

Framed For Desire

The sexualisation of women in Hollywood is a long-standing and multifaceted issue, for decades appearance being valued and prioritised within women in media over ability, gift or effort. Megan Fox, particularly in her work on *Jennifer's Body* (2009), is a case study that highlights Laura Mulvey's 1975 theory often referred to as 'The Male Gaze', revolving around the ways in which the industry manipulates young actresses to appeal to masculine markets. While the film's feminist horror aspect was the initial focus of praise; media frenzy and ad campaign promotions centered around Fox's appearance. This presentation will explore the ways in which Megan Fox was objectified both during the promotion of *Jennifer's Body* and in her broader career, highlighting the systemic problems within Hollywood. It will also discuss the impact this imaging has on young audiences, and more specifically, the mental health effects on young women.

The sexualisation of women in film has serious repercussions beyond media representation. Actresses like Megan Fox have for decades been reduced to sole beings designed to appease to male fantasies, rather than being respected for their craft. This reinforces harmful messaging to women that their value rests on their appearance and seductive ability, alone. This promotional strategy that Hollywood has adopted solidifies toxic beauty standards and unattainable expectations of women - an issue that has been surrounding the entertainment industry for decades. *Jennifer's Body* is a Comedy/Horror revolving around a man- murdering a girl. Diablo's intention of the film merely emphasises the ways in which directors and marketing management can take a script or person that is intended to be portrayed one way, and completely sexualise both elements severely. The marketing of *Jennifer's Body* shows how even feminist texts can be warped by industry pressure - in selling the movie as a sexual fantasy, the deeper feminist critique was completely overlooked. This matters because of the weight that media, press and the entertainment industry hold in their impression on young women. The beauty and sexuality expectations pushed by these narratives are internalised by young girls, having an impact on self-esteem and mental health as reported by a study done notably in 2006 (Lawrie et al., 2006). Noticing these trends is essential if we are going to push for change in Hollywood and beyond.

To narrow in on a tangible example of hyper-sexualisation within film, one could look to the case study of Karyn Kusama's 2009 '*Jennifer's Body*'. This section will explore the ways in which young women within the film industry are exploited and objectified to appease the male gaze and, later, how this dark underbelly of hyper-sexualization has altered the industry for women indefinitely. '*Jennifer's Body*' is a Horror/Comedy starring Megan Fox and Amanda Seyfried following the storyline of a young schoolgirl who turns into a boy-eating demon. While a ridiculous sounding narrative, this is one of the most palpable films, alongside Michael Bay's, '*Transformers*' and Paul Weitz's '*American Pie*', for locating a clear use of women as sexual pawns to draw in male audiences. The fashion choices made by Kusama are intentional and telling. From superfluously revealing booty shorts to ludicrously tight low-rise jeans, Fox's character, Jennifer, is portrayed from the outset of the film as a popular and unattainable high school 'hot girl'. All directors use the art of fashion and styling to deepen character narratives and storytelling (Lavery, 2021), but where does the character engineering end and the hyper-sexualization begin?

Carefully curated and intentional mannerisms are what is driving this salacious character adaptation. Looking at Megan Fox's character, Jennifer, one would immediately notice a sultry, soft and confident tone of voice, inexplicably high pitched. While Megan Fox, herself, has a naturally high toned voice, in this flirtatious conversation she is pushed as an oblivious and self-obsessed young girl with very little passion regarding her future, likeability or intelligence. This is paired with a seductive biting lip, inordinate toying with one's makeup/lips, intense and all-knowing eye contact and assertive play with her own or someone else's clothing and/or hair - depicting very clear self-assured confidence. Carelessly touching herself and others pushes a narrative of the character patronising those around her, her opinion almost appearing superior to others her age.

This demeanour is paired with the pressing conversation and fanatic discussion about boys, pushing the narrative that this idealistic girl's thoughts and days revolve purely around men - feeding into a misogynistic mindset that this is how all women, especially young girls, should be. Whether Fox's character is discussing purely going to an event for a boy/boys, her extensive sex life, or pushing her own male-obsessive habits onto her friend, Needy; we can see an intentional character vice being highlighted. A tangible indicator of male-audience-driven character engineering lies in the scene in which Jennifer meets the lead singer of a satanic-worshipping band. All confidence slipping away, she fawns dramatically over the singer, played by Adam Brody, fetching him drinks and, while in a medium frame, allowing the audience to take in Fox's body, she is filmed staring at him, unblinkingly while pouting, jaw dropped and tongue almost falling out of her mouth, close to drooling. This caters to the male gaze, men watching being notably attracted to the idea of having such an unattainable and beautiful woman, so weakened solely for them (Lammers, n.d.). It makes no direct sense why Jennifer would fall into such a state of obsession and worship over a, at that point, irrelevant singer – however, Kusama's depiction of Jennifer as loyal and mindlessly obsessed pushes this idealisation and want for the character.

Moving further into the film, Fox's character begins to 'eat boys', seducing them into being alone with her. Within these scenes, Jennifer begins to sensually and explicitly kiss each boy; Kusama selects a very close-up frame for these scenes, focusing on Jennifer's body as she begins to strip and sensually toy with before murdering her victims. One would argue the removal of Fox's clothes and sexual toying before each murder was an unnecessary adaptation on Kusama's behalf, purely designed to push a sultry and raunchy narrative for the film. A very famous clip of Fox visibly swimming naked in the lake to remove her victim's blood from her skin is an example of this overly sexual narrative. Perhaps the most infamous and notable, sexual scenes follow her intricate relationship with her best friend in the film, Needy, played by Amanda Seyfried. From the first day Jennifer turned into a 'demon', she arrives at Needy's house - appearing to threaten her while groping her breast and licking her neck with a blood-smearred mouth. This is not the only seemingly random encounter between the two characters; we also witness a very arbitrary and abrupt kissing scene in Needy's bed. The scene provoked a lot of conversation in the early 2000s and still does to this day, with the film continuing on as though it never occurred. The element of the film has no depth or role within the plot, breaking a rule of filmmaking whereby every scene should link to the storyline in at least a minute way (Screenwriting from Iowa, 2017) – however, the kiss is never mentioned again, and nor is there any further sexual tension between the two characters. While Seyfried's character does seem to bend to every whim of Jennifer's demand, being as in love with her boyfriend, Chip, as she is depicted to have been - this scene is very blatantly deemed as 'queer-baiting', a form of hyper-sexualisation used by women in modern times, and in this case a Director, to draw in a male audience who would deem this as attractive and exciting. Its engineered effect on the male audience is noticeably coherent.

Although *Jennifer's Body* is a feminist horror film, its marketing campaign erased its message altogether, rebranding it as a sexy, male-oriented thriller. Instead of promoting its horror / comedy element, the studio marketed Megan Fox's appearance almost solely, capitalising on her status as a sex symbol. This marketing not only led to economic challenges in regards to reaching KPI's, but further contributed to the overall culture of sexualising actresses for profit at the expense of their artistic legitimacy. Right from the start, the advertising company, Twentieth Century Fox, was not interested in marketing a feminist horror movie. It was marketing Megan Fox. The trailers and advertising posters for the movie played off Fox's sexuality more so than the horror and dark satire that writer Diablo Cody had wanted. Arguably, the most perceptive and renowned aspect of the film's

promotional campaign was the imagery in which Megan Fox sat on a school desk wearing a tight, revealing school uniform with her lips apart. Her attitude and her eyes were not that of a terrifying horror icon but of a seducer, commanding the viewer's gaze (Thornham, S. (2007)). The advertising text reinforced this imagery through the slogan, "She's got a taste for bad boys," suggesting a hypersexualised, man-eating fantasy rather than a dark and feminist narrative. The trailers for the movie followed a mirrored and cohesive advertising scheme. Rather than emphasising its subtext of female friendship, power relations, and revenge, they showed Fox's Body, close-ups of her lips and bare skin, and the infamous moment where she kisses Needy. This infamous kissing scene was said to have been curated with the intention of pushing Jennifer's excessive manipulation and control over Needy, but instead, it was shot so slowly and sexually, it was inevitably promoted as a spectacle for the male gaze (Feona Attwood (2020)). While horror fans and young women would have enjoyed the movie, the advertising communicated that it was merely one more teen sex horror film for boys. The studio's decision to play up sex appeal at the expense of the actual message ruined the film's initial reception by bringing in the wrong viewers and failing to attract those who would have most enjoyed its social commentary. Other than the film itself, how the media handled Megan Fox at that time only helped to show further the industry's obsession with commercialising young female actresses. Red carpet entrances and press interviews were full of sexist questioning. Interviewers grilled Fox about the inappropriately sexualised topics of her physical appearance, sexual activity, and "hotness" instead of asking her about the role she was playing or what message the movie was sending. Many of these interviews portrayed Fox as the future Hollywood "bombshell," comparing her to Marilyn Monroe instead of recognising her as a serious actress. The irony is that Jennifer's Body Indeed was a movie about the objectification of a young woman, and yet still, the industry went ahead and treated Fox just the same way. (Campbell, J. and Carilli, T. (2012)) Even while the movie critiqued how young women were being used and discarded, Hollywood machinery continued to market and treat Fox as no more than an imaginary icon of male fantasy. Jennifer's Body's publicity and media coverage is merely one sign of the much larger, structural issue in Hollywood: the commodification of female stars by the industry. Hollywood has built its business model around sexing up women and profiting from their desirability at the expense of their careers, their sanity, and their agency. (Feona Attwood (2020))

During the press junket for Jennifer's Body, Megan Fox was relentlessly objectified by journalists, and the media focused far more on her physical appearance than on the feminist themes of the film. Instead of posing intelligent questions to her about her character or the film's analysis of the objectification of women, male journalists often peppered her with invasive and sexist questions about her body and sex life. On the red carpet, the media hailed her as a "sex icon" rather than taking her seriously as an actress, once more reducing her identity to her body. Even when Fox herself attempted to speak about the deeper messages of the movie, her comments were disregarded or mocked. When she complained about the objectification of women in the industry, the media painted her as "difficult" or "ungrateful," which ignited a toxic public perception that ignored her talent and professionalism. Megan Fox's experience reflects a wider trend in Hollywood, where young women are objectified, sexualised, and silenced when they try to speak out.

About a decade later, the film 'Jennifer's body', had a reprise, people describing the film as ahead of its time, now being declared a 'feminist masterpiece' (Cohen, 2018), but why? In 2010, there was a fourth wave of feminism, Beyonce and Nicki Minaj contributing to a redefined definition of empowerment, reclaiming their sexuality on their own terms - distinguishing between being objectified by others and being sexual and sultry as a form of empowerment. Thus, a sexualised Megan Fox within this film would receive praise for being so ahead of the feminism culture in owning her sexuality. However, if women are still catering towards a male idealised vision of sexuality and attraction, regardless of choice, this probes the question of whether it is, in fact, a choice women are

making to be sexual or rather a form of intricate and long-standing manipulation from the media to imply that women will not be worth noticing unless as sexual beings. For decades, women have, in film, been portrayed as men-obsessed objects of lust, this narrative spreading so far that the introduction of the Bechdel test, dishearteningly, had to come into play. The Bechdel Test was created by Alison Bechdel in 1985. It requires a movie feature to contain at least two named female characters, these characters must talk to each other and they must have at least one conversation that does not discuss a man. The question of empowerment vs long-standing manipulation is pondered further through analysing the work of talented musicians such as Sabrina Carpenter, Tate McCrae & Taylor Swift. Most mainstream female artists perform unnecessarily in tight lingerie, contrasting to male musicians who predominantly reside in casual jeans and T-shirts. This inexplicable difference between men and women's promotional strategies within the entertainment industry is also seen in film as previously discussed. Actresses such as Megan Fox, Scarlett Johansen, and Margot Robbie have all played redundantly sexual and sultry characters in their careers. Is promoting and feeding into the male idealistic world where women are perfect, sexualised and untouchable objects wrong if it is said to be enforcing an air of empowerment and freedom in women?

Actresses like Marilyn Monroe, Britney Spears, and Lindsay Lohan all underwent the same process of over sexualisation through marketing campaigns across their various careers (Ford and Mathews, 2021). For example, Monroe was peddled as a sex object and passed over for dramatic roles, Spears was pushed into hypersexualised performances at an early age, and Lohan was utilised as both sexual fantasy and caution. Perhaps the worst trend in Hollywood is that young women are cast aside when they attempt to reclaim their narratives or appropriate their own lives. The MeToo movement followed the stories of actresses and generally women within the entertainment industry who had been used and not protected by Hollywood (Hillstrom, 2019). Megan Fox, for instance, publicly spoke about feeling used and abused by the industry throughout her Transformers era. Instead of being celebrated for telling the truth, though, she was labelled "difficult" and "ungrateful" and suffered career damage because of telling the truth. Fox's journey, especially throughout, Jennifer's Body, showcases the dark side of Hollywood; a truth of prioritising male profits above female talent or work. The press and promotion of Jennifer's Body reflects both the culture of commodifying women to be exploited sexually for profit in Hollywood, and the disregard for the detrimental effect it subsequently had on Megan Fox, herself, and young women generally.

So what is this Male Gaze that has been turning Hollywood malevolent for several decades. The Male Gaze was a theory conducted by Laura Mulvey in 1975. It followed three core aspects; The Male Gaze, Objectification and passivity and lastly, patriarchal power structures. The Male Gaze refers to the way women are depicted by both the media and entertainment companies in order to attract, seduce and excite a male demographic, a technique most commonly looked at to confirm a male audience (Marnel Niles Goins, Joan Faber McAlister and Bryant Keith Alexander, 2020). While a technique so seemingly normal in regards to marketing and target audience strategy; the techniques used by Hollywood to ensure the support of this demographic is having detrimental and horrific lasting effects on young women (Piechucka, 2020).

So how is Hollywood's dark underbelly of reducing women to aesthetic symbols of male desire, affecting young girls. Through pushing endless narratives whereby female characters are depicted as men-obsessed, mindless beings of attraction, impressionable girls who are chronically online (Raudsepp and Kais, 2019), are obscenely susceptible to absorbing the narrative Hollywood is hoping to push onto men. From physical standards of perfection, to alternative expectations of school girls; stretching from seductive flirtation to manipulation, conceptualising that attractive women are mindless - this narrative is so harmful due to its extravagantly exaggerated nature. This cycle subjects young girls to the pressures of attaining unhealthy beauty ideals and internalising self-hatred, body

shame, and anxiety. Research suggests that over-sexualised media is responsible for low self-esteem and body image issues in young women and that this causes them to feel inadequate when compared to the unattainable beauty ideals of Hollywood (Campbell, J. and Carilli, T. 2012). Real and honest female storytelling needs to be supported and promoted across various media services because it helps young girls relate to complicated, empowered women who are not simply defined by their appearance or sexual appeal. An example of this would be the responsible and of-her-age character of Needy from *Jennifer's Body* providing a more relatable and positive role model (Olsson and Martiny, 2018). By steering away from the sexualised, one-dimensional female characters, we can show girls a more holistic image of women, their aspirations, struggles, and successes. This serves to cancel out negative stereotypes and allows young girls to see themselves as whole individuals, not sexual objects. Furthermore, Hollywood must move beyond the male gaze and begin to depict actual, diverse female lives. This involves not just obsessing about exterior beauty, but exploring interior strength, intellect, and personal growth.

Using *Jennifer's Body* as the case point, this essay has illustrated the vile realities of the film world where up-and-coming actresses are not only hypersexualised but also turned into disposable objects. Megan Fox is an example of a woman being packaged as a sex object to sell films, reduced to appearances in the media, and then cast off when she had the temerity to complain about being treated wrong. The misunderstood release and subsequent redemption of the film expose how entrenched these issues are in Hollywood. With the industry still struggling with its legacy of exploiting and casting aside women, *Jennifer's Body* is both a warning and a reminder of the imperative for change. In the future, Hollywood needs to place ethics above profit-based sexualisation, making sure that female-led films are honoured, not distorted.

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