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Abstract

This is a review of *Jennifer's Body* (2009).

Jennifer's Body is the second collaboration of writer Diablo Cody and producer Jason Reitman, the first being *Juno* (2007). Described as a “horror comedy,” the film tells the story of Jennifer Check, a popular cheerleader who is sacrificed to Satan by an Indie rock band and resurrected as a succubus. As she begins seducing and devouring the boys of Devil’s Kettle High, her best friend, Anita “Needy” Lesnicki slowly learns what Jennifer has become. *Jennifer’s Body* combines and parodies many familiar tropes from the horror genre as well as darker high school comedies such as *Heathers*. Cody’s unique take on teenage slang permeates the story. In a Reuter’s interview, Cody expressed her desire to present a story about female empowerment in a genre that is frequently male dominated. In fact, the film presents several interesting twists on popular conceptions of the demonic and its relationship to the feminine.

The story is set in the town of Devil’s Kettle, Minnesota, named for a mysterious waterfall that empties into an underground river system. (Devil’s Kettle Falls is in fact a real place and can be found in Judge Magney, State Park). Throughout the film, Jennifer’s demonic exploits are associated with nature and particularly the element of water. This ranges from cinematically beautiful nature shots to a comical scene in which Jennifer devours a football player before an audience of woodland creatures - a sort of morbid parody of Disney’s *Snow White*. The association of wilderness with the demonic has been forgotten by most

Americans but harkens back to the Puritans who saw “the howling woods” as the dominion of Satan.

Low Shoulder, the Indie band who murders Jennifer in exchange for celebrity parodies another fear lurking in the American consciousness - the Satanic rock band. Because Jennifer is not a virgin, the sacrifice goes awry. This too is a trope common to modern horror films such as *Satan’s Cheerleaders*. The botched sacrifice results in “demonic transference,” resurrecting Jennifer as a succubus - a seducing demon. Her demonic rebirth is heralded by a round of projectile vomiting ala *The Exorcist*.

Despite drawing on Christian notions of the demonic, religion is conspicuously absent. The presence of the church is confined to a brief shot of a priest presiding over a funeral. In one scene, Jennifer slays an “emo” boy who wears a rosary wrapped around his wrist. Not only is the rosary ineffective, but Jennifer begins her assault by snapping the poor boy’s wrist. Like many recent horror movies, protection from the demonic comes not from the church but from occult lore. Needy learns how to defeat the succubus by consulting the occult section of her school’s library (attentive audiences may notice a copy of *Hostage to the Devil*, by former Jesuit Malachi Martin.)

The succubus appears in the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and was used during the Middle Ages to link female sexuality with the demonic. In some ways, Jennifer's Body continues this tradition. It is unclear that Jennifer is any more evil after becoming a succubus. In a violent confrontation Needy tells her demonic "BFF" that she was never a good friend. Jennifer responds, "At least I'm consistent." However, the demonic also represents female empowerment. At the film's conclusion, Needy acquires some demonic abilities herself which she uses to slaughter Low Shoulder. Curiously, Cody commented on this development: "It's a meek shall inherit the Earth sort of thing."

Finally, there was some controversy over the film's allusions to September 11th, 2001. Jennifer's Body was released in theatres on September 18th, one week after the eighth anniversary of the attack. Early in the film, Jennifer describes "a 9/11 tribute shot" consisting of red, white, and blue liquors. When Needy finally slays her best friend, she does it with a box-cutter. What could these allusions mean?

Early in the film, Low Shoulder gives a performance in which faulty wiring causes a fire, immolating numerous townsfolk. Yet somehow, the band is able to manipulate the situation to appear as heroes. Their hit single becomes the town's "anthem of unity and healing." This success, presumably, is the fulfillment of the band's pact with Satan. Needy alone questions the motives of Low Shoulder and is

shouted down for doing so. While the demonic in *Jennifer's Body* can be interpreted as “the evil that men (and girls) do,” it can also be found in the exploitation of tragedy for personal gain. This critique makes *Jennifer's Body* far more than the simple “horror comedy” it claims to be.