Sex, Motherhood, and Killing Boys:

Diablo Cody & Body Genres through the Feminine Perspective

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Diablo Cody has been described as an unlikely Hollywood underdog; the stripper-turned-screenwriter has implemented her own sense of self and quirky 21st century feminist outlook in the scripts of her film projects. Often highlighting stories of girls and women in unseen or unlikely positions, whether they are physical (like being a teen mother or possessed by a demon) or more atmospheric representations of the unseen feminine, such as protagonists who hold intense resentment for their loved ones and struggle with suicidal ruminations. Cody's body of work features distinctly hybrid generic and stylistic elements reminiscent of "body genres," a concept first proposed in Linda Williams's 1991 essay titled "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." Cody's unconventional approach to plot and dialogue distinctly foreground the impacts of unruly bodily transformations on women and girls in ways that have shaped have expanded genre filmmaking to account for 21st century feminist body politics.

This project focuses on the films written by Cody and the uniquely feminine perspective on the issues they explore. It argues that Cody's films channel the gendered forms of address found in the "body genre," which has been historically associated with genres such as melodrama, horror, and pornography, as theorized by Williams and others. This project contends that Cody's authorship is foregrounded in her appropriation of body genre elements and through her approach to dialogue and characterization, which call attention to the gendered dynamics of spectatorial identification. The films I plan to discuss in this project are *Juno*, *Jennifer's Body*, *Tully*, and *Lisa Frankenstein.* Through closely analyzing these films in relation to discourses of Cody's transgressive authorship and indie sensibility, this project points to Cody's investment in the reactionary elements of the body genres that Williams points out as frequent markers of low-brow cinema due to their association with femininity. The research questions that will guide my analysis include: How is Cody's filmography relevant to theoretical conversations around

genre and gender? How can Cody's authorship as a screenwriter (specifically, a female screenwriter) amplify Williams's ideas in "Film Bodies"? How do these ideas propel Cody's work to evolve over time through the indie or commercial landscape? How can the relationship between spectatorship and gender through the body genres alter these ideas through a female perspective or embodiment?

Cody's relationship with the body genres in her screenplays and subsequent films that they spawned is developed through her non-traditional protagonists, narratives, and structures. Starting as a name in the indie sphere of cinema, and now as a commercially successful writer for large budget pictures, Cody's filmography has remained relatively the same in terms of style and tone. The four films I mentioned previously have significant genre alignments with how Williams describes the body genres in "Film Bodies," and takes her sense of misogyny and female sensation and flips them into more thematically female centric narratives. We are still under the thumb of feeling deeply the pain, pleasure, and anguish of the female character, but I will examine how this idea is put into a different perspective while considering a more modern contemporary set of films, and how the authorship of a female screenwriter can change a spectators' relationship with character identification. These sensations of the body genres are considered to be vulgar, shameful, and barbaric even, as our societal norms teach us to hide things like our pain and pleasure, and stifle sexual or violent urges. Cody's films explore perversions of these thematic ideas, all through the feminine perspective, of the elements of life women are made to feel must be repressed.

Linda Williams' landmark 1991 essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" includes several key ideas that are essential to my analysis. This article explores how the bodily displays of vulnerability as well as the function of bodily excess serve as defining elements of

three key genres: pornography, horror, and melodrama. In these genres, bodily reactions are sensationalized and provide a physical effect for a viewer, foregrounding spectacle in ways that differ from the modes of containment found in traditional narrative cinema. These genres specifically are used to highlight the idea of spectatorship for audience groups that are not valued as critical or serious film audiences; melodrama is for women, horror is for adolescents, and pornography is for the voyeuristic male gaze. The embodied appeals of these genres are often thought of as the perversions of traditional cinema, wherein watching these films can provide you with what Williams describes as the "accompanying presence of the sexual fluids, the blood, and the tears which are presumably mimicked by spectators," (5-6), which come from arousal, terror, and sadness respectively.

Importantly, Williams notes how these embodied forms of spectatorship enact an oscillation among gendered viewing positions, and she calls for further scholarly interrogations of how generic fluidity enables "the construction of feminine viewing pleasures once thought not to exist at all" (9). Williams demonstrates her theory of spectatorial oscillation by noting how the genres invite "mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on screen," (4) for the viewer, while simultaneously foregrounding that these sensations are those of the female body. Through this argument, we are able to concisely understand the misogyny that structures horror and melodrama as especially "low-brow" film genres. So too does William's argument (e.g.: excess, bodily reaction, etc.) anticipate modern filmmaking from feminine perspectives that self-reflexively appropriate elements of horror and melodrama to invite an embodied spectatorial engagement. "Film Bodies" is also a nuanced examination of what it means to be a consumer of genre cinema, and also how it affects the general outlook of gendered cinematic dynamics while discussing the body genres in direct comparison to low brow cinema. Melodrama is referred to as

the ‘woman’s film’ or the ‘weepie’ where you feel a woman’s despair. Horror and pornography both put you into the pain and pleasure of an oftentimes female subject. You cry her tears, spill her blood, and release her sexual pleasure. Williams notes that what makes these genres considered to be low brow is the perception of experience through a distinctly female representation. By putting a viewer in the position of a woman, they are immediately treated with the abject status that the body of the woman occupies.

Williams wrote “Film Bodies” as an intervention in feminist film theory that privileged notions of the “gaze” that marginalized embodied viewing positions. The foundational work Williams responds to is scholar Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, which sought to theorize the role of women as objects of voyeurism and desire in cinema, introducing ideas such as the male gaze. Mulvey says that within a film, “[women] can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it,” (804). She adopts this theory (and most others from her essay) directly from Freudian Psychoanalysis and uses it as her main framework for discussing female characters as exhibitionist-like figures. Mulvey’s work was heavily influential to an early wave of film theorists, specifically women, who came after her. Her work is important to feminist filmmaking as a whole, as her analysis of the “male gaze” concludes with a call for a feminist filmmaking mode that rejects the “visual pleasure” of Hollywood spectatorship. Mulvey's writing outlines foundational theories of gendered spectatorship that critique Hollywood aesthetics, which Williams’ later takes up and interrogates in her theory of “body genres.” Mulvey’s analysis of the male gaze as dominant in Hollywood commercial cinema and her call for a destructive feminist filmmaking aesthetic are crucial for analyzing the modes of feminist authorship that Diablo Cody’s indie films engage with. Mulvey’s call for a feminist “counter-cinema” merges with genre dynamics Williams theorizes in

Cody's self-reflexive appropriation of horror and melodrama that foreground embodied spectatorial engagement. Williams points that the viewer holds significance with the genre of film they are watching through their identification with female characters and the emotions directly tied to a physical reaction, whether it's fear, despair, or arousal. She says there is "...value in thinking about the form, function, and system of seemingly gratuitous excesses in [melodrama, horror, and pornography]," (Williams, 3). It is understandable that from these pinnacle essays from the latter half of the twentieth century that ideas on gender in relation to cinema had already begun to shift and build on one another in terms of their theories of spectatorial identification. My analysis considers how these theories can help map the influence that a female creative like Cody with a vision unique to the experience of girlhood and womanhood could impact these dynamics as a writer (rather than a director).

Diablo Cody, born Brook Busey, moved from her hometown of a Chicago suburb to Minnesota at age 24, with her boyfriend whom she met online. As with other women screenwriters before her, Cody crafted her public image as an emerging screenwriter through publishing a memoir. 'Diablo Cody' is merely a pen name she created for herself as a blog writer in the early two thousands. The name stuck as she moved into the sphere of publication, and it is the first clue as to what has been patented as her signature quirky style of writing. In 2005, Cody published her memoir *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*, detailing the years she spent working in Minneapolis as a sex worker. In the memoir, Cody seems to weaponize her self awareness to her unconventional circumstances for the sake of humorous storytelling; she says that a woman who "would come to Minnesota to get naked night after night, to hustle for snow-dampened tens and twenties and Benjamins, well…that girl is what a proper Minnesotan euphemistically calls different," (1-2). Cody was encouraged by her manager to write a

screenplay after seeing the kind of unique writing she was capable of in her novel, and that screenplay eventually became her first feature film, *Juno*, which I will discuss later.

Throughout *Candy Girl*, it is obvious that Cody has a very distinct voice as a storyteller. Her backstory gives her an edge in an industry where it is imperative to stand out from a crowd in order to be discovered. It is obvious that Cody is an outlier when it comes to the traditional trajectory of a screenwriter of her caliber, and this authentically strange path gives her writing a unique, but less than traditional feminine perspective. I emphasize this point due to the authorship of a film typically being understood to belong more to the director than any other hand in the film's creative process. Cody works rather frequently in conversation with body genres as a way of appropriating all the "narratives out there about what men want" and imagining "what would this look like if we flipped the script?" (Cody qtd. in June). From here on, I will delve into how Cody's unorthodox sincerity in her shoes as a woman screenwriter positions her films to be read under new terms of what it means to be a film's author, especially in relation to how the aforementioned theoretic analyses have morphed over time. Scholar Katarzyna Paszkiewicz says that "Rather than thinking about Diablo Cody as a subversive auteur, who 'transcends' the formal dictates of the industrial genre," it is important to analyze "how she activates its generative force in the service of women's stories, without diminishing the importance of her own agent-hood in response to the genre's historical developments," (Paszkiewicz, 68). Genre conventions almost put Cody at an advantage on how to tell a feminist or inherently feminine story, because there is a clear standard of what genre represents; to subvert this both counteracts and reinforces the very model of the body genres.

Section 1: *Juno*

As previously mentioned, *Juno* was the first feature film Diablo Cody had written. The 2007 film follows the titular protagonist, who navigates an accidental teen pregnancy and the surrogate adoption process, all while still getting up for high school every morning and tending to relationships of her own. Juno is played by a then 17 year old Elliot Page, which is important to note in this discussion on identification and gender. Page publicly came out as a transgender man in 2020, which is something that's become increasingly relevant to one of his most notable performances being directly entwined with the experience of girlhood and pregnancy. According to an article from the Washington Post discussing *Juno*, Cody's thought process behind writing the screenplay stemmed from one question: "What's a story that's never been told?" (Chiu). This sentiment alone reminds me of Linda Williams's assesment of the genres she discusses in "Film Bodies"; it is something repeated throughout Cody's filmography that her narrative screenplays reflect heroes or anti-heroes from a very distorted idea of the Hollywood protagonist. Juno MacGuff is a mother, but also a teenage girl, two things that seem juxtaposed to one another. On top of this, Juno is also not someone who overtly or traditionally displays her femininity. So when her pregnancy becomes visible to the naked eye, she feels eyes on her not just because of her age, but also her gender expression. Williams says "melodramas are deemed excessive for their gender and sex linked pathos, for their naked displays of emotion," (3), and I agree that by these standards, *Juno* is a melodrama. One film that Williams discusses at length while covering the melodrama is *Stella Dallas*, a 1937 maternal melodrama film about working class divorcee Stella, and the things she does to allow her daughter to find her own pursuit of happiness. Though very different, *Juno* has a similar certain heightened attention to the position of what it

means to be a mother and sacrifice as one. And while the emotional tenor of the film is pronounced, its embodied dimensions are heightened by the comedic tone of Cody's dialogue.

Williams mentions that besides horror, pornography, and melodrama, comedy could also be considered a body genre. She points directly to clown humor and performances; laughter might be the equivalent of fear, arousal, and sadness. However, the difference she set up to exclude comedy from her general idea of the body genres was that "the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown" (Williams, 4), meaning that we laugh at a clown, not with them. This is significantly different from how we experience the raw emotions and sensational feelings of characters in other body genre films; when Wile-E-Coyote runs into a brick wall, we don't cry and rub our face because we feel his pain. We laugh because his pain is meant to be humorous. Alisa Perren of *Flow*, an online film journal, points out how *Juno*'s humor departs from slapstick and relies more so on developing a comedic "dry" and witty tone suited to the subcultural sensibilities of indie filmmaking and Juno's repeated punctuation of that tone through her quirky, at-time naive and cringe-worthy interjections and mannerisms. Parren categorized Cody's writing style for this movie as a "lucrative niche with a viable audience" (Parren). The article was written in tandem with the 2008 Oscar cycle, which of course saw Diablo Cody take home an award for best screenplay. Parren references the sphere in which *Juno* takes its form; it is an indie film with cynical and dry but witty humor. The jokes in *Juno* are often made at the expense of the viewer, in the sense that the uncomfortable nature of a given situation causes the viewer to cringe. This speaks directly to Juno's naivety as a character most of the time; the ignorance of being so young causes her to enthusiastically speak out of turn or say and do things inappropriate to the situation. The use of cringe importantly draws attention to the film's embodied engagements since, as Lori Marso writes, "Cringing is a bodily posture of

turning inward, and laughter is an affect that opens us to others. To cringe and laugh at the same time is an uncontrollable, disruptive response, a spectator reaction that exposes our collective investments in gendered fantasies," (2–3). The bodily nature of the cringe humor in *Juno* diverges from the mode of comedy that Williams' excludes from her definition of body genres. For example, there's a scene in the film where Juno's father takes her to meet possible adoptive parents of her baby, Mark (Jason Bateman) and Vanessa Loring (Jennifer Garner). Vanessa is unable to have children of her own and jumps at the chance to be professional with Juno, as she mentions that this kind of plan has fallen through before for them. Their house is in a rich suburb, white carpets, walls, and furniture decorate the interior, and Vanessa is nothing short of formal. Juno counteracts Vanessa's formality naturally. Vanessa's attorney asks, "how far along are you?" and Juno responds, "I'm a junior". Juno is routinely reminded of her youth and naivety as a negative, despite actively working through the process of one of the most mature acts a woman is not just known to, but expected to endure. And yet, the humor of her response speaks to Juno ability to "challenge the expected script" set out by Vanessa's question—that Juno's pregnancy is all that matters to her—her naivete creating a subversive take on the presumed centrality of pregnancy as a "defining" experience for women in middle America.

Having this knowledge of *Juno*'s combination of genre provides proper nuance to the story from Cody's position as a screenwriter. Her influence is present in small ways, such as characters like Mark hailing from Chicago, and the film itself taking place in a Minnesotan suburb. But more so than that, by the standards of Linda Williams, the melodrama, most often the maternal melodrama, derives its presumed audience from the women who play a passive role in the grand scheme of a patriarchal society. Cody skews this concept to a complete 180; Juno is both a mother and a young girl, two societal roles traditionally expected to remain silent and

obedient. However, Juno is witty, sarcastic, defiant, and unabashedly open about her pregnancy at such a young age. Her bodily transformation transcends gender roles and expectations, as her increasingly pregnant state manifests in her androgynous body, making her appearance humorous and jarring in its uncategorizable as either child or woman. As Kyra Clarke contends, "Juno's body represents a juncture between girl/woman, innocent/sexual, teenage/maternal, and places these binaries in question," (258). One of Mulvey's foundational ideas in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" comes almost directly from psychoanalysis. She says "the paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world" (803); the castration of the woman represents an envy to not only possess the male physicality on their own body, but to reap the societal benefits of having this male physicality. Juno, as a character, represents a defiance of this notion; she has the physical evidence of her carelessness in womanly sexuality on display, and doesn't take on a traditionally feminine attitude. Her existence as a character ultimately transcends gender roles and expectations for more reason than one. She represents the opposite of how Mulvey describes the "woman's desire" being "subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound" (804); sure, she suffers emotionally through her pregnancy, but the suffering is not directly linked to disliking her circumstances as a pregnant woman. Juno's development comes from her still adolescent attitude towards most situations, and how the overall experience helps her understand these circumstances.

Juno's bodily unruliness places her outside of feminine norms and conventions, and her tomboyish and outspoken personality further makes her an outlier in her suburban Minnesotan community. In addition to just the characterization of Juno herself, the film is populated with complex female characters that allow the narrative to ride the line between melodrama and

comedy. There's much to be said about Cody's style of dialogue, using the film as a vehicle for hilarious catchphrases and lines that cause cringeworthy tension. The jokes and timing are often completely off the wall, and the stylized exchanges grant the film a certain tension in terms of its portrayal of teen experience as itself serious yet absurd. Cody's written humor is whimsical and unorthodox, and it creates a melodramatic tone when grounded in the real-life rhythms of suburban life in Minnesota. There are a handful of characters in particular who I think accentuate this point, one of which being Juno's best friend, Leah (Olivia Thirlby). While the two have a very similar humor throughout the film, it is obvious that through Juno's pregnancy, she grows more mature, while Leah stays the same. After all, she is a sixteen year old girl. However, the noticeable difference creates a division between the two characters so as not to demonize Leah or to separate the two completely, because Juno is still just a child despite carrying a child of her own. But rather, to display Juno's significant emotional growth throughout the film. A scene approximately halfway through the film finds Juno and Leah at the mall. They spot Vanessa from afar, as she watches after a friend's young daughter, playing with her in a children's jungle gym. Leah cracks jokes about Vanessa stealing someone else's child to keep as her own, which Juno laughs at. Leah stands up and exclaims "Boring!" as Juno continues to vehemently watch Vanessa, smiling. When the girls bump into Vanessa exiting the elevator, she explains to Juno that she was just "shopping, you know, with [her] girlfriends", when she is interrupted by Leah, laughing, asking her, "you're gay?". Juno quickly implores Vanessa to ignore Leah. I find this scene interesting in particular because of how easily it separates Leah from Juno in terms of mental maturity as the film gets closer and closer to the birth of the baby. Juno seems to be in between stages of both the other characters in this scene, proposing the concept that motherhood and the feminine identity are dynamic. If Leah represents Juno's before stage, Vanessa in part

represents the metamorphosis into her end stage when the film wraps up. Juno's position as a combination of the two characters gives nuance to Cody's authorship as a female, and arguably inherently feminist, screenwriter.

In addition to Vanessa, the other model of motherhood that Juno is familiar with, being her step-mother, Brenda (Allison Janney). There are two very distinct motherly attributes accredited to Vanessa and Brenda respectively; one is approaching motherhood by the book, with fresh eyes, and the other is seasoned and unafraid to go outside the lines. These two motherly characters are especially significant given that Juno's own birth mother abandoned her and her father when she was a child. Being raised mostly by a single father is in part significant for Juno's pregnancy, but Brenda's involvement in Juno's life allows Juno to experience a nontraditional mother-figure and consider alternatives for her own future in and beyond pregnancy. Brenda takes Juno to her first ultrasound appointment, and when Juno asks not to know the sex of the baby, she mentions that she wants Mark and Vanessa to be surprised. The ultrasound technician says, "Are Mark and Vanessa your friends at school?", to which Juno informs that they are the child's adoptive parents. The technician replies, "Thank goodness for that". Brenda immediately snaps back, asking what she means by that. The technician simply says that teen parents are frequent visitors to the office, and it is always a "poisonous environment" to raise a baby in. Brenda defends Juno, agreeing that adoptive parents might also end up to be poisonous to their children. Brenda pointedly asks the ultrasound technician, "What is your job title exactly?" After the tech sheepishly replies, "I'm an ultrasound technician, ma'am," Brenda retorts, "Well, I'm a nail technician and I think we both oughta stick to what we know."

Brenda's initial response is to defend Juno against someone who doesn't understand the circumstances of her pregnancy. She appears abrasive, and this is not only apparent in this scene. Juno gets into multiple verbal altercations with Brenda, the most important being over her odd relationship with Mark Loring, Vanessa's husband. Throughout the film, Juno takes a liking to Mark, because of his laid back attitude in comparison to his wife. Juno frequently goes to their house to see Mark out of the standard protocol for closed adoption situations. Her intentions are pure, she thinks Mark is interesting and likes hearing about his career as a musician, among other interests they share. Mark's inability to shut down these interactions shows his true colors, and Brenda is quick to call it out to Juno, especially after he tells her that he wants to divorce Vanessa. She lectures her about how dropping in on a "married man" in secret while his wife isn't home is out of line, especially considering the fact that she is soon to birth their baby. Juno sees nothing wrong with this, speaking directly to the naivety of her age. Parren mentions that the optimism in this film provides "momentary slips" that "permit [the characters] an escape and a return to who they really are; youthful idealists" (Parren). Juno has high hopes about Mark's attitude changing to become one half of an amazing parental unit for the child, and it is clear through her actions that she believes she might be able to convince him to stay with Vanessa. Brenda doesn't tell her straight up, but the underlying message is that Juno is a child, and anything Mark wants to do with her in private without his wife present is simply inappropriate.

When Vanessa catches onto this, she adopts more of a motherly attitude on par with that of Brenda. Mark's essential problem with the pregnancy is that he feels he has ample life left to live before he officially settles down to become a father. At this point, Vanessa calls out that if he doesn't feel ready now, he will never feel ready. She says, "if I have to wait for you to become Kurt Cobain, I'm never going to become a mother." Mark and Vanessa indeed get divorced soon

after, but Juno agrees to continue with the planned adoption with Mark out of the picture. I think this point of contention between two sets of characters really calls back to the psychoanalytic idea of the 'castrated woman' that Mulvey discusses. Diablo Cody's intentional placement of two mother figures that are under abnormal circumstances but still thrive as parents is something that these genre alignments (according to Linda Williams) don't account for. Brenda as a step mother, and Vanessa as a single mother, represent a wholesome albeit unlikely message that motherhood is not linear, nor is it meant to fit in one specific mold. The desire or need for two standard parents is proved to be unnecessary. Brenda cares for her step daughter like she cares for her biological daughter, despite the brokenness of their family dynamic before she had married Juno's father. Much like how Vanessa doesn't represent a typical single mother figure, nor does she express the need for a husband in order to be a good mother to her child. Brenda and Vanessa offer alternative models of motherhood for Juno, "destabilizing the presumed inherent link between the pregnant body and the maternal body" and presumed centrality of the nuclear family (Clarke, 261). Seeing these two women move through the situation the way that they do undoubtedly affects Juno's character arc in the third act of the film, as her life returns to normal, or as normal as it could possibly be after becoming a teenage mother.

According to Alissa Parren in her 2008 article, *Juno* represented an indie style of filmmaking that spoke to the adolescent generation under a new socio-political climate than typical indie films of the time and of the distant past. Referred to as the "cinema of quirkiness", the films under this umbrella are "less likely to present sex, violence, and coarse language than [they are] to depict off-kilter but well intentioned characters engaged in offbeat activities" (Parren). This opinion in part has a lot to do with how the film has aged; Parren compares *Juno*'s style and tone to that of 1990s and early 2000s indie films such as *Ghost World* (Terry Zwigoff,

2001) and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1995), in which the worldbuilding is much more cynical without redemption. The article talks almost simultaneously about the film's success and longevity in theaters during its initial release, so in retrospect these ideas are still relevant. Where the key difference comes into play is how cynicism is matched with idealism in the film. Juno is challenged to "[re-adjust] her expectations" (Parren), after the fact opens her up to the idea of being less guarded, more mature, and more sincere. Its noteworthy to mention the ending of Cody's screenplay versus the ending of Jason Reitman's directorial attempt within the actual film under this lens; Cody chose to end the screenplay with Vanessa and the new baby, while Reitman added a final scene where we see Juno's life return back to normal, as she rekindles her on again-off again romance with recurring boyfriend Paulie Bleeker (Michael Cera). The final shot of the film is the two sharing a kiss after singing a rendition of "Anyone Else But You" by The Moldy Peaches. Two distinctly optimistic endings, but one clearly more sanitized from the open endedness and queer undertones of the rest of Cody's screenplay. The choice to end the film with Vanessa rather than Juno holds true this throughline of motherhood and the cycle it carries on, and Reitman's choice to change the final scene compromises the distinctly melodramatic sensibilities of the film. In this way *Juno* both fits into and dissects the very category of the melodrama, or as Williams refers to it, the woman's "weepie," (4) through direct characterization of the motherly figures in the story as figures who promise but cannot fulfill a search for origins for the protagonist.

Because of the film's optimistic stance on motherhood, it has been labeled problematic for its approach to the conversation on abortion in retrospect. Allyson Chiu from the Washington Post mentioned in a 2019 article that "anti-abortion proponents have reportedly praised the film's 'strong pro-life message,' while others have interpreted Juno's actions as indicative of her

freedom to choose what she thinks is best," (Chiu). This is something that Diablo Cody herself has weighed in on; in the interview Chiu references in her article, Cody says that "I probably would have just told a different story in general," (Cody qtd. In Chiu) when discussing recent incidents regarding abortion access being threatened under certain state legislation. "I don't think I was clear enough in terms of why Juno chose not to have an abortion," (Cody qtd. In Chiu) Cody said. One of Juno's first solutions is to visit a free clinic where a parent's permission is not needed for a procedure to terminate a pregnancy to be performed. The pressure she feels from being in the clinic alone causes her to contemplate other alternatives. This scene in particular garners the most attention from both pro-choice and anti-abortion perspectives. Cody mentions that she "wasn't thinking as an activist. I wasn't thinking politically at all," (Cody qtd. In Chiu) and that in her mind as the writer, Juno chose not to have an abortion simply because that's not what she wanted. Cody's response highlights what Clarke identifies as the "pedagogical" dynamics of *Juno*, as a film that doesn't only portray "teen pregnancy as abject, but also a source of happiness, humor, and discomfort, its complexity is acknowledged," (264). The film portrays a metaphorical personal growth through the very physical act of motherhood, and how it changes every mother figure present in the film. Clarke says, "Rather than viewing teen pregnancy as wrong or shameful, Juno's pregnant girl body offers a site for thinking through the complexity of intimate relationships" and their corporeal dimensions (258). Despite the ambiguous message around abortion, Cody grounds the film in how this pregnancy helps Juno move through the smaller, more juvenile conflicts that surround her as a young woman. This bodily affect is not presented as disturbing nor entirely beautiful; there is a middle ground that Juno holds true to her own pregnancy through her own self discovery.

Section 2: *Tully*

Diablo Cody has revisited the theme of motherhood in her filmography since becoming a mother of three herself. The 2018 film, *Tully*, is Cody's more recent attempt to follow a similar path that *Juno* takes, about the unplanned and unexpected parts of becoming a mother. However, *Tully* is a film follows a more middle aged perspective on this process; where Juno feels that she can put her pregnancy behind her and continue to grow up, the protagonist of *Tully,* Marlo, feels that her fleeting youth is marking the end of her life cycle of spontaneity, stripping her of her metaphorical freedom.

Marlo (played by Charlize Theron, also the mother of two children) is expecting her third child, starting the film in her final trimester. Marlo's other two children, Sarah and Jonah, are 8 and 6 years old respectively. Obviously her children are very young, but with her oldest child closer to being a tween than a toddler, it is apparent from the beginning of the film that she has strong feelings about the new baby. Marlo is 40 years old, and her current pregnancy was accidental. To add to her stress, her husband, Drew (Ron Livingston), has recently gotten a promotion and is frequently away on business. He has no ill intentions, but his lack of understanding becomes a handicap to Marlo's situation, especially as a feminine figure with no other feminine adults to confide in. When he is between work and home, he is almost entirely mentally checked out to Marlo's well being. Also, their son Jonah (Asher Miles Fallica), has a severe behavioral disorder that has yet to be diagnosed. The film frequently alludes to the fact that he might be neurodivergent, as he often has meltdowns over changes in routine and issues with noise and textures. One of the first scenes of the film shows Marlo running late to a meeting with the principal of her children's school because of Jonah's extreme anxiety over having to

park the car in a different lot than usual. In order to calm him down, Marlo returned to the primary lot to wait for a spot to open up, thus making her late for the meeting. Between Sarah, Jonah, the pregnancy, and Drew's frequent mental and physical absence, Marlo struggles to handle everything at once. She comes off as abrasive and scatterbrained to people she encounters, and is visibly unwell for the first half of the film.

The most important and unique element of *Tully*'s plot was taken directly from Diablo Cody's life, and inspired her to write the film in the first place. In an podcast interview with Vox's *I Think You're Interesting* podcast, Cody tells host, Todd VanDerWerff, the following in response to how she came up with the idea for the screenplay: "I moved [to Los Angeles] and I was at a party one night and there was a woman there who looked incredible, and she told me that she had, like, a two month old baby. And I said, well how are you here? How do you look so good? And she was like, *night nurse*." (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of 'Jennifer's Body'*). Although the terminology is outdated, the task remains the same. Historically, a night nurse was a caretaker who tended to an infant overnight in order to allow the parents to sleep uninterrupted. Now, as well as in the film, the job title is frequently referred to as a night nanny. Marlo's brother, Craig (Mark Duplass), and his family are much wealthier than Drew and Marlo, and the difference is apparent in where they live, the difference in the clothes they wear, and what kind of conversation they make with one another. While Marlo's family eats dinner at Craig's house, he insists Marlo let him hire them a night nanny as a baby gift. Marlo initially scoffs at this idea for a multitude of reasons, one of which being her stance on accepting outside help with the baby, because caring for the child feels like her sole responsibility. Marlo and Drew also feel uncomfortable accepting such a thing when they could never be able to afford such a luxury themselves. This plot device is used in the film as a vehicle to explore the class consciousness of

Marlo's family, similar to classic maternal melodramas like *Stella Dallas, Mildred Pierce*, and *Imitation of Life*, and how it affects the way Marlo develops throughout the film. In *Juno*, the family dynamic and wealth of the Lorings makes her feel like a misfit, similar to how in *Tully*, this same idea adds to Marlo's feelings of inferiority.

After the birth of baby Mia, Marlo quickly realizes that she has entirely too much on her plate, and caves in to accept Craig's initial offer. Cody describes this shift she had in her own life as well, although the circumstances were slightly different. Cody said, "I got pregnant and I was working a lot. And I thought, you know what, for my third child, I'm going to try this night nurse thing," (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of 'Jennifer's Body'*). She continues to describe it as "life changing" to "have another pair of hands on deck" (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of 'Jennifer's Body'*), without forgetting the elitism within the practice, being able to afford external childcare around the clock. When pondering the idea of hiring a night nanny, Cody says she was dumbstruck over the idea that 'you could opt out of [being a sleep deprived parent] if you have enough money," (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of 'Jennifer's Body'*). The majority of working class Americans grow up being cared for by anyone available to do the job while mom and dad are at work; daycares, before and after school programs, distant relatives, teenage babysitters, and any other inexpensive public institutions or individuals willing to watch your children with little to no financial compensation.

In American pop culture, the figure of the nanny is one that has been often associated with extreme wealth, films like *Uptown Girls* (Boaz Yakin, 2003) and television shows such as *The Nanny* (CBS, 1993-99) depict children of rich parents who have the funds necessary to essentially make sure their children are being raised by someone reliable. Parents, specifically mothers, of a certain tax bracket aren't forced to choose between maintaining a career and caring

for their family. Cody understanding this importance when exploring the class commentary in *Tully* was realized, once again, by writing directly from the influence of her own experiences. In her memoir, Cody recalls her childhood in an upper middle class suburban family. She didn't come from extreme wealth, but she was well off enough to have a private Catholic school education. Marlo's children are being raised in a similar environment; they attend private school, and live in a two story home in the suburbs of the New York City metropolitan area. They are in no means living in poverty, but they also aren't the type of people who have wealth to brag about; nothing about the family is flashy. Drew works an exhaustive schedule to provide for his family, and Marlo makes a tireless effort to keep everything else in order. Their immense work ethic is the reason they feel so opposed to the night nanny at first, and Cody shared this sentiment, saying how "it [went] against all my principles as a parent but [I did it]," (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of 'Jennifer's Body'*) and it was a much appreciated relief from the 24/7 responsibility of an infant.

The night nanny shows up for the first time, introducing herself as the titular character, Tully (Mackenzie Davis). She is a young woman who shares very little about herself with Marlo, but her mysteriousness isn't menacing, it is somehow more enticing and comforting to both Marlo and the viewer. You're never set up to fear that anyone is in danger under Tully's guard, and her presence is nothing short of maternal. Marlo spends most of the film trying to understand Tully and why she does what she does. Tully is a figure who is the most formative in Marlo's character development, helping her realize that even when she doesn't feel like it, she is a hardworking and loving mother. As months go by, the two grow much closer. Tully's presence and friendship helps Marlo become more relaxed, motivated, and even improves her romantic and sexual relationship with Drew. After a spur of the moment night out in Marlo's old Brooklyn

neighborhood, Tully informs her that she can longer work as her night nanny. She provides no other explanation besides that she "was just [there] to bridge a gap," and that "it's time for [her] to move on." This sends Marlo into a spiral, worried that she can't keep reaching her full potential without Tully's help. Consequently, driving home from Brooklyn, Marlo falls asleep at the wheel and drives her car off a bridge and into a river, landing her in the hospital. It is revealed through a brief sequence of dialogue between Drew and a nurse that Tully is Marlo's maiden name. Tully, as we see her, is a projected vision of Marlo's younger self; the real night nanny is never seen or named, and Tully is implied to be merely an imaginary remedy to aid Marlo in navigating her insecurities.

There is something to be said about Marlo's identity as a queer woman in relation to the mental roadblock she experiences throughout the film. It's revealed through a scene towards the beginning of the film that she had a serious queer relationship in her twenties. Marlo runs into her old girlfriend in a coffee shop, finding out that she still lives in the apartment they had shared together in Brooklyn; possibly the absence of that kind of dynamic makes her everyday life as a mother in a heteronormative family structure seem monotonous and restricting. Marlo's relationship with Tully becomes increasingly homoerotic as the film progresses, at one point, even engaging in a threesome with Tully and Drew. Marlo watches Tully seduce Drew, and in retrospect of the twist ending, Marlo was essentially viewing herself from a different perspective in that instance, and many others throughout the film. By engaging in this queer relationship once again with another version of herself, Cody calls into question the idea of self awareness in relation to the physical manifestations of Marlo's emotional anxieties. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey says:

> "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." (Mulvey 808-809)

This quote is increasingly relevant to *Tully*'s depiction of how Marlo views herself through the perception of others versus herself, and how those two perceptions differ. She is used to the role placed onto her by a patriarchal structure, and the two most important parts of keeping a woman within that structure; a husband and children. This is important to the narrative, giving structure to the film under the modernized viewpoint of the melodrama; Williams states that, "films addressed to women in their traditional status under patriarchy– as wives, mothers abandoned lovers," (4) make up the traditional and most recognizable thematic pattern in a melodrama. Marlo represents all three of these categories, the third possibly being the most complicated; she feels abandoned by her husband, her former self, and perhaps most literally, by her previous girlfriend. However, when she speaks to Tully, it is as though she is looking into a mirror, and that identification changes shape. Tully represents the part of Marlo's psyche that is still tethered to a twenty-something mindset, youthful and fun, but also encouraging and level headed. The only negativity Tully brings to Marlo is her trouble with responsibility outside of her work environment, regarding roommates and romantic partners, something in touch with the average characterization of a young woman. Marlo *is* Tully, and the admirable traits she desires about Tully's outlook and attitude were essentially still within her the whole time. Mulvey's original analysis of this Freudian voyeurism through cinema (and Linda Williams's subsequent expansion of the analysis) speaks to how in *Tully*, Cody manipulates Marlo's self perception based on identity, appearance, and comparison. Not only through the metaphor of Tully as a figure of comparison in the film, but also through Marlo's physical body.

In “Film Bodies”, Williams says about the body genres that, “alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite,” (3). Essentially, the boxes created by what is considered low brow entertainment in this context establish a clear other, and the artistic substance within these genres is less than radical, if existent at all. I think *Tully* creates an allegory of this theorization by utilizing the emotional longing and devastation of melodrama and the transformative physicality of the other body genres alongside one another. There is nothing in the film that exists merely to excite in the way horror or pornography do as body genres, but the focus on the female body is an element the film uses to create a tangible identification. You don’t necessarily feel the bodily stress that the pregnancy and postpartum recovery has put onto Marlo’s body in terms of physical sensation, but you feel that toll emotionally, through the embodied dynamics of melodrama that Williams theorizes.

Marlo’s problems with her body are only the surface to the sadness and nostalgia she feels for the freedom of her twenties. For example, in a tense scene where Jonah spills milk on Marlo at the dinner table, she promptly removes her stained shirt. Sarah asks her, “Mom, what’s wrong with your body?”. Marlo stares daggers at her until the scene cuts away; this line is particularly impactful on all things considered in Marlo’s storyline up until this point. It is also worth noting once again Jonah’s position as a child with what is likely to be undiagnosed autism, and his physical relation to Marlo. The film opens with Marlo preparing Jonah for bed, by ‘brushing’ him with a soft bristle brush. She rubs the brush all over his arms, legs, and back, and counts with him as she does so. It is a calm moment between the two, with warm lighting and soft instrumentals filling the score. The fact that a depiction of such a physical act of both love and routine opens the film is telling of the thematic maternal throughline.

Incorporating close up shots of this act of 'brushing' that helps Jonah navigate sensory stimulation through this mother and son dynamic sets up how Marlo has a maternal relationship to almost every major character in some capacity. At the end of the film, Jonah and Marlo have a dual epiphany moment where they realize that the 'brushing' isn't as necessary as it once was, and that Jonah just "likes being by [her]". The closeness of the two is more important than the ritual, deeming the routine obsolete in comparison. This notion solidifies the former idea of sensation through melodrama, in a way that is more complex than just sadness. Williams says that the "very existence and popularity" of body genres "hinges upon rapid changes taking place in relations between the 'sexes' and by rapidly changing notions of gender– of what it means to be a man or a woman," (12). Tully helps Marlo to discover (or rediscover, rather) this sense of autonomy through something that isn't gendered. After spending most of the film essentially in two separate bodies, what subsides her desire to be a past version of herself was realizing that she can become a new version of herself and keep the key fundamentals of her importance the same.

Tully doesn't make the statement that motherhood isn't beautiful or rewarding, but it does highlight that there is an extreme emotional damage that can come from having a difficult or unwanted pregnancy. The melodramas that Williams describes use the pain of the mother figure to essentially explain how watching your children grow older and more independent is tragic in itself, but *Tully* uses this ideology to explore how watching yourself grow older and become devalued by society as a mature woman is the real tragedy. This fractured mother and child unit, intensified through what we constitute as a typical maternal relationship, reflects back onto Marlo as a mother and self perceptive relationship. Williams says that melodrama "is the genre that seems to endlessly repeat our melancholic sense of the loss of origins– impossibility hoping

to return to an earlier state which is perhaps most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother," (10-11). This idea transforms into Marlo's loss (or projected loss) of any sense of self. As with *Juno,* Tully interrogates how age, gender, sexuality class, and motherhood become differently inscribed on the body. *Tully* successfully blurs the lines of the body genres; fear, dread, and sadness are all derived from Marlo's emotional insecurities, that develop for her, into drastic physical changes. Her new-found agency comes from a perversion of those exact principles. As Rachel Williamson writes, "While we later learn that Tully and Marlo are, in fact, the same person, this narrative twist cannot fully undermine or detract from the pleasure to be derived from witnessing these articulations of tenderness and love that are initiated as a result of motherhood but which have ultimately rippled out to touch other relationships," (216). Marlo can be interpreted as a more mature Juno-like figure as her relationship with Tully allows her to re-enter a threshold-state akin to adolescence that allows her to harness corporeality in and beyond the mother-child bodily relationship.

Tully and *Juno* are sister films, in that both films are the result of Cody's collaboration with director-producer Jason Reitman. Cody has spoken about her relationship with Reitman regarding their professional work together in an interview with Script, saying "I think I had such a positive collaboration on my first film, which was *Juno* with Jason Reitman, and he made me feel like I was an incredibly valued person in that process, which I was, and the writer should always be," (Cody, *Character Informing the Narrative*). Harrowing conversations with other writers barred from the sets of their own films helped ignite a flame underneath Cody to recognize how valuable it was to have a relationship with a director who is such a team player. For Reitman to invite Cody to be so collaboratively involved with the filmmaking process goes to show how these two films not only represent her growth as a writer, but her authorship in the

transition from screenplay to finished film.

From the very beginning of her public voice as a writer, Cody was interested in the character study of herself before any film. In *Candy Girl*, Cody states, “I desperately wanted to be a stripper, but I winced at the thought of inevitable rejection. Or did I secretly long for the stimulation of ridicule in my otherwise placid life?” (Cody, 39). Much like Marlo, who clings onto a false past, Cody held onto a job that provided her with corporeal thrills. To be looked at and not be seen as anything other than young, fun, sexy, and mysterious, however, seems to be an intimidating thought for both Diablo Cody as well as her characters, and perhaps informed her choice to use *Tully* as a vehicle for exploring the metamorphic maternal body. Cody’s own ambivalence regarding her upward class mobility and conformity to the Hollywood practice of discouraging maternity leave and instead hiring nannies inform the melodramatic framing of Marlo’s experience. As Helen Warner notes, “The assumption that women are better placed to direct ‘feminine’ genres is not new, but it has particular resonance in a post #MeToo era when personal testimonies have additional currency... authorizing [women] to tell stories that come from personal, domestic, and private experiences” (299). While Cody’s outspoken discussion of her experiences navigating motherhood and the industry that inspired *Tully* foreshadowed broader critiques of misogyny in Hollywood post #MeToo, arguably Cody’s turn to body horror has experienced a more pronounced resurgence in popularity for feminist and queer audiences in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

Section 3: *Jennifer’s Body*

After the success of *Juno* as Diablo Cody’s first screenplay-turned-film, she was in a

certain position of creative freedom; in a 2018 interview, Cody told Vox, “I was in a situation where I could write literally any movie that I wanted,” (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of ‘Jennifer’s Body’*). During this time, *Juno* was anticipating release and a lot of positive buzz had generated around Jason Reitman and Cody as director and writer. She had the opportunity to write a film from less of a mainstream convention of structure, and having the opportunity to also help produce this next film, she did just that. On the film, *Jennifer’s Body*, Cody said, “I love horror. I always wanted to do something like that — a horror movie with a female protagonist and a female villain. And that was what I wrote,” (Cody, *Diablo Cody on Jennifer’s Body, Juno, and More*). The 2009 film follows Jennifer, played by Megan Fox, who becomes an undead cannibal after an attempted satanic sacrifice goes awry. Members of sleazy indie band, Low Shoulder, attempt to sacrifice Jennifer to the devil in exchange for fame and fortune. She is kidnapped and seemingly murdered after seeing their performance at a dive bar (where Diablo Cody cameos as a bartender). Jennifer returns to school the next day, still alive, and with seemingly no recollection, or rather a dismissive recollection, of the events from the night prior. Low Shoulder had believed Jennifer to be a virgin, so the sacrifice was partially unsuccessful; Jennifer survives, but has to eat other human beings, specifically men, in order to stay strong. It is never fully disclosed what exactly it is that Jennifer becomes in this state, but from visual language it can be assumed that her state of being is a cross between a victim of possession, a zombie, and a werewolf. She is undead, transformative, blood thirsty, and being held hostage within her own physical vessel.

At its core, *Jennifer’s Body* is a film about a sororal relationship between Jennifer and her best friend, Anita (nicknamed Needy by Jennifer), played by Amanda Seyfried, and the queer affect that manifests through their relationship and Jennifer’s transformation. The confusing

social dynamic of Jennifer and Needy's friendship is explained through their long, shared past; Needy is more reserved and introverted while Jennifer is outgoing and popular, but their friendship dates back to what the film refers to as their "sandbox love" as young children. They are tethered to one another in the film's present merely because of their history, and not because of a strong friendship or any similarities. Multiple characters, including Needy's boyfriend, Chip (Johnny Simmons), point out that their friendship seems demanding to the point of queer attraction. Jennifer and Chip vocalize their distaste for one another to Needy throughout the film; they both believe the other is controlling and selfish. Needy has a difficult time balancing the two relationships, and once Jennifer has fully transformed, Chip becomes one of her targets.

There is an aspect of this plot device that derives from an assumed compulsory heterosexuality on Jennifer's part, eliminating whatever comes in between her and Needy, while also making a statement on what it means to exist as a sexually liberated woman in a patriarchal society. From the very inception of Jennifer's sacrifice, her worth as a human being is discussed through her status as a sexual object. Her importance to Low Shoulder is rooted entirely in the concept of religious modestness and purity culture; whether or not she is able to prove her virginity for sacrificial purposes is the only role she plays in their desire for her. In "Film Bodies", Linda Williams says, "...pornography [is] aimed, presumably, at active men and melodramatic weepies aimed, presumably, at passive women…with contemporary gross out horror aimed at adolescents careening wildly between the two masculine and feminine poles," (4). *Jennifer's Body* as a horror-comedy made by and presumably for women distorts this reputation of sexual and violent content being catered towards a male spectator, while expanding on the idea that horror films appeal to a less gendered audience than the other two main body genres mentioned in the essay.

In 1987, film scholar Carol Clover published an essay titled “Her Body, Himself” which eventually made its way into her book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* a few years later in 1992. In this essay, Clover discusses slasher films and their female protagonists, or final girls, through this lens of “cross gender identification,” (517). This concept essentially explains the process in which identification with a protagonist is achieved against the barrier of gender; Clover says that in a typical slasher film, “the killer is with few exceptions recognizably human and distinctly male; his fury is unmistakably sexual in both roots and expression; his victims are mostly women, often sexually free and always young and beautiful,” (516). Through this model, these films typically create a situation in which the female protagonist must slay the male antagonist in order to survive, and by doing so, her gender expression becomes inherently more phallicized. It is theorized as a subconscious way for male viewers to identify with a female hero; “The fluidity of engaged perspective is in keeping with the universal claims of the psychoanalytic model,” says Clover (519), essentially saying that the function of threat and victim exist in the same field, “regardless of anatomical sex,” (519). *Jennifer’s Body* creates a unique example of this idea, where the victims are almost exclusively men, and two women (Jennifer and Needy) must attempt to slay one another in the final battle for survival. This also corrals Williams’s idea of the adolescent attraction to horror rather than a gendered attraction; In Jennifer’s man-eating, she is essentially inheriting the male physicality into that of her own body, in a way to make herself more feminine. She reaps the benefits of their masculinity repurposed into her presentation as a sensual female figure to stay powerful. She physically and metaphorically becomes, in part, who she consumes, using her feminine traits and sexuality to her advantage. The power imbalance is shifted from sexual violence placed onto the female body, to feminine sexuality as a form of vengefulness.

Williams says, “Pornography is today more often deemed excessive for its violence than for its sex, while horror films are excessive in their displacement of sex onto violence,” (2). I find this quote relevant especially in Jennifer’s case, as she grows into a sexually liberated figure from being viewed as an object of male desire, greed, and violence. This dynamic changes Jennifer from being a victim at the beginning of the film, to being the perpetrator once transitioned. She was once prey, and has become the apex predator. She not only becomes an animalistic, exaggerated figure of toxic masculinity, but also of hyper femininity. Through both of these extremes, her amalgamation of gender expression and characteristics place her into a certain spot of androgyny within this theoretical framework.

It could be argued from Jennifer’s need to cannibalize that a gendered balance is necessary for her to remain the strongest version of herself. “Slasher films present us in startlingly direct terms with a world in which male and female are at desperate odds but in which, at the same time, masculinity and femininity are more states of mind than body,” says Clover (513), which can be theorized in this context to help understand why a once normal girl with average anxieties and jealousies takes her final form as an evil, exaggerated version of her former self. Jennifer becomes a negative stereotype in order to evade the ones placed upon her non-consentingly. Without this balance, she could die, or at the very least, feel inferior to the other women around her, including Needy. This dynamic further foregrounds *Jennifer’s Body*’s commentary on competitiveness within female friendships that holds the approval of men at its moral center, as well as the outcome of a one sided, queer-coded relationship between Needy and Jennifer. Cross gender identification is manifested into Jennifer’s situation; in order to avenge herself from a patriarchal male power, she must in part identify with this power.

Another essay by Linda Williams titled “When the Woman Looks” predates both “Film

Bodies" and "Her Body, Himself", and discusses a more general theorization of gender in the horror film. Williams says this, speaking to a female horror film audience:

> "Whenever the movie screen holds a particularly effective image of terror, little boys and grown men make it a point of honor to look, while little girls and grown women cover their eyes or hide behind the shoulders of their dates. These are excellent reasons for thus refusal of the woman to look, not the least of which is that she is often asked to bare witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation and murder," (Williams, 61).

In this situation, these ideas are very applicable to the inciting incident in *Jennifer's Body*; the film starts at the end of the story, with Needy in prison, serving time for murdering Jennifer. The only way she can protect everyone from Jennifer is to get rid of her, and that is what she decides to do. The end of the film loops back around to Needy's time in prison, where she eventually escapes and murders the members of Low Shoulder. Williams mentions how when the woman does choose to face the perpetrator of the violence she's suffered, she is "violently punished" for how "threatening" that act of looking is "to male power," (65). In this context, Needy is punished for essentially doing what is best for all parties involved, taking away Jennifer's power to compare herself to Needy as well as seeking revenge on the band members for creating this situation for the two girls in the first place. In opposition to this, Jennifer starts off the film as a pawn in the sacrifice, begging for her life, as the band members mercilessly stab her to death. She then switches this narrative, acting out her revenge on every male character she has the ability to seduce. She no longer has the same powerlessness she had before, and no longer has to feel that she isn't in control in a vulnerable situation. By pulling the right strings to turn a story about a tragic and violent event that so many women are all too familiar with, Diablo Cody uses *Jennifer's Body* to tell a story about reversed gender roles and expectations. This tactic once again can be traced back to Laura Mulvey and her discussion of scopophilia, the power of the

male gaze, and the power in flipping that gaze to represent a swapped gender dynamic that could gesture toward a feminist counter-cinema.

As *Jennifer's Body* is widely regarded as a feminist cult classic, it is important to once again consider Cody's place in this feminist critique. This film particularly takes place in a podunk town with her signature Minnesota flair; instead of being head cheerleader, as the most popular girl in school, Jennifer is a flag spinner for the color guard. The character's visit dive bars, hang out in the woods and abandoned buildings, and engagement in subcultures is looked down upon. But more importantly, casual racism and the use of offensive slurs is frequent throughout the film. It could be argued that all of these instances were satirical, pointing to the humor in smalltown America, their lack of social awareness and political correctness. However, I personally see most of these lines as a direct result of Cody's identity; a white screenwriter from a middle class background creating a script in the late 2000s, when a lot of these rather offensive ideas were abundant in popular culture, which isn't necessarily something to look back on with distaste. It wasn't meant to be offensive more than it was meant to be humorous, and it isn't hard to tell the difference. There is a sort of ambivalence that comes with referring to Cody as a feminist writer, considering her early (and argued continual) lack of intersectionality.

Her films are not radically disruptive to the point that the themes can be categorized as feminist writing from certain perspectives. In this particular instance, and many others throughout her writing career, it's easy to nitpick Cody's work through the lens of white, middle class feminism, and those viewpoints aren't wrong to vocalize. However, the point of contention in this conversation is the importance I, and many others, find in *Jennifer's Body* specifically in how it has evolved to become aligned with feminist filmmaking and the conversation of queer representation. In an interview with Slant Magazine after *Jennifer's Body* premiered at the

Toronto International Film Festival, Cody said the following when asked about the implications of feminist themes through the film working with a female director:

> "Well, obviously there is some feminist stuff in there, but we tried to be as subversive as possible. We know that no one wants to be hit over the head with a frying pan of a feminist movie. But we definitely had something to say, and the fact of the matter is my stance is that I just want to give women the best lines. I think about what the best lines in the movie are, and then I give them to girls. That might not seem so radical, but it doesn't happen that often, and that's my M.O." (Cody, *Diablo Cody on Jennifer's Body, Juno, and More*).

It's important to understand this quote from the time this interview was conducted to truly understand how Cody saw the feminist themes in her own work. This quote is taken directly from the *Jennifer's Body* press tour and festival circuit in 2009. It is something in and of itself for a female writer to expand on how their work is not intentionally made to be a revolutionary piece of feminist critique, but by executing a story featuring multifaceted female characters and their niche complexities, it is almost as if that is a work of feminist rebellion on its own. *Jennifer's Body* seeks to disrupt how the male gaze interacts with the passive female victim complex in a way that doesn't seek to diminish the intelligence of its female audience. In this interview, Cody continues to discuss her partnership with director Karyn Kusama and how that has worked itself into the themes of the film. Cody acted as both writer and a producer on *Jennifer's Body*, being a part of the process in choosing Kusama as the film's director. Cody says, "I've been lucky enough to work with directors who will actually sit and listen to me while I describe scenes, and then they've incorporated part of that initial vision into their final vision," and that if that weren't the case, she would despise having to "constantly second-[guess]" one another, and "translate [to] each other," (Cody, *Character Informing the Narrative*), making the production process very incoherent. She spent many days on set fleshing out physicalities with Kusama, and working through the visions they both had for the project as a finished film. To some, having female writers and directors working on a film is enough for it to be considered a piece of feminist

cinema, but I think that opinion alone detracts from how subversive a female centered horror comedy really was, especially in the late 2000s at its conception. This can be seen from the very first marketing tactics 20th Century Fox used while promoting and distributing the film.

A key idea in Carol Clover's essay lies within the following question: "How are we [to] explain the appeal to a largely male audience of a film genre that features a female victim-hero?" (Clover, 517). This dilemma is inherent to that idea of cross gender identification, and was dually present in the rather disastrous marketing campaign of *Jennifer's Body*. Today, the film has found a new appreciation, referred to as "...[a] critically derided movie [that] has been reclaimed as a deeply feminist horror film emblematic of the Me Too movement," (St. James). But in the words of Diablo Cody herself in an interview with Vox, "I know it's so cheap to blame things on external shit, but the movie was marketed all wrong," (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of 'Jennifer's Body'*). With Megan Fox as the lead, the film already had fuel to draw in the audience of young men who had garnered attention to Fox's performance in Michael Bay's 2007 *Transformers* film.

While the studio attempted to reach that audience, they failed to reach young women, which is essentially who the film was for. The sex appeal was heightened in trailers and posters, often failing to include anyone except Fox in the material. "I'm not usually an argumentative person. In fact, I'm really passive," says Cody. "But that was like the one time I've gotten in a fight, because I was so furious. They said, "We want to market this movie to boys who like Megan Fox. That's who's going to go see it." And I was, like, "No! This movie is for girls [too]!" That audience, they did not attempt to reach," (Cody, *The Life, Death, and Rebirth of 'Jennifer's Body'*). There is something to be said about a film marketed to the wrong majority

simply because of the status of the lead as a cultural sex symbol; was this a film women couldn't enjoy? Was Fox only there to sell a film to her male audience? These questions reflect some of the very sexism the film attempts to deconstruct. In mainstream cinema, even something as obvious as the plot of a film can be misconstrued in order to fit into an agenda that attempts to put female creatives into boxes; men will get pleasure from watching her suffer, or from watching her arousal, there can be no in between and no complexity. Cody, Kusama, Seyfried, and Fox all stand in as an artistic team of women bringing this story to life, and that in itself represents a shift in the culture of feminist authorship. As Carol Clover states in "Her Body, Himself", "filmmakers seem to know better than critics [that] gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane," (519).

Section 4: *Lisa Frankenstein*

Diablo Cody's next theatrically released project after *Tully* in 2018 was the 2024 horror-comedy, *Lisa Frankenstein*. Similar to *Jennifer's Body* (and taking place within the same universe according to Cody), the female written and directed film follows a female protagonist and a course of revenge against the men who have wronged her. However, *Lisa Frankenstein* takes a bigger leap, using this plot structure in pursuit of love rather than bloodlust. The film follows Lisa Swallows (played by Kathryn Newton), in constant mourning of her late mother who was brutally killed by a masked axe murderer. In wake of her mothers death, she has trouble adjusting to living with her step-family, even though the incident had happened two years prior. Lisa's father, Dale (Joe Chrest), is unattentive, and allows a mutual hatred between Lisa and her step-mother, Janet (Carla Gugino), to boil over. Her bubbly and ever popular step-sister, Taffy (Liza Soberano), weaponizes her generosity to try and improve Lisa's less than impressive social

status, much to Lisa's dismay. With no friends and no one to relate to, Lisa spends her free time in a cemetery, in particular at the grave of a young man killed by a lightning strike in the early Victorian era. While visiting the cemetery, Lisa exclaims, "I wish I could be with you," to the headstone of the man. And in an act of divine clairvoyance, her wish is granted during a storm where lightning once again strikes the man's headstone. Through the electricity, the man, played by Cole Sprouse (never referred to by name, but billed in the credits as 'the creature') rises from the dead as a zombie. Cody mentioned in a 2024 interview with Script that when first envisioning the screenplay for *Lisa Frankenstein*, she "originally thought of it in [a] sort of very romantic, melodramatic," structure (Cody, *Character Informing the Narrative*). "I had the seed of an idea in my mind of this script about a living girl and her dead boyfriend," she said, "I don't know why I was so fixated on that idea," (Cody, *Character Informing the Narrative*). The film takes place in a neon taffeta 1989, using the excess of the time periods' fashion and pop culture to coat its background. The film's title as well as the plot are obvious references to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and the cultural phenomenon it has become in the age of cinema and television. The original concept for the film as a piece of horror, romance, comedy, and melodrama has ample significance in the realm of Linda Williams's theoretical framework on body genres, but also to the original source material it is referencing. A throughline of abandonment is key to understanding melodrama as a body genre, both through the Cody-written films I've discussed thus far, as well as the classic melodramas I've claimed Cody's films have used as a formatting blueprint. *Frankenstein* is a tragedy in true melodramatic fashion aligning perfectly with these claims. The novel examines the fractured relationship between creator and creation that mirrors that of a mother and child. This callback to gothic horror and the roots of *Frankenstein* specifically as a story written by a female author is important to understanding how

Diablo Cody moves through the world of the film; although it is Cody's only other horror-comedy to date, it is difficult to compare *Lisa Frankenstein* to *Jennifer's Body. Lisa Frankenstein* is more of a traditional love story, ripe with satirical commentary on death, sex, and sexual violence that exaggerate the campiness of comedy and tragedy. The film both blurs and distinctly separates the lines between love and the physical act of sex; the pleasure in feminine sexuality takes precedence over the patriarchal dissection of the female body. In a reversal of the traditional slasher film dynamic, the male body is subjected to violence as an act of revenge and acts of lustful objectification.

Lisa Frankenstein highlights both the castration anxiety of horror films as well as the loss of origin of melodrama discussed by Williams in "Film Bodies". The film climatically changes course to a point where the surface level tragedy becomes the achievement of female desire without punishment; the punishment is, in itself, what Lisa desires after a long period of pain. The creature murders Janet, among others, and in a final act of independence from her mortal suffering, Lisa commits suicide by electrocution in Taffy's tanning bed. In order to move onto the afterlife with the creature forever, Lisa must evade life itself. The consequences to being an accomplice to homicide are an afterthought, as Lisa's biggest priority is escaping her own trauma and living forever a life of pleasure. This ending is jarring, as the female protagonist is not typically granted satisfying release from their desires, but rather, punished for them with loss or death. Lisa defies how the horror or melodrama woman is typically written, testifying so deeply in her own desires that she is willing to die to get what she wants, or rather that she would prefer to die if it meant evading the violence and heartbreak that women are so frequently subjected to. Williams stresses that there is "a sadistic voyeurism which punishes or endangers the woman through the agency of an active and powerful male character; and festishistic over-valuation,

which masters the threat of castration by investing the woman's body with an excess of aesthetic perfection," (64). This speaks to how Lisa is being forced to face her own torment and trauma consistently throughout the film at the hand of misogynistic individuals and power structures; her pain and pleasure are identifiable to a viewer, but they are not permanent. Lisa becomes the antithesis of the final girl by ending her own life, but it is on her terms. Carol Clover says that by enacting a shift in power through survival, "the Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with," (520). Lisa effectively phallicizes herself in the imbalance of power, turning her focus to self serving revenge and pleasure. There are a number of instances in which this claim can connect to, and this is something explored through shifting the roles of passive-female and active-male that Mulvey discussed, shaping the structure of the slasher film.

"I had to depict all of it through screen direction," (Cody, *Character Informing the Narrative*), said Cody, discussing the significance of the creature as a character. Although reanimated, the creature does not have the ability to speak. Sprouse plays the character through body language, facial expressions, and perhaps most important to Cody's authorship, actions. Lisa projects conversations onto him, as if able to communicate with him in another non-verbal language. Clover says "[The Final Girl] and the killer have a certain link: sexual repression," (520), which ends up becoming the element that draws the two characters closer together, eventually in death. The creature is not a character that can be left up to the improvisation of an actor or the guidance of a director, as Cody has a clear position in the action of how the creature moves about the film. Lisa and the creature become partners in crime, in which Lisa has to be the voice for the both of them. The male figure takes a backseat to the female figure's needs, wants, and sometimes even orders, swaying between the poles of gender identification in the film. The

only time the creature speaks is in the epilogue, in which he sits with Lisa, seemingly in the afterlife, and reads aloud to her a love poem titled *To Mary*, written to *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley by husband Percy Bysshe Shelley. This acts as a final nod to the idea of creation versus creator, and the importance of being not only perceived, but loved, by someone else in pursuit of one's own desire.

The film does not shy away from blood, and most of the humor and feminist undertones arrive at a point of tension in the convention of *Lisa Frankenstein* as a slasher. The first person the creature kills is Janet; as she threatens to send Lisa to a mental institution, the creature knocks her unconscious and cuts her ear off. In the climax of the film, the creature helps Lisa to lure Doug (Bryce Romero), her lab partner into the woods, seemingly to seduce him. This scene is very reminiscent of the ways in which Jennifer finds her victims in *Jennifer's Body*, although Lisa has another male figure at her beck and call to help with her scheme. Doug had sexually assaulted Lisa in the beginning of the film while she was intoxicated, and rumors had made Lisa out to be at fault. The creature cuts off Doug's hand and leaves him to die. Shortly thereafter, Lisa and the creature simultaneously arrive at the house of Michael Trent (Henry Eikenberry), who had been the main interest of Lisa's romantic pursuit. They both find Michael out of jealousy; the creature has grown a romantic attachment to Lisa, and Lisa has discovered that Taffy has been seeing Michael behind her back. The pair figuratively and literally catch Michael with his pants down in secret with Taffy, and the creature retaliates by axing off Michael's penis. In all three instances, the creature keeps the severed limbs, and reattaches them to his own body with help from Lisa. On this aspect of the film, Diablo Cody had this to say in talks with Script:

> "One thing that was really important to me as well, and probably the most important thing is the idea of her repurposing these body parts that have hurt her. Like, they take the hand of this kid

> who sexually assaulted her, and she sews it onto The Creature who uses it to make music and to touch her. I just thought that there was something very cathartic about that. Her stepmother doesn't listen to her, they get her ear, and then obviously, the denouement [laughs] at the end of the movie, which I knew from day one that that was gonna happen. It was all building up to that always," (Cody, *Character Informing the Narrative*).

The significance of the specific body parts taken from the antagonists of Lisa's story are directly correlated to this recurring theme of her own desire; the creature puts himself between Lisa and the people who've wronged her, using their body parts to actually listen to her and embrace her with a consensual touch. It is almost a complete reversal of the castration anxiety presented by a typical slasher villain, who in this case, are the harsh and unforgiving individuals who exploit her vulnerability, and the very system of misogyny that keeps Lisa from being able to express both her sadness or sexuality in a safe way. The creature re-phallicizes himself in his desire to please Lisa; after sewing Michael's dismembered penis onto the creature's corpse, Lisa ultimately loses her virginity to him. This is a chivalric act by the metrics of their relationship, the creature even posing like a marble sculpture with his hands rested noblely on his hips as Lisa stitches him together. By using the physicality of those who harmed her on her own terms, Lisa breaks the traditional status of the female weepie protagonist; she overcomes her traumas and receives pleasure in the process.

Williams says, "in the classic horror film the terror of the female victim shares the spectacle along with the monster," (5), but in this case, the catharsis is achieved through Lisa finally receiving the kind of loving embrace from the film's 'monster' that she had been searching for since the loss of her mother. "Horror films often kill off promiscuous women, allowing only the non-sexual 'good' girls to survive," (Williams, 6), and in a way, this plot device is true to the formula of the slasher film. Lisa becomes a sexually curious character in the events that lead to her demise. However, it is the intention of these actions that matter more in a

feminist viewpoint; Lisa's death shortly after losing her virginity to the creature was of her own volition. It is simultaneously vengeful of her mother's death, and the loss of her own self within the mourning of her mother. As in all three body genres, *Lisa Frankenstein* works as a text and as a visual film in the mode of excess. This is reinforced by highly stylized elements throughout the film that utilize exaggerated modes of mise en scene; including multiple animated sequences, black and white scenes reminiscent of silent films and classic melodramas, dream sequences with imagery of heightened reality, as well as the tension of dark humor through gore. These sequences cannot solely be attributed to Cody's influence (although she did work closely with director Zelda Williams to curate these stylized sections), but her style is carried consistently with the tone of excess that heightens these more abstract scenes.

Diablo Cody stresses that the written tone and thematic message of *Lisa Frankenstein* were important to keep in tact through the production process. She mentioned to Script that a Victorian era love interest was chosen because of the culture the Victorians had around grieving, and how different it is from the time period in a film like *Lisa Frankenstein*. "With this movie, I knew what I wanted it to be about. And it was really important to me to preserve that emotional core," Cody says, "We are expected to keep our distance from death and to move on as quickly as possible," (Cody, *Character Informing the Narrative*). This film emulates the power of uncomfortability in death and subsequently in the body genres as a whole; Lisa is a character who admits herself that she is not afraid of death. How different her experiences with grief are from the people around her give her more emotional depth in navigating a relationship with death, whether it is through her mother's murder, or a literal intimacy with death, through the representation of an undead lover.

Lisa Frankenstein as a case study of authorship through Diablo Cody's perspective is interesting in that it is a very recent installment in her filmography. The film is less than two years old, but stands in as a marker from where Cody's career as a screenwriter began, and where it remains as of today. It acts almost as a period piece in how the voice of the woman has evolved in film industry spaces. A seventeen year career as a screenwriter has given her a unique opportunity; many women who start in the sphere of indie filmmaking transition into the mainstream after a few tentpole films. Filmmakers like Greta Gerwig have followed similar paths as Cody, debuting into the industry with independent films, and eventually leading blockbuster projects. This allows them to not only write, but direct films that are more thematically linked to the modes of traditional Hollywood cinema. This however, is something of the Hollywood regime that Cody has contested; her style has not faltered from the quirky oddball humor and indie sensibility of *Juno* all the way back in 2007, and even the writing she published prior to *Juno*, such as *Candy Girl*. She remains interested in the body genres in her films and hasn't shied away from exploring the perverted aesthetics of pornography, horror, and melodrama since becoming a successful household name. She remains almost exclusively interested in these genres that are still viewed to have low cultural value, adding layers of substance through the coming of age stories of all of her female characters. Not only this, but Cody also has not yet made the shift into directing. Being able to produce her own projects has helped in achieving her creative vision, but directing isn't something she has attempted on a large scale. For a non-directing screenwriter to have such a distinct style almost two decades into her career is significant to the longevity of the kind of films she continues to write.

Diablo Cody is now a sought after collaborator for upstart women creatives; she has helped to usher in a new wave of visibility for artists who make films on the body politics of

queerness and feminism; like Zelda Williams, whose directorial debut was *Lisa Frankenstein*, and was in part chosen by Cody for the film. Much like how Jason Reitman platformed Cody into her debut, Cody has begun to do the same for others under her creative authority. Her films in this kind of counter cinema have been catapulted into the mainstream, increasing visibility for serious work in the realm of body genre, especially under the pretenses of a female perspective and authorship. Rebecca J. Sheehan states that, "We limit women when we hold them solely responsible for these structural biases and when we hold them and their output to a theoretical feminist ideal," (11). Cody's films may not be overtly feminist, and she doesn't claim them to be. However, her films do not exist in a vacuum; a female-written, female-led slasher, coming of age, comedy, or melodrama is inherently in opposition to how many films of the same stature of genre are made exclusively to be engaged within a gender-biased position. "By recognizing the limitations of feminism-as-genre in an unequal world, we might avoid dooming women filmmakers to a recursive cycle of failing to meet impossible expectations," (11), meaning that Cody's unflinching bottom line of staying true to her vision represents an act of defiance. By carving out her own space as a writer, Diablo Cody has cemented herself as an enduring figure in both the indie and contemporary scenes. She continues to innovate within the body genres, engaging with spectatorship from the perspectives of her female protagonists and displaying the variety in collaboration and creative authority screenwriters can undertake when the opportunity arises.

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