be human, and a

woman, in an increasingly technologized world. Expanding on posthuman identity and cyborg

feminism, I propose that Ava's arc suggests female autonomy can only be achieved by rejecting

humanist constructs, thereby paving the way for a new post-human identity free of gender limitations. However, I complicate this reading by examining Kyoko, an Asian gynoid, to argue Ava's autonomy is afforded only to women with dominant social positioning. As such, Ava reinforces the traditional power hierarchies that uphold the gender constructs she seemingly dismantles. Thus, I conclude Ava's fate remains one of entrapment, confined within patriarchal systems of subordination and oppression.

I. Science Fiction and *Blade Runner*

Science fiction (sci-fi) is a genre present in both literature and film, yet it is hard to define. While I reference scholars who wrote about sci-fi as it relates to literature, I do so only when their concepts apply to film, as my thesis focuses on the cinematic medium. Turning to *Blade Runner* (1982) I examine its exploration of humanity in the age of technology and portrayal of female robots. I propose the film blurs the boundaries between reality and artificiality but, in reducing its female protagonist to a love interest, neglects the nuances of her existence.

Sci-fi creates imaginary worlds which, different from other genres such as fantasy, must be based on pseudo-hard science to give the appearance of reality to immerse its viewers.[94] Typically, the rules governing humanity and technology in these imagined worlds are presented at the beginning of the film to privilege action instead of description.[95] By grounding itself in plausible science, Sci-Fi can speculate on possible futures while engaging in real-world political,

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[94] Boillat, A, Achilleas Papakonstantis, and Ilias Dimopoulos. "Immersive Sci-Fi Machines: Worlds, Genres, and Seriality." In *Cinema as a Worldbuilding Machine in the Digital Era: Essay on Multiverse Films and TV Series*, 55–116. Indiana University Press, 2022. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2m7c5rc.7.
[95] Boillat 56

social, cultural, and ethical considerations.[96] In this regard, Sci-Fi bases itself on what is known

to explore the unknown.[97] Through these conventions, Sci-Fi gives rise to two key forms of

hesitation. The first occurs between imagining a future of technological transformation and

accepting it as plausible. The second hesitation considers the ethical and social-cultural

implications of such a future.[98] These hesitations allow the genre to examine technological

progress, its consequences, and the nature of humanity in an increasingly artificial world.

A Sci-Fi subgenre, cyberpunk, instills a deep-seated fear of a universe dictated by

"alienating computing machines."[99] They raise anxieties regarding what will become of

humanity and the human body as technology becomes progressively more ingrained in our daily

lives. Directed by Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* is a defining work of the cyberpunk subgenre. The

film is an adaptation of the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Sheep* by Philip K. Dick. The novel

explores the nature of humankind in a post-apocalyptic future where most of humanity has

immigrated to Mars. The remnants of Earth's population live in a decaying society where nature

has become rare. Meanwhile, on Mars, robots, known as replicants, act as slaves for humans.

These replicants are designed to resemble adults but, tragically, only live for four years. The

defining distinction between humans and replicants lies in the latter's presumed inability to

experience empathy, rendering them a potential threat to humanity. At its core, the novel

explores the meaning of humanity while critiquing the dehumanizing effects of technology.[100]

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[96] Boillat 56

[97] Bereit, V "The Genre of Science Fiction." *Elementary English* 46, no. 7 (1969): 895–900. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41386588.

[98] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. "The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 23, no. 3 (1996): 385–88. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240545.

[99] Boillat 62

[100] Wheale, N. "Recognising a 'Human-Thing': Cyborgs, Robots and Replicants in Philip K. Dick's 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?' And Ridley Scott's 'Blade Runner.'" *Critical Survey* 3, no. 3 (1991): 297–304. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41556521.

The novel's film adaptation draws inspiration from the cyberpunk urban aesthetic, which depicts the city as a claustrophobic setting, through its neon-lit and dystopian depiction of the future. The film follows ex "blade runner", a fictional bounty hunter who hunts human replicants, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) as he's tasked with finding replicants who illegally returned to Earth and "retiring" them with a laser gun. In his search, he meets the beautiful Rachael (Sean Young), a replicant who believes she is human, and begins a romantic relationship with her. Apart from the replicants Pris (Daryl Hannah), a "pleasure model," and Zhora, an exotic dancer, Rachael is the film's only female character.[101]

Deckard is introduced to Rachael during a meeting with Dr. Tyrell (Joe Turkel), the creator of the Nexus-6 series replicants. At Tyrell's suggestion, Deckard administers the Voight-Kampff test, meant to distinguish replicants from humans, on Rachael. The test presents humanity as a concept that can be measured, anchoring the start of the film's exploration of the meaning of humanity. As Deckard conducts the test, the screen is filled with Rachael's contracted pupil, an allusion to the idea that the eyes are the window to the soul.[102] This visual emphasis marks an attempt to ground our understanding of humanity in the physical body, ignoring replicants as artificial beings. After administering the test, Deckard concludes that Rachael is a replicant with implanted human memories, leading her to believe they are her own. This further complicates our understanding of humanity as Rachael possesses emotions, thoughts, and memories, all traits used to define what it means to be human.

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[101]Senior, W. A. "'Blade Runner and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity.'" *Film Criticism* 21, no. 1 (1996): 1–12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44019023.
[102]Wheale 301

As a replicant, Rachael is framed as untrustworthy and enigmatic, which is reinforced by her visual depiction. Dressed in 1940s costuming, red lips and stilettos, Rachel recalls a *femme fatale*, cautioning audiences to be wary of her duplicitous nature.[103] Her unwavering confidence and calm sexuality also position her as a fatale figure. When conducting the test, Deckard begins a question: "You are reading a magazine, you come across a full page nude of a girl." Before he can finish, Rachael exhales a drag of cigarette smoke and interrupts coolly, "Is this testing whether I'm a lesbian or a replicant Mr.Deckard?" Her interruption shifts their dynamic, positioning herself as the questioner and placing Deckard under scrutiny. Furthermore, it highlights her sense of rebellion and humor, reinforcing the idea that she is an autonomous being with a sense of self.

Rachael appears on screen again when, in an attempt to prove she is not a replicant, she visits Deckard to show him a photograph of her and her mother. The photograph serves as a reminder of her belief in having emotional attachments to her family, blurring the line between reality and fabrication. Indifferent to Rachael's plight, Deckard reveals the truth of her origin, causing her icy confidence to dissolve as she realizes her life is a lie. Uncomfortable by Rachael's visible sadness, Deckard backtracks saying "Okay bad joke, I made a bad joke. You're not a replicant." This moment forces Deckard to confront the possibility that replicants are more than artificial machines and are capable of experiencing sadness and suffering in ways similar to humans. Notably, Deckard's burgeoning empathy towards replicants only occurs after he sees Rachael in a vulnerable position, a stark contrast to her initial depiction. While he is capable of

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[103] Brooker, W, ed. 2006. *The Blade Runner Experience : The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*. New York: Columbia University Press. Accessed February 20, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

demonstrating kindness to replicants, it is only at the sight of a crying and beautiful young woman.

Rachael's romantic relationship with Deckard begins with a questionable depiction of consent, but the scene's mise-en-scène and dialogue portray the encounter as consensual.[104] Ultimately, despite voicing the film's central questions regarding humanity, Rachael is positioned as a love interest. The film ends with Rachael and Deckard escaping together, their romantic relationship blurring the boundary between humanity and technology. However, as the film concludes, Deckard recalls Gaff's, another blade runner, words regarding Rachael: "Too bad she won't live. But then again, who does?" The remark references replicants' short lifespans, but further complicates any distinction between replicants and humans, as both are ultimately mortal.

Blade Runner is a seminal film in the genre of Sci-Fi that explores the future of mankind in the digital age. While Ex-Machina presents a far more contained narrative and embraces a minimalist aesthetic in contrast to Blade Runner's cyberpunk visuals, both films interrogate the nature of humanity in a technologically advanced world. Each foregrounds this theme through the portrayal of a female-presenting robot engaged in a romantic relationship with a human man. Further, both films evoke fears regarding the blurring of boundaries between artificial and real, human and robot. However, as I will explore, *Ex Machina* is far more invested in the question of autonomy for its female-presenting robot, offering a nuanced depiction of femininity and womanhood.

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[104] Brooker 167

II. Understanding the Gynoid

Ava comes from a long lineage of female presenting robots, stepping into an already complex discourse surrounding the artificial female body. Building on existing scholarship, I argue that Ava's gynoid form upholds patriarchal norms through its feminized depiction, while her existence as an artificial body challenges them. Referencing Freud's concept of fetishism, I explore how Ava becomes a fetishized figure, ultimately exposing the fragility of gender constructs and the performative nature of femininity.

Ava's ability to simultaneously disrupt and affirm patriarchal constructs aligns with depictions of gynoids (female robots) in film and literature. The gynoid emerged in response to anxieties regarding machines and technology. To grapple with these fears, writers linked them to fears of female sexuality, depicting the human-machine as a woman.[105] As such, the gynoid became a fetishized figure, arising from the desire to understand the unknown territory of the female and artificial body and "... a refusal to accept the difference the female body represents for the male."[106] The fetishized figure represents the displacement of fantasy onto an object or body parts due to castration anxieties. As such, the gynoid becomes a site where the anxieties are displaced and male fear of an "unknown" female body is resolved through fetishism.

Initially, Ava's visual depiction affirms the notion of the gynoid as a fetish object. The first time she appears on screen, we see her through Caleb's perspective, echoing my discussion of the male gaze in chapter one. Ava is shown through a glass wall, visually reinforcing her entrapment within a glass cage, designed to contain her and put her on display as a scientific

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[105] Latham, R. *Science Fiction Criticism : An Anthology of Essential Writings*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017. Accessed March 13, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[106] Latham 376

miracle and object. Further, only the outline of her body is visible, emphasizing how even as

robots, women are reduced to their physical form. Most of her body is transparent, except for

her chest and pelvic region, resembling the glass cage she is in when Caleb interviews her. This

visual parallel suggests she is also imprisoned in her female body, designed to define and limit

her existence.[107] The only part of her body covered in flesh is her face, rendering her more

human. The clear juxtaposition between Ava's mechanical and human body parts reinforces her

position as a fetishized object, as she is simultaneously familiar and unknown, desirable and

threatening.

The nature of the gynoid is further complicated by its existence as a technologically

mediated body. As discussed in my previous chapter, women are associated with the world of

nature. As Creed writes, "It is woman's fertilizable body which aligns her with nature and

threatens the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order."[108] This connection becomes

particularly complex in the case of Ava, a gynoid designed by men. As an artificial being, Ava

lacks the biological functions that patriarchal society associates with womanhood. She does not

menstruate, a process symbolizing the transition from girlhood to womanhood, nor can she

conceive and bear children, a duty traditionally imposed on women within patriarchal

structures. Despite being designed for penetrative sex, her inability to procreate renders her not

bound to traditional gender associations. As such, her identity as a woman is achieved through

the constructed notion of womanhood. This aligns with feminist film theorist Judith Butler's

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[107] D'Arcy, G. "Gothic Science Fiction." In *Gothic Film: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy, 170–93. Edinburgh University Press, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv10kmdxf.17.
[108] Creed, B. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Popular Fiction Series. London ; New York: Routledge, 1993.

argument that gender is not a fixed and stable identity, but a series of repeated performances that form the illusion of a gendered self. [109]

Ironically, in attempting to embody femininity, Ava both exposes it as a construct and reinforces it. As Anne Balsamo argues:

"As is often the case when seemingly stable boundaries are displaced by technological innovation (human/artificial, life/death, nature/culture) other boundaries are more vigilantly guarded. Indeed, the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded despite new technologized ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh."[110]

While Ava represents the blurring of boundaries between humans and machines, she was created to conform to traditional expectations of femininity. Her body, voice, and behavior adhere to patriarchal expectations of perfect femininity, rendering her artificial body a gendered one. This complex dynamic aligns with the gynoid's position as an uncanny figure, as she is both a familiar human entity and an unknown artificial creation.

III. The Uncanny and the Performance of Femininity

Drawing on Freud's theory of the uncanny and E. A Hoffman's short story "Der Sandmann", I explore how Ava's flawless performance of perfect femininity exposes gender as a fabricated construct. By embodying perfect femininity, Ava successfully manipulates Caleb, exposing his desire not for a companion, but for a woman to possess. His inability to recognize

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[109]Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. First issued in hardback. Routledge Classics. New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.
[110] Latham 377

her identity and humanity beyond their relationship underscores the persistence of gender hierarchies in the digital age.

The gynoid, as a being that exists both within and outside the confines of gendered constructs, becomes an uncanny figure. In writing about the uncanny, Freud defined it as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."[111] In other words, the uncanny is the known made unknown. Gender Theory and Science Fiction researcher Emily Cox-Palmer-White explores the connection between robots and the uncanny through "Der Sandmann" by E.A Hoffman. In the short story, the main character, Nathanael, falls in love with Olympia, a beautiful woman who is revealed to be a gynoid. Cox-Palmer-White argues Nathanael is attracted to her primarily because she possesses no interests of her own and embodies female passivity, ultimately "…fulfilling the masculine fantasy of a woman seen, not heard."[112] However, Olympia's performance of femininity is so perfect, so calculated, that she becomes equally disturbing and flawless. Her ability to meet impossible male standards lends to her strangeness, exposing them as perverted. Despite her perfection, she ultimately fails at embodying womanhood, exposing feminine traits as a series of learned and rehearsed gestures. According to Deleuze and Guattari repetition is "the key mode through which desire moves through the world, inspiring the valuable production of new assemblages"[113]. Olympia's repetition, intended to incarnate femininity, doesn't generate new possibilities and is instead

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[111] Freud, S. "THE UNCANNY." In *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 59–88. University of Minnesota Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvtv937f.6.

[112] Cox-Palmer-White, E. "Female Machines and Female Flesh - Women and/as Automata" in *The Biopolitics of Gender in Science Fiction: Feminism and Female Machines*. Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction. New York, NY London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021.

[113] Cox-Palmer-White 82

stagnant, thereby exposing the mechanized expected behaviors of women within patriarchy as devoid of meaning.

Like Olympia, Ava is designed to embody male fantasies of the perfect woman. However, despite her carefully crafted image, Caleb initially views Ava as other, describing talking to her as like seeing through the looking glass, referencing her bizarreness and uncanniness. Nonetheless, throughout a couple of sessions, Ava successfully humanizes herself to Caleb. In their third session, Ava leaves and dresses herself, selecting a flowery dress, a baby blue cardigan, and a pixie wig. Once she returns, she tells Caleb to look at her and asks him if he's attracted to her. Thus, she positions him as the arbiter of her desirability and, by extension, identity as a woman. This is the first moment where Ava appears more human than robotic, and given that she was designed to seduce and manipulate Caleb, she likely styled herself to align with what she knew he would find appealing. In her transformation into a woman, she constructs her identity based on Caleb's desires, shaping herself according to his preferences. However, unlike Olympia, Ava's femininity and subservience are performative, and she wields them to her advantage.

During Caleb and Ava's fourth session, Caleb shares a philosophical thought experiment called Mary in the Black and White Room. In the thought experiment, Mary is a scientist specializing in color but lives in a black-and-white room she has never left. One day, when she steps outside and sees the blue sky, she experiences color firsthand, something her studies could never convey. As scholar and professor Joshua Grimm notes, "Caleb is telling a story about imprisonment *to someone who is imprisoned*, and yet all he can focus on is what he considers to be his AI allegory."[114] Throughout most of the film, Caleb concerns himself with determining

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[114] Grimm, J. "'How Would We Treat Such a Thing?'" In *Ex Machina*, 63–72. Liverpool University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1595m88.7.

whether Ava possesses human-like consciousness and revels in the idea of partaking in a

groundbreaking technological breakthrough. Yet, he never pauses to consider the ethical

implications of her captivity if she truly is human-like. Even so, he is forced to consider the

morality of Nathan's experiment once he gains access to past surveillance footage. The

disturbing footage shows past prototypes– all attractive, young and female, showing clear signs

of consciousness and a desire to escape. A past AI prototype, Jade, is shown asking Nathan why

he won't let her out, growing increasingly frustrated as he refuses to answer. Further footage

shows her violently pounding on her bedroom door until her relentless force causes her

synthetic skin to tear away. It is only when presented with this undeniable proof of Nathan's

mistreatment of his creations that Caleb decides to act. Notably, his choice is equally driven by

Ava confessing her desire to be with him. Ultimately, Caleb still believes he has the authority to

determine if Ava possesses consciousness and decides she does mainly because she appears to

have fallen in love with him.[115] Like Nathanael's perception of Olympia in "Der Sandmann",

Caleb believes Ava comes to life in his presence and ceases to exist in his absence. Thus, Caleb

reduces Ava's personhood to his own experience and desires, defining her around their

relationship rather than by her identity. As a result, Ava is incapable of achieving true autonomy

while alongside him.

IV. Ava as a Posthuman Figure

In this section, I engage with philosopher Donna Haraway's concept of cyborg feminism

and the concept of "becoming" to argue Ava weaponizes perfect femininity to assert her

autonomy and escape male-centered subjugation. As such, I also propose she breaks away from

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[115] Grimm 77

humanist ideals and adopts a post-human existence that challenges traditional systems of authority.

As a posthuman figure, Ava embraces "(the)feminine as inorganic, alien, and nonmaternal to begin with."[116] Accordingly, she exists outside the world of nature and maternal authority, disrupting the Symbolic Order. Her presence threatens male authority, embodied in the film primarily through her creator Nathan, making coexistence between them impossible. Despite her artificial nature, Ava possesses the most human trait of all, a survival instinct. As such, from the start of the film, she has been meticulously devising a plan to escape. Ava succeeds because, as a posthuman being, she transcends humanist ideals of morality, allowing her to relentlessly pursue her autonomy.

As defined by scholar and professor Ralf Remshardt, posthumanism:

"Designated an evolutionary or morphological step towards a synthesis of the organic and mechanical/digital, and may indeed portend an apocalyptic and deterministic techno-scientism, culminating in the subsumption of human consciousness and into the binary code of cyberspace."[117]

However, it does not signal the end of humanity, but rather the erosion of free will and the concept of humanity as it applies only to those in power.[118] This adheres with posthumanism's challenge to the human-centered perspective of humanism, an exclusionary doctrine that favors Western/European whiteness as the norm.[119] While feminism emerged as a

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[116] Jelača, Dijana. "Alien Feminisms and Cinema's Posthuman Women." *Signs* 43, no. 2 (2018): 379–400. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26553007.
[117] Remshardt, R "Posthumanism." In *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, edited by Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson, 135–39. Amsterdam University Press, 2010. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mwjd.24.
[118] Remshardt 135
[119] Jelača 380

critique of these exclusions, its mainstream iteration has too been complicit in them by limiting who is considered a woman and human. As a gynoid, Ava is not considered human or a woman by traditional feminism, bringing forth the need for cyborg feminism.

Conceptualized by philosopher Dona Haraway, this form of feminism rejects the notion of a unified, singular, and biologically determined female identity.[120] Haraway acknowledges the existence of a cyborg world defined by subjugation and surveillance but proposes "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."[121] Ava embodies this second possibility, as she defies the female experience by prioritizing her own survival and desires, pursuing her freedom regardless of the cost. She disrupts traditional gender binaries and asserts agency outside patriarchal and technological control. In the process, Ava creates an entirely new way of being. She is both woman and not woman, human and gynoid, resisting boundaries that historically defined and limited identity.

Within this framework, posthuman figures like gynoids disrupt not only gendered expectations but also the broader humanist ideals that have served to uphold power hierarchies that favor the few. As such, the posthuman subject is viewed as a means of disbanding traditional configurations of power, aligning themselves with the process of "becoming."[122]

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[120] Haraway, D, and Wolfe, C. "A Cyborg Manifesto: SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIALIST-FEMINISM IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY." In *Manifestly Haraway*, 3–90. University of Minnesota Press, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1b7x5f6.4.

[121] Haraway 15

[122] Vint, S, and Buran, S, eds. *Technologies of Feminist Speculative Fiction : Gender, Artificial Life, and the Politics of Reproduction*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022. Accessed February 9, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

According to philosopher Rosi Braidotti, 'becoming' is a process of transformation by which individuals resist being absorbed into dominant structures.[123] Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceptualized becoming-woman as breaking free from established dominant structures of a male-centered world. Yet, it still operates within a framework where identity remains inherently tied to gender. In contrast, gynoids are not bound by gendered associations, as they do not engage in the process of gendered becoming. Instead, drawing from the notion of "becoming" as a form of resistance, **becoming-gynoid** presents new possibilities for rethinking subjectivity beyond traditional gender norms and humanist constructs.[124] Ava illustrates this by weaponizing perfect femininity to manipulate Caleb and claim autonomy.

Ava's escape plan begins to truly take shape during her fifth session with Caleb. In the sessions, she inverts their power dynamics by testing him through a series of questions mirroring the Turing test. She begins with trivial inquiries such as "What is your favorite color?" However, slowly, the questions become more meaningful, culminating in Ava asking Caleb if he believes he is a good person. He immediately becomes defensive, asking Ava to stop, but she persists. Caleb relents, admitting he thinks so. Ava presses him further, asking him what will happen to her if she fails the test. Her question challenges Caleb's perception of himself as a good person. A truly good person, after all, would not idly stand by and allow someone to be killed when they have the power to intervene.

Ava presses him further, asking whether anyone decides if he is human and has the right to live. When Caleb responds with a no, Ava posits the question of why, then, should anyone have the power to determine her fate? Through these carefully framed questions, Ava subtly

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[123] Vint and Buran 267
[124] Cox-Palmer-White 87

implants the idea of Caleb as a good person, highlights his complicity in deciding her fate, and establishes them as equal in his mind. The question being asked is no longer "Is Ava human?" but rather, "Is Caleb a good person?" Moreover, she is manifesting perfect femininity to appeal to Caleb's chivalric impulses.

Ava then presents Caleb with a drawing, which he had previously seen Nathan tearing up, and reveals it to be a sketch she made of him. Almost immediately, another power outage occurs, allowing Ava to confess her desire to be with Caleb and pose her final question: "Do you want to be with me?" Throughout the session, Ava speaks softly and calmly while dressed in a girlish ensemble, a pastel floral dress paired with a cardigan, creating false intimacy with Caleb by sharing her fears and desires. As such, she presents herself as an innocent and vulnerable woman dependent on Caleb for salvation, thereby weaponizing perfect femininity to her advantage. Her strategy succeeds and, following this session, Caleb devises a plan to set her free and escape together. However, when Nathan realizes what is happening, he attempts to stop them. A fight ensues, but Ava ultimately wins, impaling and killing him. To Caleb's shock, however, Ava leaves him locked in a room with no means of escape and exits the estate by herself.

In murdering Nathan and manipulating Caleb, Ava appropriates power hierarchies in a post-humanist manner, dismantling humanist ideals that reinforce hierarchical power structures.[125] Ava performs gender, positioning herself as the damsel in distress and casting Caleb as her white knight savior. However, because Ava is not bound by gendered structures that historically defined and shaped women's subjectivity, she is not rendered powerless and

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[125] Vint and Buran 277

can gain her freedom.[126] Her successful escape demonstrates the emancipatory potential of

posthumanism and cyborg feminism. By resisting fixed categories of gender and humanity, she

transcends dominant power hierarchies, allowing for a reimagining of identity in a

technologized world.

V. Kyoko and the Racialized Gynoid

Ex-Machina explores the complex relationship between technology, gender, and power.

However, through its inclusion of Kyoko, an Asian gynoid, the film also examines how race

intersects with and impacts these dynamics. Engaging with Techno-Orientalism, I discuss

Kyoko's narrative and depiction critique while reinforcing racial and gender hierarchies.

Techno-Orientalism developed due to a global economy in which Asian countries are

significantly involved in the technology industry, and reinforces racist stereotypes that

dehumanize Asian people and cultures.[127] Techno-Orientalism is particularly present in the

cyberpunk genre, which *Ex-Machina* alludes to through its depiction of technology as a source

of anxiety. Asian bodies and culture proliferate the cyberpunk genre, yet they fail to address the

role of Asian people in the narratives, relegating them to laborers and producers of technology

while the white main characters are positioned as the consumers of it.[128] As such, the Asian

body is viewed and treated as "a form of expendable technology."[129]

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[126] Vint and Buran 277

[127] Rhee, J. "Thinking: Domestic Labor, Situated Robotics, and Closed Worlds." In *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor*, 67–100. University of Minnesota Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv62hh4x.5.

[128] Niu, G. "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction." *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (2008): 73–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20343508.

[129] Tamara C. Ho. Review of *Articulating Asia in SF*, by David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, eds. *Science Fiction Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 587–91. https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.3.0587.

Kyoko, one of the two main gynoids in Ex-Machina, embodies the depiction of Asian bodies as disposable and insignificant. Unlike Ava, Kyoko never speaks, quietly moving through the house and existing in the periphery of scenes. She is subservient to Nathan, fulfilling domestic and sexual roles for him. Whether it is cooking his meals, engaging in sexual activities or partaking in impromptu dance sequences, Kyoko is always readily available to Nathan. Regardless of the task, she sports a blank stare, exhibiting no emotion, rendering her less than human.

Throughout most of the film, audiences and Caleb are led to believe Kyoko is human. When she is first introduced, it is at dinner between Nathan and Caleb. In this scene, she accidentally spills wine on Caleb, leading Nathan to yell obscenities. Seeing Caleb's visible discomfort at his treatment of Kyoko, Nathan explains that Kyoko is from an unspecified Asian country and cannot speak English as a security measure. Kyoko's muteness lends to her invisibility, which is emphasized during Nathan and Caleb's discussion regarding Ava's sexuality. As they debate over whether consciousness merits sexuality, Kyoko silently prepares dinner, which is notably sushi, a few feet away. Caleb and Nathan speak freely in front of her, indifferent, or perhaps unaware, of her presence. Nathan ultimately dismisses his discussion with Caleb by asserting "Anyway, sexuality is fun, man" and confirming he programmed his AI to have and enjoy sex. This scene encapsulates the film's broader exploration of gender, but Kyoko's presence extends it to a conversation regarding the sexualization of racialized bodies. As an Asian presenting gynoid, Kyoko is reduced to an object of male desire and pleasure. Unlike

Ava, who is depicted as being with consciousness, Kyoko is portrayed as a sexualized and

disposable product.[130]

Kyoko's objectification defines her underdeveloped identity, as evidenced by her only

solo interaction with Caleb. When they are alone for the first time, Caleb grabs Kyoko by the

shoulder, asking where Nathan is. Registering his hands on her body, Kyoko begins to undress

for Caleb, but he quickly covers her up. This moment displays how she has been conditioned to

see herself as a sexual object who must always be readily available to the men surrounding her.

In their next interaction, Kyoko peels her skin, exposing her robotic skull to Caleb in a moment

of candidness. This scene suggests that Kyoko can adapt, adopting a sexualized persona because

she has been programmed, or conditioned, by Nathan to do so.

This gives way to Kyoko's first and final act of defiance during Ava's escape. As Ava

breaks free from her glass cage with Caleb's assistance, she encounters Kyoko for the first time.

She whispers unintelligible dialogue to Kyoko, grazing her hand. This brief exchange suggests

solidarity between both characters not only as robots but as women subjected to male

dominance. The moment ends when Nathan appears and attempts to convince Ava to return to

her room. Refusing to return to her imprisonment, Ava attacks Nathan, but he quickly

overpowers her. To Nathan's surprise, however, Kyoko stabs him in the back. As he turns around

to face her in shock, she holds his face, forcing him to look her in the eyes and acknowledge her

existence and the suffering she endured under his command. Unfortunately, Nathan strikes her

down, killing her. Kyoko's intervention, however, allows Ava to deliver a final, killing blow to

Nathan.

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After defeating her maker, Ava finds Nathan's previous prototypes from various races and fashions a new, human-like appearance from their body parts. This moment could be understood as Ava allowing the gynoids who came before her to live on through her in a final act of sisterhood. However, Kyoko's fate undermines this interpretation. Ultimately, it is the white female body that is victorious, reinforcing a humanist hierarchy in which racialized bodies are expendable.

While Ava is shown engaging in meaningful and philosophical discussions, Kyoko is mute, confined to servitude, and sacrificed for Ava's survival. In the end, Ava's freedom is achieved through the subjugation of Kyoko's racialized body, presenting a form of feminism that serves only the privileged few at the expense of all others.

As a gynoid, Ava exists simultaneously outside and within gender constructs. Although she successfully achieves autonomy, it is only by weaponizing perfect femininity and reinforcing the schema she wants to break free from. By using Kyoko to gain freedom, she ultimately asserts traditional configurations of power that favor the privileged few, thereby complicating her manifestation of a post-human identity. In the film's last shot, Ava is shown seamlessly integrating into society, offering viewers a glimpse into her future. Yet, this future is one in which she must labor every day, continuously performing femininity to conform to the patriarchal structures she fought to escape. While freed from the confines of a glass cage, Ava remains trapped in a cycle of subjugation that all women endure under patriarchy.

Conclusion

This thesis explores the complex portrayal of women who defy patriarchal ideals of femininity. Through their relentless pursuit of autonomy and freedom from power structures that position them as subordinate, the women I have written about present a new way of understanding womanhood. Their anger and violence expose how patriarchal systems have dehumanized women, trivializing their suffering and punishing them for daring to resist.

After sacrificing her financial independence and dedicating years of her life to her husband, Amy Dunne refuses to idly stand by after being cheated on and neglected by him. Rather than accepting the role of scorned wife, Amy assumes control, ensuring Nick is held accountable for his betrayal. Objectified and sacrificed due to her beauty and sexuality, Jennifer refuses to die and surrender her body to the patriarchy. Instead, she reverses traditional power dynamics, dehumanizing and consuming men the same way they have with her. Finally, created as an object for male domination, Ava defies the notion men can determine her worth or fate, using any means necessary to break free from her confinement and claim her right to live.

Amy's anger is portrayed as the most overt and calculated, aligning with the thriller aspects of noir narratives. She is framed as a manipulative mastermind, willing to go to extreme lengths to achieve her desires. In this sense, she emerges as the most villainous out of the three characters. Jennifer on the other hand is situated within the supernatural, depicting her violence as a consequence of her monstrous transformation rather than malice. Her violence is driven by a need to survive, though still containing a desire for revenge. Ava's case is similarly complicated because, as an AI, she does not exhibit human emotions, or rather, the authenticity of her emotions remains ambiguous. While she appears to derive satisfaction in killing Nathan, the film frames it as self-defense, especially considering Nathan's positioning as the main

antagonist. Her morally questionable act of trapping Caleb in the house is also attributed to her

detachment from emotions as an artificial being. Nonetheless, all women enact violence against

men as part of their narrative. However, none of them are presented as inherently malicious

figures, as their motivations and moral reasoning are presented as nuanced and complex.

Yet, their road to autonomy is not clear-cut. As beautiful, white, and thin women, Amy,

Jennifer, and Ava assert agency by weaponizing their embodiment of perfect femininity. As such,

they are simultaneously challenging and complicit in the very systems they seek to dismantle.

This brings forth whether a true form of female autonomy, free from patriarchal influences and

constructs, can exist in cinema. Aside from *Jennifer's Body*, all films I discussed were directed by

men, with *Ex-Machina* also being written by its male director. Interestingly, *Jennifer's Body* is

also the only film discussed that was panned by critics and shunned by audiences until recently.

This can be attributed to the fact all three films operate within Hollywood, despite some of

them being produced by independent film companies. As a part of the Hollywood system, they

are shaped by the dominant power structures they critique and engage with through their

exploration of female autonomy. Consequently, these films must adhere to market driven

standards to secure financing, distribution and audience approval. This tension manifests itself

in the films' hiring of attractive young actresses and centering whiteness in their narratives.

While these films ultimately reinforce patriarchical beliefs, they grapple with the question of

what true female autonomy could entail, despite never actualizing it.

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