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Gender in *Possible in Michigan*

Gender is a construct, queerness is a spectrum—but it's also a construct in its own way. During the 80s, there was a surge of feminist art, one example being the short film *Possibly in Michigan* by Cecelia Condit. Using horror and fairytale elements, *Possibly in Michigan* critiques patriarchal dynamics of male dominance and consumption of women's labor and bodies by depicting Arthur as a faceless man whose power depends on cannibalizing women, whilst showing women just as capable of violence. By presenting subversive, violent women who defeat their abuser through the power of their wits and feminine bond, the film subverts traditional victimhood narratives and offers a vision of gendered solidarity that can stand against patriarchal violence.

The short film is, in short, about two women, Janice and Sharon, being stalked by a man named Arthur at a department store. We don't learn much about the three except through narration from Janice: "Sharon attracted violent men. Strangely, she had a way of making the violence seem like it was their idea... Her friend Janice was cut from the same mold... Arthur, who was following them closely, was similarly disposed" (Condit). This sets up all three characters as inherently violent, moving away from the idea of Sharon and Janice as pure victims. The film follows the women as they flee Arthur in the department store, escape to their car, and make it home safely—for a moment. Arthur reappears, smashes Sharon's window, and forces himself onto her. Sharon calls Janice for help, interrupting her as she shoots an Arthur

look-alike in her garden. Arthur tells Sharon he can either consume her now or slowly, claiming it's "for love" (Condit). His justification mirrors how society often frames male dominance in relationships. Before he can stab Sharon, Janice arrives and shoots him dead. Together, the two women dismember and eat Arthur, throwing his remains in the garbage before cooking and eating his flesh as if nothing had happened. It's undeniably feminist, but what does it mean?

+To understand Janice and Sharon's actions, we first need to examine the patriarchal system they exist, represented by Arthur. Arthur stands as a symbolic embodiment of the patriarchy itself—sometimes real, sometimes figurative, yet always present. Three scenes stand out where Arthur appears more symbolic than literal: first, he stalks them in the mall, then when Janice shoots his double out of her window while the real Arthur attacks Sharon, and finally, after the women have eaten him. In the mall specifically, Arthur lurks just behind the women, unnoticed but always looming—much like how patriarchal ideals loom over women's lives. The mannequins' dawning bunny masks further this imagery, framing the women as prey to Arthur's wolf-like predation, displayed as they flee. Later, Janice repeatedly shoots an never-ending army of Arthur look-alikes, reflecting how entrenched the patriarchy seems to be, male violence hounding women even from the safety of their homes. Finally, after Arthur's death and consumption, a masked version of him reappears beyond their window. Janice wags her finger, and he vanishes—a clear rejection of the violence he represents. He will haunt her no longer as she basks in their reclaimed power.

Arthur's masks are crucial to his character and the shifting faces of the patriarchy. Janice claims he had "forgotten who he was" (Condit), and his masks—a pig, donkey, wolf, and frog—represent different facets of his identity. The pig symbolizes greed, the donkey his foolishness, the wolf his predatory nature, and the frog, his entitled delusion that Sharon's kiss (emotional

labor) can transform him into the man he believes she wants. Judith Butler's theory of gender defines gender as "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo," connecting directly to Arthur's masks. His masks are a literal representation of his performative identity, shifting as he plays the different roles he believes he needs to. Social pressures are the most prevalent reasons men carry on destructive behaviors, lest they face social consequences and isolation. Meanwhile, the Arthur most often seen—represented by the open-mouth mask—remains static, embodying his pure hunger for power and dominance, the true reason for the patriarchy's continuity. The patriarchy relies on men performing dominance to uphold its structures. If women were allowed in their spaces, they'd be forced to see women as equal players and not a means to their own pleasure or worth. This is especially evident when Arthur forces a kiss on Shannon, admits to consuming six women before her, and tells her she will be the seventh. Earlier, during the mall scene, the song describes Arthur as a man who "ate his women friends," and shows Sharon dancing unhappily with him, reflecting the performative gender ideals placed on many women. A fairy tale says safety is found in the arms of the knight. A man provides safety for himself in others in exchange for a love that gives more than it takes, consuming the women in their lives to upkeep the image of themselves, to fuel egos built of shifting sands. In the end, Arthur chooses to wear the mask of a monster—and dies as one.

In traditional fairy tales, strapping, idealistic men are the heroes, but with men as beasts, it's the women left to protect themselves, as is often the case in the world. Janice steps into the knight in shining armour, coded as the more dominant and queer of the two. She pulls Sharon to safety, wields a gun with expertise, and never appears in scenes with the dancing male figures. Even her curly (not straight) hair, contrasted to Sharon's silky straight locks, subtly marks her nonconformity. Courtney Duckworth notes that Janice and Sharon "consume the prince in the

manner of witches imbibing power and end up alone, together” (Duckworth). The post-cannibalism scene—smoking together naked—nods to queer intimacy as was common trope in the early conservative eras of film. Even conservative advocate Pat Robertson described the film as “lesbian and anti-male” (Duckworth), which only highlights how overt its queer themes are if those not trained to pick up on queer messages can receive it. But why cannibalism? Hager explains: “Cannibalism connects to the way one devours an opponent to ‘steal their forces.’” which Sharon and Janice do—consuming him to claim the power he held as a man and displace it onto themselves. Sharon, initially depicted as delicate, reveals her own monstrous potential in this act, with images of a corpse overlaying pictures of her lying in the grass with flowers as she gets closer to the feast. Tortolani explains the meta-analysis of the scene, showing “The female body, rather than interrupting the patriarchal social order through abject behaviors, is instead a powerful weapon of self-defense.” By consuming Arthur, Janice and Sharon strip him of control and dominance, and by tossing his remains in the garbage afterward, demonstrate their complete rejection of the patriarchal system as they return to their home hand in hand. As Duckworth concludes, they “forcibly regain(ed) ownership and control of the feminine self,” which is a path many women have had to look at. Without the natural weapons of men, many women choose passivity, instructed since birth. Those women of whom patriarchy benefits shun those who fight for them, but without outliers banding together, all would be devoured.

Possibly in *Michigan* critiques patriarchy, subverts fairy tale tropes, and uses horror to explore queer solidarity. Through Arthur’s masks, Janice and Sharon’s rejection of victimhood, and their act of consuming him, the film dismantles traditional narratives and reclaims power. By devouring the very system that sought to consume them, the women achieve victory, standing together in defiance of patriarchal violence.

Works Cited

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