
FAMILIAR AESTHETICS AS FEMINIST STRATEGY: HOW FEMALE DIRECTORS USE POPULAR CULTURE TO CHALLENGE GENDER NORMS IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how female directors strategically employ familiar pop culture aesthetics to embed feminist critique within mainstream cinema. While conventional films often reinforce patriarchal values through genre conventions and visual codes, this research demonstrates how women filmmakers subvert these same tools to challenge gender norms. Through qualitative textual analysis of four contemporary films, i.e., *Clueless* (1995), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and *Barbie* (2023), the study reveals how elements such as colour palettes, costume design, music, humour, and casting function as deliberate feminist interventions. Drawing on feminist film theory (Mulvey, Beauvoir, Butler) and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the analysis shows that these directors use aesthetic familiarity to create viewer comfort, then introduce disruption from within that space of recognition. The findings indicate that popular culture aesthetics enable feminist ideas to reach broader audiences while encouraging critical engagement with gendered expectations. This research contributes to feminist film studies by foregrounding aesthetic strategy as a primary mechanism of ideological critique, demonstrating that visual style, genre conventions, and casting choices are not decorative elements but central sites of feminist meaning-making in contemporary cinema.

KEYWORDS: *Feminist cinema, pop culture aesthetics, feminist film theory, gender performativity, aesthetic subversion, female directors.*

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has historically played a powerful role in shaping societal understandings of gender, identity, and social roles. From early productions to contemporary blockbusters, mainstream cinema has consistently offered audiences a narrow version of womanhood defined largely in relation to men. Women appear on screen as objects of desire, rewards for male protagonists, or victims whose suffering drives the plot. These representations are not innocent; they shape cultural imagination and reinforce patriarchal assumptions that extend beyond the cinema screen into everyday life (Seluman et al. 746).

Feminist film scholars have examined these patterns since the early 1970s, developing powerful analytical tools such as Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which describes how classical Hollywood cinema positions women as passive objects of visual pleasure for a presumed male spectator (Michna). While this scholarship has been important for exposing the problem, less attention has been given to how female directors working within popular forms might turn those forms against themselves (Grover).

In recent years, female directors have begun challenging these patterns in creative ways. Instead of rejecting mainstream cinema entirely, they work within it, using familiar pop culture aesthetics (Jenkins), like genre conventions, nostalgic references, music, fashion, and visual styles, to question gender norms from within. This study examines how female directors use these recognisable aesthetics as tools for feminist critique, arguing that pop culture is not only entertainment but also a site where meanings about gender are created, negotiated, and contested.

The films examined (*Clueless* (1995), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and *Barbie* (2023)) are all recognisable and popular on the surface. They operate within familiar genres using colour, costume, music, and humour in pleasurable ways. Yet beneath these surfaces, each film is quietly radical, using the very tools that have historically limited and trivialised women to expose and challenge the gender norms those tools usually reinforce.

This approach can be described as critique through familiarity. Rather than rejecting mainstream aesthetics, these directors deliberately and strategically use them. A pastel colour palette or romantic comedy structure creates conditions of comfort under which feminist ideas can reach audiences who might otherwise resist them. The viewer is drawn in by what feels safe, and it is from within that space that the critique is delivered. This is significant in the contemporary moment, where popular culture is the primary medium through which

gender norms are produced and circulated at scale through social media, streaming platforms, and global media industries.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study uses qualitative textual analysis grounded in close reading and comparative methods. The research does not use surveys or quantitative measures, as the aim is to examine how meaning is constructed within the films themselves through theoretical frameworks established in feminist film theory, popular culture studies, and reception theory.

Film Selection Criteria

Four films were selected for analysis: *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009), *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020), and *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023). Selection criteria included: (1) female directorship, central to the study's focus on authorial intent; (2) deliberate use of pop culture aesthetics inviting feminist interpretation; (3) temporal span across nearly three decades (1995-2023), allowing examination of evolving feminist strategies; and (4) generation of meaningful critical discourse around gender, providing richer analytical context.

Analytical Approach

The primary method is close textual analysis examining formal and stylistic elements: visual composition and colour palettes, costume and production design, dialogue and narrative structure, soundtracks and musical choices, genre conventions, and casting decisions. These elements are treated not as background but as primary sites of meaning construction. Comparative analysis identifies patterns and variations across the selected films, allowing the study to argue for shared approaches while acknowledging significant differences in genre, tone, and directorial intent.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on three interconnected theoretical bodies: (1) Feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's male gaze concept, Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of woman as constructed Other, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity; (2) Popular culture theory, especially Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which distinguishes between meanings encoded by producers and those decoded by audiences, understanding popular

culture as a terrain of ideological struggle; and (3) Reception studies, examining how these films have been received, interpreted, and reappraised over time, providing evidence of the multiple readings Hall's model predicts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals four primary aesthetic strategies through which these directors embed feminist critique within popular forms: visual design and colour, music and soundtrack, humour, and casting against type. These strategies operate collectively to create what can be seen as an aesthetic use for disruption. i.e., the viewer is made comfortable, then gradually challenged.

Visual Design and Colour as Ideological Strategy

Promising Young Woman exemplifies how visual softness functions as disruption. The film's pastel palette, which includes bubblegum pinks, mint greens, and baby blues, aligns with the aesthetics of romantic comedy and contemporary girlhood. Cassie's bedroom evokes frozen adolescence with delicate decorations and stuffed toys. The opening nightclub scene uses warm, saturated colours and soft lighting that recall mainstream representations of nightlife as a flirtatious possibility (Stanger). Nothing initially signals danger; the visual grammar suggests safety. As the scene progresses, however, male behaviour reveals predatory intent. The softness does not contrast with this behaviour; it enables it. The viewer, like the male characters, initially reads safety through familiar visual cues. Discomfort arises from realising those cues were misleading.

This strategy continues throughout. The pharmacy scene uses bright lighting and playful costuming for what appears to be flirtation, yet gives way to unease as Cassie performs exaggerated femininity. The bachelor party sequence presents the most striking contradiction: Cassie dressed as a nurse with colourful hair in a decorative, celebratory setting, which becomes the site of the film's most violent conclusion. Visual softness does not prepare the viewer for this shift; it actively works against it, forcing confrontation with the extent to which aesthetic cues shaped interpretation.

Jennifer's Body employs a highly polished aesthetic drawing from bright, saturated early 2000s high school cinema. *Devil's Kettle* is presented with heightened artificiality resembling teen drama, filled with recognisable archetypes. Jennifer is introduced with visual attention, marking her as the popular, desirable girl within established tradition. This deliberate borrowing from mid-2000s teen cinema, where female characters occupy predictable roles

(cheerleader, outsider, mean girl), leads audiences to believe they understand the narrative structure.

The critical intervention lies in the gradual reconfiguration of these expectations. Cinematic techniques traditionally framing female characters as objects of desire, like close-ups, soft lighting, and careful composition, are progressively redirected to construct Jennifer as a predatory power. Formal elements remain consistent; their meaning shifts. Jennifer's feeding sequences are staged not according to horror conventions emphasising victimhood, but aligned with action cinema. Jennifer is framed as an agent rather than a spectacle, positioned within cinematic frameworks historically reserved for male protagonists, producing unsettling effects for viewers accustomed to interpreting such cues in specific ways (Brody).

Chueless treats costume design with exceptional seriousness as a central argument. Cher's wardrobe, which includes plaid coordinated sets, knee-high socks, and matched accessories, functions as the film's primary visual language. Her computerised wardrobe system articulates that femininity is not innate but constructed, deliberately chosen, and performed. The deliberate excess in Cher's presentation is significant: her style reflects someone highly skilled in performing teenage femininity (Spellings). Every element is meticulously coordinated, surpassing ordinary standards. This heightened stylisation aligns with Butler's performativity concept. Gender becomes visible as an act precisely when exaggerated. Cher's femininity, through its intensity and self-awareness, no longer appears natural but recognisably constructed (Butler).

Barbie establishes its approach through the opening sequence, parodying *2001: A Space Odyssey*, replacing Kubrick's monolith with a Barbie doll, signalling self-awareness and cultural engagement (Dockterman). Barbieland's exaggerated colour palette, artificial architecture, and idealised characters create an apparently harmonious utopia that is fundamentally constrained. Apparent perfection conceals limitations as characters are defined by rigid roles. The film uses visual excess to expose the constructed nature of idealised femininity embodied in the Barbie brand.

Music as Misdirection and Cultural Positioning

Promising Young Woman uses well-known pop songs associated with femininity and pleasure to establish and then destabilise familiarity. Charli XCX's *Boys* plays over a montage of men dancing playfully, non-sexually, temporarily reversing expected visual dynamics. The tone is light and disarming, establishing crucial tension: the same men

appearing harmless within this aesthetic are later revealed to participate in systems of harm. The pharmacy scene's *Stars Are Blind* by Paris Hilton is staged with warmth and intimacy, producing a genuine connection. The song carries early 2000s pop culture associations, being carefree, romantic, and uncomplicated. This moment offers emotional relief, suggesting conventional romance, yet it becomes retrospectively unsettling as the narrative reveals more. Britney Spears' *Toxic* appears in an instrumental, string-based arrangement during high tension. The transformation from high-energy pop to a slower, ominous register is significant. The melody remains recognisable but emotionally altered, creating a layered response: familiarity coexists with unease. The choice is particularly resonant given thematic associations with danger, desire, and entrapment. Music does not provide relief but intensifies tension while drawing on prior emotional connections.

Jennifer's Body uses a soundtrack reflecting the mid-2000s musical landscape, featuring Florence and the Machine, Cute is What We Aim For, and All Time Low. The film draws from pop-punk and emo scenes strongly associated with teenage female audiences, characterised by emotional intensity and adolescent experience. This choice moves away from mainstream horror's darker musical cues. Instead, the soundtrack aligns the film with teenage girls' emotional world, positioning audiences as participants within that cultural space. Music evokes familiarity and recognition, encouraging affective engagement grounded in shared cultural experience.

Clueless employs music as cultural documentation of mid-1990s American teen culture. Tracks like *Just a Girl*, *Kids in America*, and *Rollin' with My Homies* construct a detailed cultural mapping of Cher's world. The soundtrack establishes familiarity and trust. For contemporary audiences, music evoked personal memory; for later audiences, it functions as a clear cultural marker. Music produces recognition, allowing the film's complex arguments to be absorbed without resistance.

Barbie uses music to guide tonal and thematic shifts. *What Was I Made For* by Billie Eilish serves as the emotional core, articulating central questions of purpose and identity. Its introspective quality contrasts with visual spectacle, creating tension between external performance and internal experience. Musical sequences like *I'm Just Ken* draw on Hollywood musical conventions, using humour and exaggeration to explore masculinity and validation, reversing traditional gender dynamics.

Humour as Feminist Entry Point

Promising Young Woman's first half is structured to encourage dark comedy reading. Cassie's repeated bar encounters follow predictable patterns that are sometimes amusing. Her deadpan delivery, controlled intoxication performances, and calculated confrontations produce tension often resolved with a sharp, comedic twist (Jeakle). The notebook recording encounters introduces repetitive, almost absurd elements, creating a pattern that the viewer anticipates. However, as the film progresses, repetition becomes unsettling rather than amusing. Humour does not disappear; it becomes harder to sustain. The viewer reconsiders earlier responses; what felt entertaining begins feeling complicit.

Jennifer's Body's screenplay by Diablo Cody incorporates distinctive, stylised humour crucial to the film's strategy (Lemire). Jennifer's dialogue uses inventive slang and sharp, ironic tone, making her engaging even during violence. Lines like "I go both ways" and "Got a tampon?" (after being stabbed) exemplify combining humour with darker elements, creating tonal complexity, resisting easy categorisation ("Jennifer's Body Quotes"). Needy's narration contributes a self-aware perspective engaging with genre conventions. Humour establishes familiarity and accessibility, encouraging surface-level enjoyment even as the film engages unsettling ideas.

Closer analysis reveals humour's precise function: it renders Jennifer charismatic and appealing, positioning her for identification. This creates central tension - viewers sympathise with a violent character, exposing inconsistencies in how female versus male aggression is represented and received. The Jennifer-Needy relationship also benefits from this framework. Their interactions blend humour and emotional complexity, lending authenticity. Beneath horror elements, their friendship emerges as an emotional core, shaped and distorted by exploitation structures giving rise to Jennifer's transformation.

Clueless makes humour central to its function. Cher's humour arises from malapropisms, confident misinterpretations, and elaborate social reasoning, presented from within her perspective rather than external mockery (Koski et al.). When she remembers Hamlet quotes from the movie rather than the play, the film does not undermine her through ridicule. It remains aligned with her viewpoint. This is significant. Films featuring supposedly superficial female characters often position audiences as superior to protagonists. Heckerling rejects this entirely. The camera aligns with Cher, encouraging serious engagement, ultimately revealing that such seriousness is justified.

Barbie employs humour as a primary vehicle for feminist critique, using physical comedy, satire, and meta-commentary to address complex issues while maintaining accessibility. The sequence where Ken encounters and attempts to replicate the patriarchy exemplifies this. Humour does not diminish critical force; it highlights the constructed, performative nature of gendered power structures (Wheeler). The film's most direct statement, which is America Ferrera's monologue articulating contradictions faced by contemporary women, is enhanced by placement within a predominantly comedic narrative. Preceding humour prepares audiences to engage with its content.

Casting Against Type as Meta-Commentary

Promising Young Woman's casting of Carey Mulligan represents effective subversion. Mulligan, known for roles emphasising vulnerability and emotional restraint (*An Education*, *Never Let Me Go*), brings associations with quiet, internalised emotion rather than confrontation. This creates contrast with Cassie's controlled rage and strategic performance (Croot). The casting of male actors reinforces this strategy. Bo Burnham (known for comedy and perceived sincerity), Adam Brody (lovable Seth Cohen from *The O.C.*), and Max Greenfield (*New Girl*) are actors audiences are predisposed to trust. Discomfort arises because these are recognisable, likeable figures whose actions challenge perception (Nolfi). Casting becomes a narrative argument demonstrating how assumptions about character and morality are shaped by familiarity.

Jennifer's Body's casting of Megan Fox represents a significant formal intervention. By 2009, Fox was highly visible from *Transformers*, where her presence was primarily visual, positioned as a male desire object rather than a fully realised character (Calfee). Kusama and Cody deliberately utilise this existing image. By placing Fox in Jennifer's role with depth, complexity, and agency, they reverse the dynamics previously defining her screen presence. Jennifer is not merely observed. She is active, articulate, and dangerous. She consumes the male gaze that defined Fox's cinematic identity, transforming it into power site rather than objectification. The casting operates as a meta-commentary on Hollywood's treatment of female bodies, making critique visible before the narrative unfolds.

Amanda Seyfried's casting as Needy is equally deliberate. Widely recognised from *Mean Girls*, where she portrayed naive Karen Smith, in *Jennifer's Body*, she assumes the narrator and primary perspective roles. Needy is observant, intelligent, and ultimately survives and

makes sense of events (Nichols). This inversion reinforces the film's broader project, challenging established expectations.

Clueless's casting of Alicia Silverstone plays a crucial, meaning-shaping role. Before *Clueless*, Silverstone was known primarily from Aerosmith music videos (*Cryin'*, *Amazing*, *Crazy*), embodying a rebellious yet sexualized teenage image, emphasising visual appeal over intellectual expression (Gott). Heckerling deliberately reconfigures this by casting her as Cher, defined by verbal wit, social intelligence, and personal growth. Audiences must revise preconceptions, recognising that Cher's identity is grounded in thought, speech, and development. The casting itself enacts the film's central argument.

Barbie's casting of Margot Robbie is central to the argument. Her embodiment of conventional beauty standards allows the film to explore those standards' limitations from within (Aguirre). As her character evolves, performance shifts from rigid perfection to complex, human identity expression. America Ferrera's role introduces an additional dimension, positioning a woman of colour at the film's ethical framework centre (Vrajlal), ensuring critique extends beyond narrowly defined womanhood representation.

Reception and the Evidence of Encoding/Decoding

The reception histories of these films provide empirical support for Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall). *Jennifer's Body* represents the most striking example. Initially dismissed by critics and poorly performing at the box office, it was marketed to male audiences through materials emphasising Megan Fox's physical appearance, framing the film as a conventional horror spectacle rather than a feminist critique. Feminist dimensions, like a focus on female friendship, satirical treatment of male violence, and the use of the female monster as a rage figure, were largely overlooked or misread. Over the following decade, a substantial reappraisal occurred, the film becoming recognised as a significant feminist horror work. This trajectory demonstrates how initial reception conditions, shaped by marketing and cultural moment, can produce readings entirely misaligned with encoded meanings.

Promising Young Woman generated considerable critical debate despite winning the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. Critics are divided over the ending's implications. Some argue it undermines constructed feminist agency; others read it as a deliberate comment on individual feminist action's structural limits within fundamentally patriarchal systems (Ebersole). This division reflects the complexity of encoding ideologically challenging content within familiar, pleasurable popular forms.

Clueless has been subject to sustained feminist reappraisal since its release. Initially received primarily as a teen comedy, it has been increasingly recognised as addressing female intelligence, social performance, and gender construction. *Barbie* generated extraordinary cultural commentary volume, much focused on the tension between feminist critique and its origins as a commercially powerful toy brand product.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that female directors strategically employ familiar pop culture aesthetics as sophisticated tools for feminist critique in contemporary cinema. Analysis of four films spanning 1995-2023 reveals four primary aesthetic strategies operating collectively: visual design and colour establishing emotional tones later complicated, music shaping instinctive responses and cultural familiarity, humour functioning as a socially acceptable critique vehicle reducing resistance, and casting drawing on audience associations to embed subversion at a recognition level.

The central finding is that familiarity enables rather than opposes feminist critique. These directors (Heckerling, Kusama, Fennell, Gerwig) demonstrate awareness that audiences anticipating ideological confrontation may resist it. Feminist ideas become more effective when embedded within pleasurable experiences conveyed through humour, emotional engagement, and cultural recognition. Audiences connect with characters and narratives before fully recognising the critical perspectives being presented.

The study's examination of reception histories provides empirical evidence for Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. *Jennifer's Body's* trajectory from dismissal to feminist horror recognition, *Promising Young Woman's* divided critical reception, and *Clueless's* ongoing reappraisal demonstrate that familiar aesthetics invite multiple interpretations, with feminist meaning dependent partly on audiences' willingness to engage critically.

These findings contribute to feminist film studies by foregrounding aesthetic strategy as a primary mechanism of ideological critique rather than secondary stylistic embellishment. Visual style, music, humour, and casting are not decorative elements but central sites where feminist meaning is constructed and contested. By working within familiar forms, these directors introduce new perspectives, challenge established norms, and expand mainstream cinema possibilities.

The research demonstrates that feminist critique and popular entertainment are not incompatible but most effective when operating together. Popular culture remains a site

where gender ideas are produced and contested at scale. The directors examined recognise this and use their mechanisms advantageously. By embedding critique within pleasurable experiences, these works make gender and power discussions accessible to audiences who might otherwise avoid them, ensuring feminist thought continues circulating within cultural spaces where it can have the greatest impact.

Future research could extend this framework to examine how these aesthetic strategies function across different national cinemas, genres, and media platforms, including streaming series and social media content. Additionally, empirical audience reception studies could test the theoretical claims made here about how familiar aesthetics facilitate feminist engagement. The methodological approach developed in this study, treating aesthetic choices as primary ideological sites rather than background elements, offers a productive framework for analysing how marginalised voices strategically employ mainstream forms to challenge dominant ideologies.

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