

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Another kind of monster: Cindy Sherman's *Office Killer*

by [Dahlia Schweitzer](#)



Our first shot of the film is a POV from the mail cart as it makes its office rounds, spreading communication and disease.



Our first shot of Dorine is through this mail cart, but we still have no idea who she, or anyone else, is.



An off-kilter close-up of the receptionist, whom we never see again. We do, however, see many telephones throughout the film, again emphasizing the parallels between transmissions of a virus and viral communication.

“Sherman does not consider *Office Killer* to be part of her own body of art, since she was more of a hired gun to direct the picture,” writes Catherine Morris in *The Essential Cindy Sherman*.^[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) However, Sherman was not simply a “hired gun.” In the June 1997 issue of *Art in America*, Sherman herself acknowledges that the general idea for the story was hers, that she was involved in preproduction, that she gave specific instructions to the cinematographer and the actors about what she wanted, and that she played a direct role in the editing. She is officially credited in the film’s titles for the story idea and her role as director. Then the movie bombed,^[2] and everyone, including Sherman, stopped talking about it.

Part of the problem is that the movie isn’t really a horror film, or even a send-up of a horror film. It’s more of a dark “chick pic,” drawing on the tradition of *The Women* (1939), combined with elements of camp and satire. The relationships between the women (all the main characters are female) echo a Joan Crawford-led women’s picture from an earlier era, where the films—from *The Women* to *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962)—explored the complicated interpersonal dynamics between women and their struggles for men, power, and independence, the roles of the men often an afterthought in the narrative. There are numerous thematic and atmospheric parallels between *Office Killer* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, another mix of horror and melodrama from three decades before.

The intensity of some of the scenes and the relationship between Dorine, the protagonist, and her mother support the film’s placement in the category of melodrama, whereas the lighting in many of the scenes is reminiscent of film noir, and the high strung absurdity is comedic. The killings and decay are horrific. It’s as if Sherman took all the cinematic elements that inspired her photographs and rolled them into one film, which could be why everyone keeps trying to tie the film to her pictures.^[3]

Even more disturbing than the one-dimensionality of the conversation about *Office Killer* is the conspicuous lack of dialogue about the film, at all. It’s as though there has been a collective decision not only not to talk about the movie, but also not to talk about the photographs through the film. If we start to think about Sherman as an artist transfixed by the materiality of the body, rather than the more typical cliché of the feminine image as projected by the male gaze, if we start to pick up on the aggression inherent in the photographs, the lack of pin-up glamour, the steely solitude, how does that re-invent the Film Stills, the Centerfolds, the Fashion series?

If the movie, like her photos, twists and parodies horror, fashion, and melodrama, if both are seen to focus on a general, conceptual exploration of the individual’s portrayal or role within society, rather than on a specific individuality, why is the film fundamentally upsetting? Why do her photographs continue to impact on such a personal, intimate level despite dealing with abstract issues? Why do I see myself in her archetypes? What is it we are reacting to in a movie so completely



Gossiping with Kleenex. The “Office Cold” is getting around.

fake we laugh at the most violent and grotesque moments? If all horror, as a genre, is built on a familiarity of what will happen next (girl alone, wanders to look for the monster, dies), how does Sherman push the boundaries, keeping us continually surprised within a construct which feels inexplicably familiar?

Much as her images work off layers of reference, the film itself is not structured along the lines of a conventional narrative. In contrast to other similar office dramas, like *Working Girl* (1988) or *Wall Street* (1987), our protagonist does not learn from a superior and then come into her own by defying the same superior, at least not in a typical way. In fact, no one learns anything from anyone else in this movie. The only character with the responsibility of teaching others, Daniel (Michael Imperoli), doesn’t provide any real instruction, at least not in front of the camera. He sets up Dorine’s computer and suggests that she play around with it, check out the manuals herself, do the tutorials, and that there will be a class in the future, which of course never happens. The only character who undergoes any sort of evolution in the film is Dorine, and it is not as a result of external instruction, least of all from Daniel. She promotes herself from copyeditor to office manager. She teaches herself the life lessons she needs to progress in life and in the workplace. Dorine does all this, reaching her own levels of success, while still remaining resolutely the oddball.



Virginia, looking like the Wicked Witch crossed with Virginia Slims.



Virginia, chasing her cigarette with some Echinacea.



Norah, looking very Jackie O.



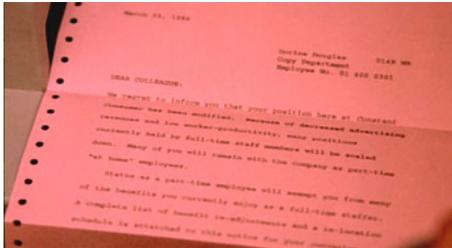
Finally, our first real shot of Dorine (and her desk).

Kim and Norah, the two most charismatic and polished women in the film, are played by well-known actresses Molly Ringwald and Jeanne Tripplehorn. If we didn’t know better, we’d start to think the movie was about them—or at least about glittering and glowing Ringwald, the best dressed employee of *Constant Consumer* magazine, even if we never find out exactly what she does there—but it’s not. Ringwald’s Kim is the character most at ease in the film, and she walks through the magazine’s office as if she belongs there. Despite the fact that she is the only one in the film who seems like a believable person—someone we could imagine existing in our own off-screen reality, someone who voices the concerns and questions we hear in our heads—she is only there to propel things along. The movie is not about her or about Tripplehorn’s Norah. Neither has any character development. This story is about Dorine Douglas, a quirky loner with bad makeup, even worse fashion taste, and a propensity for accumulating bodies in her basement.

So if we don’t have a typical narrative or a conventional heroine, what do we have? We have a movement through genres, with layers of reference to horror, melodrama, and contemporary culture, and the opportunity to fill in the blanks ourselves. In terms of a storyline, *Office Killer* is structured by the order of the killings, each successive murder another notch in Dorine’s development. The sequence of the movie is best outlined in terms of deaths: Mr. Michaels, Virginia,



A rare exterior shot – Dorine is at the copy machine.



The pink slip that started it all. Work-at-home status has officially begun!



Dorine has toner all over her face. She has been infected. Norah doesn't want to get too close.



Our lovers' triangle. Norah has her Kleenex, Kim is dressed to the nines, like always. This bar is one of the few outside-the-office locations other than Dorine's house, but we never see anyone else there. This movie has no time for any other characters.

the Mail Boy, Daniel and Norah—possibly even beginning with Dorine's first intentional execution, that of her father. We think we know what to expect when we see certain scenarios play out. And Sherman plays on those expectations, using them to build her story, while also defying them in surprising ways. The use of a predominantly female cast, with tensions built on typical female-to-female conflict— notions of female aggression, competition, role-play, beauty—while echoing films like *The Women* (1939), is amped up to nightmarish levels. This film is far from a typical horror vehicle and not only because the killer is a woman. What's relevant is not that the bodies accumulate, but what Dorine does to the bodies after they're dead—and the very fact that she doesn't see the bodies as dead.

When Dorine Douglas' job as copyeditor for *Constant Consumer* magazine is turned into an at-home position during a downsizing, she doesn't know how to cope. When an accidental electrocution does away with the office sleaze, Dorine realizes she can just move the office home with her. The bodies at home begin to pile up as, one by one, she picks off her former colleagues, intentionally targeting those who, for whatever reason, have offended her. Sherman soon reveals to us, via flashback, that Dorine's father also died by her hand following his own inappropriate behavior. Don't think that these bodies are brought up and merely dumped! The camp horror comes in as Dorine tends for them, taping over the gaping holes and decomposition, spraying glass cleaner as a general disinfectant, neatly arranging the bodies so they can all watch television together. Only when her work is done, when the appropriate victims have met their fate, does Dorine drive off into the sunset, ready to find other work and other friends in a new city.

Not only do we have a film that isn't purely horror/ comedy/ melodrama/ noir, both none and all of the above, but also the film had its marketing odds further stacked against it by Sherman's choice of Carol Kane as Dorine. Molly Ringwald, as the female lead of the eighties, would have been sure to get more press, if not more box office dollars; even Jeanne Tripplehorn would have been more commercially safe. When Miramax set up focus groups to watch early screenings of the film, they selected young males who had seen *Kids*, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, *Basquiat* and *suburbia*, young males who universally demanded "More Molly Ringwald," both in terms of more screen time, and literally, as in more of her body.[4] These kids obviously didn't get it, and neither did Miramax, who had the rights to *Office Killer* for a year before deciding not to try releasing it.

Strand Releasing picked it up, gave it a very select distribution in a handful of art houses nationwide, before sending it to the grave of the VHS/DVD bin, a difficulty which Christine Vachon, the film's producer, briefly alludes to in her book, *Shooting to Kill*. Despite the fact that *Office Killer* was clearly an inspiration to the name of her production company (Killer Films), Vachon's discussion of the film is almost non-existent, dwarfed by conversation about her other movies, like *Velvet Goldmine*, *Safe*, and *I Shot Andy Warhol*. The book's longest segment about *Office Killer* deals with the test screenings that doomed the film.

Another problem of marketability for the film is the aforementioned fact that, at first glance, it doesn't easily fit with the rest of Sherman's work, and not only because the pictures move and have a title. There's so much going on in *Office Killer*, so much that has nothing to do with what came before or after in her enormous body of work, that it's hard to talk about, harder to pick apart. So we snuggle comfortably against the *Untitled Film Stills* and try to make sense of the madness, using Laura Mulvey or Rosalind Krauss to present us with a framework for discussion.[5] Out of the articles that Metro Pictures, Sherman's New York gallery, lists as coming out in 1997 about Sherman, fewer than half deal with the movie. Roberta Smith, in her review of *Office Killer* for the *New York Times*, devotes the first three paragraphs to the movie before returning to the familiar terrain of the photographs for the next four. Smith does go back to the movie eventually, to discuss the problems entailed in Sherman making one, before skipping ahead to review the current Sherman (photographic) retrospective. By the time she ties it all together, it is with the succinct statement,

"The movie itself is almost a Sherman retrospective." [6]



Kim is the glamour girl.



Dorine, at home, with the cat.



The cat has caught a mouse. Dorine is about to dispose of her first body—down the garbage disposal.



Mrs. Douglas is impatient. Where is her breakfast?

Once again, another critic looks at the movie through the eyes of the photographs, missing the opportunity to use the film as a vehicle for gaining a richer appreciation of the photographs. Especially telling is the assigning of Roberta Smith, an art critic, to review *Office Killer*, a film.

There is no question that it is fun to watch the movie with an eye for Sherman's style and technique, but it's still a movie, and by virtue of being a movie, much of its meaning and significance is fundamentally different than a photograph. If we accept this fact, that this is Sherman's only work with sound, motion, a title, and involving other people besides herself, we have to wonder why most critics only discuss the film in terms of the photographs, when they bother to talk about the film at all. The film is almost completely ignored in discussions of Sherman's work post-1997. Critics tend to flatten the differences in her work, to fuse the various photographic series together as continuations of the *Untitled Film Stills*, to interpret every work in relation to what came before. This could be because of the narrative quality that builds when the individual photographs are organized in a row, since alone each might seem fragmentary, speaking merely in notation. But such an approach also creates a dangerously limited, one-dimensional perspective, prohibiting any real complex understanding of her work. Each series of Sherman's photographs, while obviously coming from the mind of the same woman, engages with different issues in various ways, and it's essential to judge each series on its own, as well as part of a body of work.

Corporate shift

Office Killer is about life in 1997, ten years after *Working Girl*, two years before *The Matrix*, three years before *American Psycho* (the movie), and six years after *American Psycho* (the book). Two years before *Office Space*. Corporate USA was shifting, people were changing. Cubicles would never be the same again.

"You're Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable software company. You have a social security number, you pay your taxes, and you help your landlady carry out her garbage."—*The Matrix* (1999)

"I'm gonna need you to go ahead and come in tomorrow. So if you could be here around nine, that would be great, mmmkay? Oh...oh... and I almost forgot: Ahh, I'm also gonna need you to go ahead and also come in on Sunday, too, mmmkay?"—*Office Space* (1999)

The worklife in the United States in the late nineties was no longer confined to the eight-hour day. Technology was supposed to make life easier. It was supposed to enable us to make money off Ebay while sunbathing, but instead it became domain of the cubicle, sales of which rose to \$3.4 billion in 1997.[7] The late 1990s workplace was lean and mean, opting for smaller and less private spaces and more powerful, versatile technology. In the late nineties, we became slaves to our apparatuses, we became our jobs because we were always working. Technology became a non-negotiable part of the workspace, as the boundaries between home and office shifted forever—the computer becoming, in the words of Daniel, the "lifeline to the office," as if we needed to be umbilically connected to the office when we weren't there, via a *life*-line. At the same time, technology allowed the underdog, the techno-nerd, the tongue-tied and the awkward, to achieve a new kind of power through the creation of a very different type of power, communication, and infrastructure.

Office Killer begins with a corporate downsizing, many of the employees converted to part-time status and sent home to do their work via email. This technological shift mirrored the then current economic and work situation, which was emptying the workplace, making it more common to email someone rather than talk to them. People were literally and metaphorically disappearing, which made it even easier for Dorine's actions to go unnoticed. This anonymity combined with a lack of individuality is emphasized when Dorine is identified by an employee number on her pink slip, like a prisoner in a jail or concentration



Dorine is fed up with her mother, so she unplugs the wheelchair ramp so that her mother has to stay upstairs.

camp, just another piece of machinery. Much like in *American Psycho* (2000), the killings that will happen could happen because it wasn't clear what people did at work or where in the corporate structure they belonged. Both Dorine and Patrick Bateman are constantly mistaken for other people. They are just cogs in the apparatus, one no different than the next, despite their differences in social status. *Office Space* (1999) is also built around this new world of indirect communication, even more acute two years later, of staring at terminals, unclear job responsibilities, and no job security. There is a constant fear of being downsized. "Oh no, they're not in today, they're working from home," became a common explanation for empty desks. No one knew where anyone belonged anymore.



A little office romance between Kim and Mr. Michaels.



Working late in a deserted office, Dorine has been forced to turn to Mr. Michaels for assistance.



Ever the gentleman, Mr. Michaels is happy to come to a woman's assistance.



Unfortunately for him, Dorine is a little clumsy.



Despite being clumsy, Dorine is ready to clean up her mistakes. The first body is coming home.



Getting comfortable in the basement.

These vagaries of office politics also helped set the stage for a rise in white collar crime—just a couple dollars here and there, no one will notice. No one notices anything, anyway. Spam literalizes mail that comes from no one, email originating from a vacuum. "Did you get the memo?" replaces real dialogue. Or, as Daniel tells Dorine, "Some people like [email] so much, they stop talking to people in person." Avoiding confrontation or conversation whenever possible has become the rule of the game. Dorine's actions are in retaliation for the disappearance of the corporeal.

In this way, Dorine's killing spree can be seen as a reaction to the devaluing of the body. However communication has been facilitated by technology, it has also rendered it more abstract and anonymous. As the bodies in her basement disintegrate, we are reminded of the oozing organs at the other end of these email accounts. Dorine makes bodies real again. *Office Space* and *Office Killer* both end with primal bonfires, in the former the actual office building, while in the latter the improvised "new" office, Dorine's home, going up in smoke.

While *Office Killer* is not a science-fiction cyberpunk film, and it borrows far more heavily from *Halloween* than anything by William Gibson, it also emphasizes our current society's turn to the technological and virtual versus our search for authentic self—leaking bodies, leaking self, leaking information contrasted to technology's clean efficiency. As the offices of *Constant Consumer* magazine grow more computer-reliant and more sterile, the messiness of person-to-person contact eradicated by the prophylactic of the keyboard, Dorine wages a one woman campaign to remind us of the superficiality of that pursuit. The sterility is barely skin-deep, computer cables providing no escape from the inevitable decomposition and failures of our insides and the uncertainty of our souls. We consume identities like we consume new cars, we transform ourselves with everything from plastic surgery to vitamin pills, but we don't come any closer to knowing who we are or to postponing the betrayal of our still death-prone bodies. We need to be bigger, better, faster while we understand ourselves less.

Technology does not necessarily supersede an understanding of self. "In the beginning, I was spooked by all the gadgets...but now the computer is my best friend," explains Dorine Douglas, but even though she says she was spooked, it's obvious that Dorine understands technology immediately, and that it helps her understand herself. She sends emails with as much skill as she distinguishes between "which" and "that," head copyeditor for a staff who clearly don't know any better. She isn't frightened by technology, she knows how to use it to her advantage, and she allows it to empower rather than depersonalize her. Not everyone in her office feels the same way.

The conflict between old school and new school manifests itself in the first scene of the movie, as Virginia (the boss, representative of the old guard) and Norah (the office manager, aka the new guard) bicker over the significance of technology. Norah says her technological savvy is the only thing keeping the magazine out of the Stone Age and bankruptcy. Virginia retorts that knowing about computers doesn't mean you know anything about running a company. Virginia, tellingly, is wearing black, and Norah is wearing a soft pink. Virginia is classic old school femme fatale, Norah is Chanel. Neither woman seems likeable. Neither woman seems happy. Neither type appealing.

Both women contain elements of Sigourney Weaver's bitchy brunette Katharine Parker from *Working Girl*, a film which shares several other amusing parallels with *Office Killer*.^[8] The women are a complement to fellow magazine matriarchs Martha Stewart, Helen Gurley Brown, and Bonnie Fuller. Ultra-skinny and ultra-chic Helen Gurley Brown, bearing more than a passing resemblance to Barbara Sukowa's Virginia, became editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965, turning the failing magazine into an icon, before being replaced by will-do-anything-for-a-story Bonnie Fuller in 1996, described by former employees and maligned celebrities as "the devil"^[9] and by New York gossip columnist Cindy Adams as "Fuehrer-in-Chief." Fuller, however, had the golden touch, as newsstand sales of the magazine grew 18%, from 1.6 to 1.9 million, in her first year. Martha Stewart, in contrast, was *NY Magazine's* "definitive American woman of our time" in their May 1995 issue. Her version of corporatized domesticity infiltrated the publishing world in 1990, when she signed with Time Publishing Ventures to develop a new magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, for which she served as editor in chief. Virginia and Norah share elements of all these women, a blend of unquestionable femininity with ambition and a thirst for consumption, but in a much more confined and claustrophobic way.



Another telephone close-up, only this time it's Mrs. Michaels who is on it.



Shots of domestic bliss, number 2. Still in Mrs. Michaels' kitchen.



Dorine, as a child, surveying the results of her first "accidental" death.

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Setting up Dorine's "home office."



Dorine is escorting Daniel out. Behind him is visible the odd painting of Dorine and her father.



"Where is Mr. Michaels?"



Shots of domestic bliss, number 1. Mrs. Michaels' kitchen.