

Hell is a Teenage Girl

by Clare Moore

Female coming-into-sexuality films do not generally find their way into the horror genre, though they may utilize elements of horror, like the suburban gothic murderousness of *Heathers* and the supernatural mysticism of *The Craft*. Horror has historically remained closed-off to stories that focus on the trauma of female sexual development, presumably because the horror genre relies on revenue from a dedicated male audience that delights in misogynistic slasher-style bloodletting—excluding metaphors for taboo menstrual blood and any other aspects of female sexuality that do not directly involve male pleasure. Recently, however, the horror genre has exhibited an activated feminist consciousness that allows robust female coming-into-sexuality films to enter its formerly male-exclusive realm. Three recent films in particular have boldly crossed into this genre: *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), and *Excision* (2012). Each of these films has captured and effectively reshaped a different classic horror subgenre, and in doing so has accomplished the cultural work of expanding the scope of both female coming-into-sexuality narratives and the horror genre. *Ginger Snaps* is a modified werewolf story, *Jennifer's Body* combines elements of both the rape-and-revenge and demonic possession subgenres, and *Excision* adds a colorful and innovative twist to the doctor-gone-mad trope.

All three of these films are incredibly diverse conceptually and stylistically, but some qualities remain consistent in each of them, especially the qualities that tie back to female survival and solidarity amidst traumatic sexual development. Each film takes place in an almost Lynchian suburban gothic setting complete with small-town drama, overbearing parents and overconcerned idiotic adults, vaguely Christian religious values, and stereotypical John Hughes-

style public high school misery. These qualities, melded together in the background, exaggerate the peculiarities exhibited by the monstrous female protagonists and the acts of violence that they commit, which ultimately turns the protagonists' traumas into spectacular displays of blood and bodies. Within their respective suburban bubbles, all three soon-to-be monstrous adolescent girls attempt to navigate their own fluctuating bodies and psyches either alongside or for the sake of rescuing a trusted female companion. The central relationship in both *Ginger Snaps* and *Excision* is between sisters and in *Jennifer's Body* it's an especially parasitic and homoerotic one between close female friends, but all three central relationships do contain some elements of parasitism. This parasitism stems from the girls' need for self-preservation and their desire to ensure the survival of their counterpart during a period of intense transformation. These transformative processes vary between films, but each one unites common horror myths with complex elements of female sexuality in order to elevate the female adolescent's monstrosity to a supernatural, and ultimately more powerful, level. Elevating taboo sexual characteristics to a supernatural plane allows female audiences to confront their own monstrosity through a provocative gynocentric lens, untouched by the sheen of patriarchally-enforced shame that so often coats representations of female adolescent sexual development.

Ginger Snaps tackles taboo topics like menstruation and increased sex drive during puberty through an adaptation of the typically testosterone-fueled werewolf subgenre, which effectively drew in non-horror female viewers and resulted in the eventual production of a modestly profitable trilogy. This film manipulates genre experimentally by combining a werewolf mythos and a female coming-into-sexuality narrative and uniting both with black comedy, and adopting this stylistic liminality allowed *Ginger Snaps* to evolve into a twice-extended cult classic rather than remain a forgettable box office success. The popular

recognizability of the werewolf genre allows the viewer easy access to this experimental genre-bender, particularly female viewers whose own menstrual monstrosities are all too similar to lycanthropic growing pains. According to Aviva Briefel, "...the menstrual plot...[forces] us to realize that we know [Ginger's] cramps and cycles as much as if they were our own...the calendar on her tampon box...becomes the emblematic object of these narratives of female monstrosity" and thus gives female horror fans the space to indulge in their own biological and psychological monstrosities along with Ginger.

The film opens with a wide overhead shot of an idyllic fictional Canadian suburb called Bailey Downs and the camera soars downward to expose—in Lynchian fashion—a severed dog's paw in a child's sandbox and then continues past the sandbox to reveal the bloody and partially shredded remainder of the dog's corpse. This disturbing juxtaposition of put-together suburban houses and pulled-apart animal flesh provides an appropriate preface to the introduction of the two main characters, nihilistic and morbidly co-dependent sisters Ginger and Brigitte Fitzgerald. The viewer meets Ginger and Brigitte through a montage of staged death-scenes that the sisters filmed for a school assignment, which required them to create a film that reflects the quality of life in their suburb. Their short film features dozens of deadly scenarios, including ones that would constitute anyone's twisted suburban nightmare—dying from several different methods of suicide, being impaled by a picket fence, getting torn up by a lawn mower, and being stabbed in the throat with a sharp metal rake, to name a few. One scene in their film briefly shows one of the sister's staged bodies in the background, arms across her chest as if in prayer, with a handwritten sign with a partial *Paradise Lost* verse, "Long is the way that out of hell leads up to light" in the foreground.

Naturally, the dark humor in Ginger and Brigitte's creative display of morbidity fails to

intrigue their teacher, who claims to be “sickened” by their film, and the sisters’ isolation from their suburban community and peers is established for the viewer outright. According to “Menstrual Monsters,” Martin Barker’s analysis of *Ginger Snaps*’s cult status, their homegrown film of “murder and mayhem not only demonstrates the duo’s disgust at the banality of their suburban surroundings, it also proclaims their self-styled exclusion from the heterosexually fuelled dynamics of the teen scene,” a disgust which is also reflected in Brigitte’s definition of their high school social scene as “a mindless little breeders’ machine” (69). Brigitte categorizes her peers as immature and unsophisticated, and she associates this intellectual emptiness with sexual voracity, which is why Brigitte feels so threatened when Ginger develops an unquenchable sexual thirst after simultaneously being bitten by the Beast of Bailey Downs and getting her first period. When Ginger gets her period, her immediate adult female influences—her mother and the school nurse—remain oblivious to her dual-curse because they assume that her excess bleeding and body hair growth are conventional symptoms of menstruation, which leads to a humorous encounter between the school nurse and the two sisters, during which the nurse emphatically describes menses as “a thick, syrupy, voluminous discharge . . . that may turn to a brownish blackish sludge” which is normal and will be “expected every twenty-eight days, give or take, for the next thirty years.” This interaction magnifies Ginger’s own personal fears about her pubescent monstrousness through the voice of the nurse and blurs the line between atypical monstrosity and abnormal physiological processes, especially when she describes menses as “thick, syrupy, voluminous discharge” to be “[squeezed] out” like some sort of monthly toxic waste. Although this conversation is sure to unsettle an audience with its cringe-worthy frankness, the underlying irony comically shows how understandably eager Ginger is to deny the abnormality of her lycanthropic symptoms.

The menstrual curse and the werewolf curse become conflated in Ginger's body and psyche, and her sexual urges become indistinguishable from her homicidal urges, which the viewer comes to understand when Ginger tells her sister that tearing people apart "feels so . . . good, Brigitte. It's like touching yourself. You know every move . . . right on the fucking dot. And after, you see fucking fireworks. Supernovas. I'm a goddamn force of nature. I feel like I could do just about anything." Ginger derives erotic energy from every violent act that she commits, rapidly moves away from her human state, and consequently becomes distant from her sister, who eventually chooses to respond to Ginger's transformation by stabbing her in the heart in order to preserve the lives of Bailey Downs' remaining residents. By severing the bond of sisterhood in this manner, Brigitte ends up committing the final act that Ginger had jokingly but not inaccurately predicted at the beginning of the film: "You kill yourself to be different and your own body screws you. If I start moaning about PMS, shoot me okay?"

Like in *Ginger Snaps*, the central conflict in *Jennifer's Body* centers around the monstrous transformation of an adolescent girl—Jennifer Check—and the tension that this transformation creates between her and her mostly supernaturally unaffected female companion—Needy Lesnicki. This film, too, takes place in a fictional small town called Devil's Kettle, but it is set in America rather than in Canada. Jennifer's transformation into a man-eating succubus is triggered by a ritually-motivated attack which occurs alongside a freak-accident bar fire that causes a Heathers-esque panic to spread throughout Devil's Kettle. Writer Diablo Cody intended for the film to both confront the misogyny in the horror genre by creating a story told from a female perspective and show the dangerous aspects of intense adolescent female friendship through Needy and Jennifer's almost parasitic bond. Cody said that she "wanted to show how almost horrific that devotion can be," which is why the movie opens with the

statement Hell is a teenage girl. This statement means to “reflect the horrors of puberty” and the emotional intensity that follows pubescent girls through high school and into adulthood (Kwan). One particular scene—a scene that closely mirrors an iconic one in Brian De Palma’s adaptation of *Carrie*—stands out as a subtly suggestive flicker of commentary on the female adolescent’s patriarchally-enforced preoccupation with meeting certain standards of femininity. In this scene, Jennifer coats her face with makeup in an obvious attempt to direct any Devil’s Kettle spectator’s gaze away from her internal state—a state of monstrosity—to her external form. Like in *Carrie*, where the viewer understands, through the reflection in her mirror, “the fact that Carrie’s ‘femininity’ is a surface alteration designed to mask the true horror of her body” and that this “separation of visual image from physical body that the mirror reflection creates is akin to the effect Carrie achieves by making up” (Lindsey 38). So, by diverting the camera to the mirror, the viewer’s gaze is also deflected and denied access to Carrie’s—and Jennifer’s—interior condition in the same way that they each attempt to create a masquerade of femininity as a means of self-preservation in a toxic patriarchal society. Diablo Cody has been very earnest in explaining her feminist intentions for the film, stating that she hopes “the film inspires girls to take life into their own hands and do with it, what they want,” an empowering ripple effect which very rarely, if ever, emanates from the horror genre (Kwan).

Similar to how *Ginger Snaps* redefines the limits of the werewolf horror subgenre, *Jennifer’s Body* effectively intrudes both the rape-and-revenge and demonic possession genres because it relies on direct narration by an adolescent girl—Needy Lesnicki—and therefore allows the viewer access to a female interpretation of Jennifer’s monstrous transformation. This narrative gynocentrism allows the viewer to develop a nuanced understanding of Needy and Jennifer’s unhealthily codependent—and increasingly homoerotic—friendship, a relationship

that drives the plot to its predictable conclusion where Needy must kill Jennifer in order to preserve the small-town tranquility of Devil's Kettle. Needy says that she and Jennifer are "sisters, practically," despite their peers finding it "hard to believe that a babe like Jennifer would want to associate with a dork like [her]" but that "sandbox love never dies," and their sandbox love impacts Needy's judgment regarding Jennifer's degree of violence after her vaguely alluded-to rape—which was actually an attempted virgin sacrifice intentionally framed to lead the viewer into assuming violent sexual assault—and subsequent transformation into a man-eating succubus. For example, after witnessing a massive bar fire during which dozens of Devil's Kettle residents perished, Needy pours all her concern into rescuing Jennifer from the men that both Needy and the audience assumes are rapists, a concern that her boyfriend fails to grasp. He asks, "Who cares about Jennifer and those douchebags with their douchebag haircuts and their man-scara? People just burned to death," which is a chillingly believable reminder of men's quickness to minimize the severity of sexual violence.

Needy's boyfriend displays his ignorance yet again during a sexual encounter when her body begins to convulse as her mind senses a parallel sexual encounter between Jennifer and a boy whom, as the viewer sees in silhouette only, she rips apart with her mouth during intercourse. Needy begins to moan, clearly experiencing emotional turmoil rather than an unpleasant physical sensation, because her intimate psychological connection with Jennifer makes her react to the monstrous crime that she is committing at that same moment across town. Needy's boyfriend remains oblivious to the cause of her discomfort, smiling smugly and asking, "Am I too big?" as she moans in pain. The fact that Needy can sense Jennifer having sex and experiences a physical reaction to her sexual behavior is inherently homoerotic, but their relationship becomes explicitly more queer when they passionately kiss in bed during a

sleepover, an encounter that makes Needy finally ask “What do you want from me?” This is the central question of the story and one which remains unanswered until the very end of the film, when Needy partially transforms into a succubus after absorbing some of Jennifer’s power and vengefully sets out to murder the rapists—the men who attempt to ritually sacrifice Jennifer at the beginning—who turned her best friend into a monster.

Excision (2012) exhibits the same subgenre-bending magic produced by *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer’s Body*, but creates a much higher degree of psychosexual disturbance in its monstrous protagonist, ultimately because it attempts to tackle the emergence of non-mythical sociopathy and cognitive distortion as an adolescent girl comes into her sexuality. The film artistically incorporates elements of fantasy and horror in order to transform the protagonist—18 year-old high school outcast Pauline—into a menstrual, sexually developed, and homicidal mad-surgeon. This female rendering of the mad-doctor horror subgenre was actually released within the same year as the Soska Sisters’ Canadian mad-surgeon horror film *American Mary*, which incidentally stars a grown-up Ginger (Katharine Isabelle) and exhibits a refreshing take on both the mad-surgeon and rape and revenge subgenres. If it weren’t for the extremely bloody and gory dream and fantasy sequences, *Excision* might appear more like a psychological thriller/coming-into-sexuality film, but these scenes firmly secure it in the horror realm. Ultimately, *Excision* feminizes the traditionally male mad-surgeon subgenre in order to open up an investigation of what happens when a mentally unstable and socially isolated adolescent girl hits her delusional peak at the same time as she reaches a state of sexual self-awareness.

The film’s opening scene shows two versions of Pauline sitting in chairs opposite each other, the one on the left bleeding from the mouth and convulsing and the one on the right staring at her counterpart and fidgeting around in her chair and moaning as she reaches sexual climax at

the sight of her other self. Similar to the beginning of *Ginger Snaps*, the beginning of *Excision* establishes Pauline as psychosexually deviant and masochistic, and several more fantasy and dream sequences throughout the remainder of the film mirror this opening scene stylistically. These sequences all take place in a brightly-lit room with a blue background and involve darkly glamorous versions of Pauline performing sexual acts, surgery, or both, on herself and on oddly deformed unnamed strangers. Her sexual fantasies and dreams intensify until she achieves the sexual goal that connected all of her hallucinatory reveries like a crimson current—losing her virginity on her period. As a social outcast with no friends or love interests, Pauline chooses to formally request that one of her male classmates take her virginity, not because she is particularly interested in experiencing physical pleasure, but because she can more easily simulate her violently and bloody psychosexual fantasies in her own mind if her actual body encounters someone else's body. Pauline engages in the physical experience of sexual intercourse in order to feed her cognitions rather than the reverse—playing out her cognitions in order to heighten the physical experience of sex. Pauline's mind-body split is evident because the sex scene is filmed to show shifting perspectives: The first shows Pauline quietly and tearily losing her virginity, clearly experiencing discomforting, while the second positions the camera above Pauline, allowing the viewer to see her choking her male classmate's neck with her hands as blood pours out from between their bodies and colors their skin, the walls, and the bedsheets deep red. This duality shows the difference between a realistic coming-into-sexuality encounter and what Pauline wishes sex were like, a distinction that comments on the larger cultural issue of the absence of representations of female sexual desire in a patriarchal society. Pauline relies on fantasy for erotic gratification because societal rules denying, say, homicide or surgical operations mid-coitus preclude her ideal version of sexual agency.

Pauline's sexual voracity feeds off of increasingly deranged delusions that she holds about her capacity to perform surgery, delusions which take center stage as her young sister's cystic fibrosis worsens until she eventually gets placed on a waitlist for a lung transplant. Because Pauline is earnestly motivated by her desperation to keep her sister alive, the viewer cannot help but empathize when she immerses herself in the independent study of anatomy textbooks and practices a lung transplant on a dying bird, but this empathy abruptly evaporates when the film reaches its predictably horrific climax. At the height of her psychosexual madness, Pauline enters her sister's room, joins her on the floor, and says "You're not going to understand what I'm about to do, but someday you'll thank me" and then shoves a chloroform-soaked cloth into her sister's mouth and shaves her own head mad-doctor style. Although the viewer, at this point, knows that Pauline will inevitably attempt a crude amateur lung transplant on her sister, the final scene is no less shocking. The film's conclusion—Pauline's mother walks into the garage to find her delusional blood-soaked elder daughter poised over the corpse of her younger daughter—is more heartbreaking than frightening, especially since the mother reacts to the bloody spectacle by hugging Pauline as they both scream in agonizing grief. The ending leaves the viewer with a profound sense of unshakeable despair and still, somehow, sympathy for Pauline despite her sin because her madness is not entirely unimaginable.

In her landmark book, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed proposed that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject," and, unfortunately, cinematic representations of the female terror that Creed unpacks here are still, for the most part, produced by men to please male audiences (1). However, synthesizing elements of horror and female coming-into-sexuality narratives results in an emergent hybrid genre—coming-into-monstrosity—that has successfully,

particularly in the case of *Ginger Snaps*, *Jennifer's Body*, and *Excision*, allowed for a nuanced exploration of the less palatable aspects of female adolescence. These three cleverly self-aware films produced within the scope of the horror genre have proven that it is possible to generate useful feminist social commentary through this medium, and the cultural work accomplished by doing so confronts the notion that “hell is a teenage girl” by expanding, rather than limiting, the complexity of the female adolescent psyche.

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