

WARNING: SPOILER! ALERT

WIENERS AND WOLVES

An Introduction to *Year of the Carnivore*
By Adam Litovitz

From its onset, Sook-Yin Lee's *Year of the Carnivore* is steeped in fairytale grotesque. Like Little Red Riding Hood, it involves a young woman's adventure with wolves, or as Sylvia puts it, "wieners", and like Alice's quest in Wonderland, Sammy's exploration of Big Apple Food Town, and beyond, induces both empathy and disgust in the viewer. As web-oracle *Wikipedia* puts it, "In fiction, characters are usually considered grotesque if they induce both empathy and disgust. A character who inspires disgust alone is simply a villain or a monster." From the beginning, Sammy has kinship with the classic characters of the grotesque tradition. Like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, she is physically impaired, having lost full use of her leg to a battle with cancer during childhood, and has the cringe-worthy social trait of laughing uncontrollably during sex, the most social of all acts. Her rare form of cancer, rhabdomyosarcoma, is an off-screen trauma that can be named, but never fully understood, just as we can never verify the cause of Sammy's ticklishness. They are simply problems for her to contend with.

In addition to these initial problems, Sammy is wounded in a more precise manner near the film's start; she is struck by a shoplifter's dart, thrown by "some sick Cupid", as she puts it. He is another grotesque figure, at once a love-object and an object of disgust, a vicious criminal, whose attack is subtle but insidious. The dart strikes her leg and renders her even more crippled at this same source of trauma, as if to suggest that the perpetuation of this unknown wound is continual and re-emergent. The stab of the dart is further initiation to a physical and an emotional quest, and fuses the two; the search for love is explicitly tied to the need for well being, for healing, for bodily wellness, as her leg is connected to both Cupid and rhabdomyosarcoma – the unknowable signifiers of lovesickness and physical sickness. The one who threw the dart is my no means a suitable or conventional love-choice for Sammy: he steals, calls her a "fag", misrecognizing her gender, and shows nothing but disdain towards her. However, he is the person the world has presented her with, and she must deal with him as a love character, as well as a thief.

This indicates a more general trend in *Year of the Carnivore*: characters are expected to behave a certain way, in accordance with social or economic obligation, in their roles as parents, store managers, store detectives, and so on; however, they breach these expectations in order to fulfill their individual desires. For instance, there is an onus on Sammy, as store detective, to have a streamlined manner of dealing with all criminals; however, eventually she breaches this protocol and uses the apprehended as sexual test partners. Her encounter with the dart-throwing criminal, though not explicitly sexual, does involve a long wrestling match before he is brought to justice, indicating a libidinal dimension to even the most seemingly asexual of workplace affairs. Every lover like every thief gives as well as takes.

In *Year of the Carnivore*, every thief is also a lover and vice-versa. Little Red Riding Hood may have been fending off wolves, but YOTC's Sammy must transform into her own variety of wolf. She begins the film in a plastic orange rain poncho, evoking Riding Hood's cape. However, unlike Riding Hood, or perhaps like an exaggerated version of her predecessor, she eggs the "wieners" on (to extend the film's constantly evolving sex-and-food metaphor); she isn't only avoiding wolves, but deliberately encountering some to learn about sex. Every sex act in the film is rife with ambiguity. Among the questions we are being forced to ask: Is this safe? Is this consensual? Is this right? Is this good? What is the role of desire in a reproductive act? These are the questions that sex asks of us as we experience it in daily life, but in *Year of the Carnivore* the questions are posed in a unique fashion.

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Just as the shoppers at Big Apple Food Town choose to veer into unknown dangers as they steal, without the implication that they do so out of financial desperation, Sammy puts herself at risk by veering from her relatively safe, middle-class world into the sexual unknown. In both Sammy and the shoppers' cases, they are putting themselves physically in harm's way. By stealing, the shoplifters are not only facing the presumed outcome of being caught stealing, which is being arrested, but are facing an unpredictable physical threat, a pummeling by store manager Dirk. By selecting sex partners by unusual and indiscriminate means, Sammy is also facing unknown elements, namely the partners that may turn out to be wonderful or spectacularly awful, or be any number of things to her. At a rock concert, she responds to the come-hither stare of a soundman who utters sweet nothings such as "are we doing this or what?" to her as they prepare for coitus. Around the same moment, she tells him that he was selected strictly because he was "available". Neither of them is attached to the other for any particular reason other than that they had glanced at one another. Indiscriminate sex can be explained starkly: we met each other, we had sex. There is no history involved between the pair, but both hold the expectation for some form of satisfaction. Neither can avoid their personal histories, however much they want the immediacy of sex to be all encompassing. It is the dissatisfaction provided by this encounter that teaches Sammy what she does not want from sex, as many scientific studies teach us: by process of elimination, and by trial and error. Sammy, herself, refers to her odyssey as the "experiment". But can love so easily be deduced? Again, *Year of the Carnivore* leaves us with another hanging question: is each sex act with each different partner different from each other sex act, or is there a common denominator we can begin to understand and use to interpret our own sexuality as a whole?

Sammy does not only want to understand sex, but also love. Love is like food. It is what sustains us but it can also harm us: especially if we are without it. We need delicious and nourishing foods, but even these can be deceptively harmful. In the world of this film, an avocado is not just an avocado, but is an "avocado", a signifier to be questioned. Upon reading the sign in Big Apple Food Town's produce section reading "AVOCADOS", in quotation marks, Lazowski asks store employee Sylvia, "what do you mean 'avocados'?" before he steals them. A questionable signifier, such as the one designating these avocados, is dangerous because it suggests that there is not an obvious meaning to the sign, and once we are in a world of multiple meanings, we are closer to a world of disorder and chaos. It is only by agreement, about the meaning of our terms and in our relations, that we can find understanding within chaos. Even though love might really be "love", in order to co-exist we must come to terms with our terminology. Lazowski commits a grand socially disruptive act, suggesting his disagreement with societal rules: he steals. Rather than acquiescing to the status quo, perhaps if an avocado is not what it appears to be, a person need not act in accordance with the law. That Lazowski is warned about the inorganic "avocados" by Sylvia, an employee of the store which is supposed to be selling them, is emblematic of the film's exploration of moral gray areas, and of Sammy's conundrum. By labeling the avocados as "avocados", indicating that they are artificial, Sylvia is acting in accordance with her own moral code, but against the code of the store, and this clash is ever-present in *Year of the Carnivore* – that of individual needs vs. societal expectations. Just as Sylvia's moral code clashes with that of her employer, Sammy's desire for love and acceptance clashes with her sexual inadequacy, and her methods of dealing with apprehended criminals differs from what is expected of her. Just as her method of dealing with criminals strays from the norm, as she has more experience with sex, her confusion about it increases.

At the end of the film, after her effort to "get good" at it, she's not sure whether she's better or worse at sex. Just like Lazowski's curiosity about the "avocados", as we question what sex is, it becomes more dangerous, but also more potent and meaningful in its multiplicity of meaning. Though Sammy's notion of sex is still murky by the end of the film, her knowledge of love becomes clearer – it is that which protects one from danger, a type of certainty, and a form of agreement. At the very least, love is that which isn't bad, and her bond with Eugene is a unique one, as all love bonds are, because they are formed by a meeting of individuals.

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