

REEXAMINING CINDY SHERMAN'S 1997 FILM: *OFFICE KILLER*

By

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(Under the Direction of ISABELLE WALLACE)

ABSTRACT

In 1997, the film *Office Killer* was released to the public. Cindy Sherman, of photographic fame, had directed the film as her first foray into the world of cinema. The film was ultimately received negatively publicly and critically with many critics criticizing that the film had none of the artistic direction that Sherman's photographs displayed. This paper reexamines the film in the context of the critical theory written by Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane about her photographic series *Untitled Film Stills*, *Disasters*, and *Fairy Tales*, reconsidering its merits in line with Sherman's larger oeuvre.

INDEX WORDS: Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer*, photography, *Untitled Film Stills*, film, horror, *Disasters*, *Fairy Tales*

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## DEDICATION

For my Nana, Rachel, and my Papa, Perry, in thanks for their years of love and support.

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## REEXAMINING CINDY SHERMAN'S 1997 FILM: *OFFICE KILLER*

In 1997, Cindy Sherman produced and directed a horror-comedy film called *Office Killer*. The film opens with a scene of a busy office environment accompanied by a voice over, spoken by the main character, Dorine Douglas, who says, “At *Constant Consumer Magazine* there is but one constant rule: get the job done. This can be hazardous, however, when the laws of economics affect our workplace and threaten to downsize us. For those of you who cannot keep pace with such changes, be forewarned: you will be terminated.” Dorine’s commentary establishes the tone the rest of the film will follow, one of urgency, as Dorine tries to hide her quickly-faltering psyche from her coworkers.<sup>1</sup> From the voice over, the film follows Dorine, a mousy, awkward, and socially inept copy editor, seemingly out of place in the professional work environment due to her inability to have interpersonal conversations and her baggy and raggedy clothes. During the beginning of the film Dorine is portrayed as a mousy and plain woman. Her hair is kept up and neat in a controlled yet unfashionable style. The makeup she wears is minimal, her lipstick a subdued matte color and her cheeks decorated with an almost unnoticeable amount of blush (Fig. 1). Provocatively, a direct comparison can be drawn between Dorine’s appearance and Sherman’s own appearance in the *Bus Riders* series from 1976 (Fig. 2). These photographs were

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<sup>1</sup>For the convenience of the reader, I have included a list of the main characters of the film and their roles within the magazine itself. Dorine, the main character of the film. She is played by Carol Kane; Norah, the newly-promoted manager over Dorine’s department at Constant Consumer and the person to try to reach out to Dorine as a friend. She is embezzling money from the magazine and is discovered by Dorine. She is played by Jeanne Tripplehorn; Kim, Norah’s friend and one of the writers at Constant Consumer. She suspects Dorine is the murderer and tries to warn Norah. She is played by Molly Ringwald; Gary Michaels, a writer at Constant Consumer considered to be a notorious flirt. He is Dorine’s first victim. He is played by David Thorton; Virginia, the owner of Constant Consumer magazine and the one who ordered Norah to downsize the office. She is played by Barbara Sukowa.

produced soon after Sherman's graduation from Buffalo State college. Like Dorine, Sherman wears what can be described as "nerdy" glasses, an oversized cardigan and a ruffled skirt combined with little to no accentuating makeup and plain hair. The character from the *Bus Riders* photograph even has a stack of books in her arms, anticipating Dorine's job as a copy editor. As I will argue, this is one of many connections between Sherman's photographic and filmic project, the existence of which have been largely ignored.

This socially-constructed female image is also a major theme of Sherman's photography, and, on this basis, I will argue that there is a connection between the film and the photos as such. In doing so, I will rely on visual analysis of key works from the *Untitled Film Stills* and *Disasters* series specifically and put them in direct comparison with scenes taken from *Office Killer* in order to establish a direct connection with the photographs and establish thematic coherence within Sherman's oeuvre. I will also look at the overarching themes of Sherman's early photography and provide a scene-by-scene analysis of *Office Killer* to show their theoretical connection to each other. By examining the film *Office Killer* with the same critical eye that has long been applied to Sherman's early photography, and by also examining it through critical film theory, this thesis aims to challenge the notion that the film is far removed from her photography. In doing so, I hope to establish a greater appreciation for the film itself and form a more complete idea of how Sherman's work engages with critical feminist theory and with the medium of film as well.

Famous for her *Untitled Film Stills* of the late 1970s and 80s, Sherman's reputation as a photographer is secure. Much has been written about her work in relation to her portrayal of female identity in popular culture and the male gaze upon that female body. Coming after her *Sex Pictures* series of the early nineties, *Office Killer* was Sherman's first foray into film.

However, unlike her photography which was critically acclaimed, the film fell on deaf ears and remains Sherman's only work in this medium.<sup>2</sup> Reviews ranged from neutral to negative and dismissive commentary continues.<sup>3</sup> Much of the negativity surrounding the film focused on its seeming difference from the photographic style that had made Sherman an art world darling.<sup>4</sup> As Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* explained in his review of the theatrical release, "*Office Killer* is dreadful, all right, but what's truly depressing about it is that Sherman doesn't even appear to be trying for the lyrical ambiguity of her best work."<sup>5</sup> Amy Taubin of *The Village Voice* shared his opinion, writing "If Sherman, a brilliant visual artist, has any filmmaking talent, it's not in evidence here. A couple of punchy static images do not make a movie."<sup>6</sup> However, like many commentators, Gleiberman and Taubin failed to grasp the essential connections (both stylistic and thematic) between Sherman's work in the mediums of film and photography, and as such there is very little critical literature written about *Office Killer*. Instead of viewing Dorine as a stand-in for the absent Sherman whose photographic oeuvre is largely comprised of self-portraits and grasping the deep critical and thematic implications through the film -- and its connection with Sherman's oeuvre -- reviewers viewed *Office Killer* through the lens of other Hollywood horror films such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Scream 2*, or *The Night Flier*, which also were released in 1997. Perhaps the film too literally told the story implied in

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<sup>2</sup> While Sherman did cease directing her own films, she did not entirely step away from Hollywood or the world of cinema. After *Office Killer*, Sherman acted in two other films, *Pecker* in 1998 and *Guest of Cindy Sherman* in 2008, and in both films she portrayed herself.

<sup>3</sup> As of 2011, *Office Killer* has a tomatometer score of 12% with an audience score of 51% on rotten tomatoes and IMDb has scored the film at 4.9 out of 10.

<sup>4</sup> Artist Paul Pfeiffer was living in New York at the time of the film's premier. When asked by myself about the reaction of the art world and public to it, he stated, "It was a scandal. No one could believe that [Sherman] had done it."

<sup>5</sup> Owen Gleiberman, "The Week," *Entertainment Weekly*, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1997, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Taubin, "On The Townie," *The Village Voice*, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1997, 68.

Sherman's photographs<sup>7</sup>, but by applying the same critical attention to *Office Killer* as was applied to the *Untitled Film Stills* and Sherman's other series of photographs, I aim to solidify the film's place in her oeuvre.

As the narrative of *Office Killer* progresses and Dorine becomes more psychologically unhinged, her appearance begins to change to better conceal her dark secrets. She lets her hair down to fall over her shoulders in waves. Her makeup becomes more distinct with her lipstick becoming a copy of the vibrant shade that her coworker, Norah, wears, her blush becoming more caked on and noticeable, and her eyebrows penciled in in unnatural shapes. Her clothes, too, become more fashionable. Dorine begins to wear accessories such as floral scarves and pronounced gold earrings in contrast to her prior, plain wardrobe (Fig. 3). Not only has Dorine changed her appearance to mimic how she believes her coworkers and victims dress but she has also engaged in the quest to regain control of her life. However, by doing this and changing her appearance, she draws even more attention to the cosmetics she has put on to mask herself.

One night, Dorine is called in to the office to help her coworker Gary Michaels fix his computer; yet, her actions lead to his accidental electrocution. She hides his body in her basement, and the traumatic experience of his death causes tragic memories of her past to resurface. As an effect of Michaels' death, Dorine recalls the death of her father and the role she played in it, the implication being that she effected his death in a car accident in order to escape his heavily-implied sexual abuse of her, which left her both sexually and mentally stunted in a state of adolescence. Her father, understood through the dialogue of Dorine and Norah was a founding member of *Constant Consumer*. Mr. Landau, another coworker, also speculates that

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<sup>7</sup> It is Laura Mulvey who first brings attention to the overarching narrative of Sherman's photographs in her article "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Works of Cindy Sherman" from 1991.

Mr. Douglas was very protective of his daughter, as her father offered him the editing job in order to keep him away from Dorine. Returned to this history by recent events, Dorine's psychological state begins to spiral out of control as she navigates reliving her childhood trauma. In order to regain control, she begins to kill off her coworkers one by one and set them up in her basement, all the while adopting aspects of the glamorous aspects of her female coworkers' personae, even taking objects of their clothing from them to wear herself, such as Kim's scarf. The film ends with another narration as Dorine drives out of town, dolled up in makeup and a fashionable blond wig: "If there is one thing I have learned, it is accepting my limitations while accentuating my strengths. A new job awaits me somewhere, perhaps in your office. I hope that we could get along." Dorine's appearance, in conjunction with the film's final lines suggest both transformation and stasis, for while she may have changed on the outside, her final words are menacing, suggesting that her murderous rampage might continue.<sup>8</sup>

Central to the plot is the arrested development of its main character, which the film explains in a flashback scene. It takes place in the family car with Dorine separated from her parents, sitting in the back seat while they occupy the front driver and passenger seats. Her mother is irate<sup>9</sup>, stating that her father should have heard the accusations that Dorine was saying about him. The mother's monologue about Dorine's behavior and how "wicked" and "dirty" she and her thoughts are, clues the audience in to the possibility that the father is sexually abusing Dorine. This can also be inferred from the later flashback scene where her father tells Dorine to

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<sup>8</sup> Originally the script included much more detail of the violence during the murder scenes but Sherman wanted to focus more on Dorine's psychological state and how she interacted with the bodies in the aftermath so the scenes were cut down.

<sup>9</sup> It might be tempting for the audience to read a sense of Desire for her father on Dorine's part into what the mother is saying. However, the only Electra complex that exists in the film is one that is a fantasy in the mother's mind. Dorine rebukes her father's advances on numerous occasions seen through flashbacks, eventually culminating in the ultimate rejection of killing him.

sit on his lap (1:07:30). Her father, in response to the mother, looks back at Dorine in the rearview mirror and states that she is “probably jealous of [her] mother,” implying she has incestuous desire. However, when he reaches back to touch Dorine’s knee, she grabs hold of his arm and traps him, making him subsequently crash the car in an accident that results in his death and the paralyzing of her mother. Later dialogue in the film illuminates the fact that Dorine was removed from her family after the accident and placed in foster care, only to return to the home eventually to take care of her mother.

This first act of violence, the retaliation against her father, and to a lesser extent her mother, could have been Dorine’s first attempt to seize control of her young life. However, the trauma of the event and her subsequent removal from the family situation without the time to properly process and move on from what had been done to her and what she had done in return and then her subsequent return to the mother who verbally abused her left Dorine frozen in that infantile state of adolescence. She went from being controlled by her father, acting out in retaliation and seizing some small aspect of control, only to be controlled again by her mother who repeatedly makes it quite clear through her dialogue that she views Dorine as someone who cannot function on her own.

From the beginning of the film, the arrested and socially awkward nature of Dorine is contrasted with her coworkers, particularly the gossipy and flirtatious Kim and the career-driven Norah. In the beginning of the film, this juxtaposition is made clear by two sequential scenes. Approximately eight minutes into the film, Kim, Norah and Norah’s boyfriend Daniel frequent a bar. The three of them are shown together drinking and gossiping about the events at the office, a line of conversation that eventually leads to tension between the two women as Kim believes that Norah is changing with her newfound promotion. However, as the sexually charged scene of

office drama and adult drinking ends, the setting changes to Dorine's home where she is seen, in her frumpy bathrobe drinking tea in her kitchen alone. The noise of the bar has faded away to the quiet solitude of the house that Dorine splits with her mother, and her isolation is felt through the drastic change in setting. Not only is Dorine alone, her mother being all but confined to the upstairs portion of the house, but she is drinking tea which creates another contrast to the prior scene where Norah and Kim were enjoying alcohol and unwinding after a day at the office as friendly coworkers would do. This not only highlights Dorine's aversion to social situations and contact, but also paints her in the light of being someone who is young and incapable of partaking in adult activities. This juxtaposition further highlights the norms of femininity that are set up early in the film. The other examples of femininity presented to the viewer are Norah and Kim. They are well dressed and enjoy social situations together outside of and inside of the office. In contrast, Dorine, who is shabby in appearance and unable to socialize, stands out as stunted, a departure from the norm.

During the beginning of the film, the audience is witness to small acts of rebellion by Dorine against her living situation. During these acts, Dorine is shown to act out in minor ways that, while they don't change the environment and situation in which she exists, do offer some psychological reprieve for her to act out against society. The first scene to this effect begins with Dorine in her kitchen, holding a dead mouse over the sink. Dorine takes a long pause as she looks at the mouse, holding it up at eye level, before dropping it down the garbage disposal and turning on the mechanism to grind it up. While the mouse was already dead, and her actions do not constitute murder, as with her father and with her victims later in the film, this act of violence does show a predisposition to violent tendencies.

The second scene [12:00] in which Dorine acts out, both against her mother and her gendered role as a female caretaker, comes just after Dorine's mother has been established as a character. Dorine descends the stairs after speaking with her mother, and in the process of doing so, she offers these thoughts about what makes a good mother/daughter relationship: "It is true that to live inside a warm and nurturing environment is everybody's dream, but as we grow up we also need to experience independence and adventure. That is the key to a successful mother/daughter relationship." As she reaches the bottom of the stairs, Dorine bends down and unplugs the power cord connected to her mother's stair chair, which she uses to get down the steps given her paralyzed condition, an action that later would be blamed on the family cats. Again, this is not an act of violence, but rather a minor act of resistance as Dorine tries to establish a modest amount of freedom as she laments about growing up and the need to be free of her controlling mother as if she is still a teenager who operates under the rules of her house. However, as seen later in the film through Dorine's mother stating that she had to call the neighbor to plug her chair back in, the independence gained from Dorine's action was short lived, just as her stay in foster care was as a child.

The final scene in which Dorine attempts to gain some semblance of control over her environment differs from the other two in that it was not a consciously committed act of defiance, but instead an accident that, nevertheless, inspired the murder spree, with which the rest of the film is occupied. After Dorine becomes a part-time employee, she is told by Mr. Landau to stay late with Gary Michaels in order to work with the new computers and to help him get his front-page article finished by the next day. Consequently, that evening, she is left alone with Michaels, known to be a womanizer, who actively makes Dorine uncomfortable. After her computer crashes, she calls on Michaels to repair it, and when he proceeds to make advances and

then subsequently verbally abuses her when she panics, she anxiously excuses herself to the bathroom. This situation, the confrontation with a sexually forward male, harkens back to the unwanted treatment that Dorine received from her father as a child. Not only were both men sexually predatory but they also were confrontational and in positions of power over her. As Dorine's mother alluded to, her father kept abusive control over the women in his life. This same abuse is reminiscent of the abuse of Michaels. After some time, she returns, and Michaels has crawled under the desk in order to work with the electrical wires there. He had previously turned off the power in order to work with them, but as Dorine reenters the scene she stumbles back against the breaker box and turns the power back on, leading to his accidental electrocution.

The lights popping back on in the office symbolize the proverbial ah-ha moment, the spark of light, where Dorine realizes that she can take control of her own life by taking away the autonomy of another person through violence. She returns to her desk and sits down over Michael's body, proceeding to chastise his corpse in the way a mother would a child, a director would an actor, or an office manager would an employee, saying that she's going to have to clean up the mess that he's left behind. This choice of tone and language, the idea of cleaning up a mess, places Dorine in a position of power over Michaels, giving her control over him and the situation at hand. This moment is the spark that allows Dorine to see how she might take control of both her environment and, eventually, her own appearance. It is after this event that Dorine both begins to act out in violence to "clean up" the office, ridding it of those who are ruining her father's company, and also cleaning up the mess that her father left of her own life through his abuse. This process parallels her own transformation, as she "cleans up" her own appearance as well, taking control of both aspects of her life.

This shift in Dorine's personality and demeanor can be seen through the way that she interacts with her coworkers in the office. As the film progresses, Dorine is shown to become more confident in herself and more assertive after the death of Michaels. A comparison of two scenes shows her transformation: the first conversation that Dorine has with Mr. Landau at the beginning of the film as compared to the scene [55:00] in which she strides into Norah's office and asks her to go to lunch as a pretext to kidnap her. In the beginning of the film, Dorine struggles to even make eye contact with Mr. Landau, who she is revealed to have grown up with and been close friends with. At the office, he would have been her closest ally, yet she keeps her head down and only glances up occasionally as he speaks to her over her desk. This could likely be due to the apprehension she has towards males after her father's implied abuse and her continual stagnation in adolescence. Through the film, while her interactions with Mr. Landau become fewer and fewer, her interactions with Norah increase. Before Dorine enters Norah's office, she had previously sent her an anonymous e-mail stating that she knew Norah was laundering money from the magazine, putting her in the same category as she did her other victims. When Dorine enters the room, she catches Norah off guard and instantly puts herself in a position of power over her. This dynamic of power is communicated by both her position standing above Norah and the fact that she appears put together while Norah seems frazzled and disheveled. Dorine keeps eye contact with Norah through the scene, asking her if she would like to get out of the office and go to lunch. As they leave the office and exit to the garage, Dorine maintains control over the scene which culminates as she hits Norah over the head and knocks her out. Once the two of them are in the car, Dorine takes a moment to fix her foundation and to even fix Norah's as well, linking her cosmeticization both with violence and with the control of the appearance.

As Dorine's body count continues to rise, the control she exerts over the bodies she sets up in her basement becomes clear. In both of the basement scenes at 37 and 52 minutes, the viewer sees that Dorine has set up her victims in ways that suggest her familiarity with them and simulates an office environment. In effect, she is creating a world, an office, that she wants to be in and have control over. Dorine becomes the office manager as she mimics that power that her father presumably had over the company as a founding member during his life. The way that Dorine sets up the bodies in her basement, and how she takes the time to clean them, as she does with Michaels by spraying his gaping chest wound with Windex and trying to tape it shut [54:00], expresses, however pathetically, the control she has over them.

The scene that features Dorine sitting on the couch sharing a bowl of popcorn with two of her victims [37:00, Fig. 4], is comprised of purple and blue tones set against the stark black background; in this respect, it can be likened to Sherman's *Untitled #168* from 1987 (Fig. 5). The stark lighting that illuminates Dorine's pale face make her stand out against the dark backdrop of the scene and contrast her to the gray pallor of Michaels and Virginia who flank her. The light therefore illuminates the line she has crossed in to insanity. Parallels can also be drawn between the colors of the clothes that the characters wear during that scene; Michaels' blue shirt, the black of Virginia's top and the blue highlight on her leather belt, and the browns, tans, and light blues of Dorine's shawl, all mimic the color palette of the food, sand, and vomit in Sherman's *Untitled #175* from 1987 (Fig. 6). The color scheme of Dorine's clothes mimics the color scheme of the vomit. By creating a visual link between the outside of the body and the inside, where vomit is before it is expelled, Sherman creates a visual representation of Dorine turned inside out and reveals the destabilized insides that Dorine is trying to hide.

The culmination of Dorine's struggle for control occurs just before the credits roll [1:18:00, Fig. 7]. Dorine's voiceover plays over her driving off into the distance, Norah's head in her bag and a wanted ad for a new office position in the passenger seat beside her. She is dolled up in makeup that can be seen in the rearview mirror, fashionable blond wig and glamorous clothes reminiscent of Sherman's character in *Untitled Film Stills* 21 (Fig. 8) and 23 (Fig. 9). Dorine's narration states that, "If there is one thing I have learned, it is accepting my limitations while accentuating my strengths. A new job awaits me somewhere, perhaps in your office. I hope that we could get along." The accentuation of her strengths ties in with her change in appearance and her new sexualized and confident demeanor. Dorine has finally taken control of her appearance and of her own life, moving past the blockade that the death and abuse of her father left her with as a child. However, it is through the act of murder that Dorine attempts to take control. Given that in ordinary circumstances she has no control over her own life, the only way that she can gain control is by taking away the autonomy of others and make them into objects. By taking control of her own body, she has unleashed her psyche to spiral out of control in a way that shows her that murder is the way to right the perceived wrongs she sees with her workplace, a killing spree which the ending narration of the film lets the audience know may very well continue once Dorine has moved on to her next job. She has adopted a conventional feminine appearance as a way to take control of her place in society and her newfound social prowess, while still being rooted in her violent psyche alluded to by the warning of hoping to get along with new coworkers, allows her to move forward into society in a way that she was not able to previously do while under the control of her mother.

But what does this story of madness and socialization have to do with Sherman's art more generally? This is the question that the critics of the film seemed to struggle with in their

reviews of *Office Killer*'s premier. To attempt to answer this question, one must return to Sherman's photography and start at the beginning. Cindy Sherman was born on January 19, 1954. She began as a painter at Buffalo State College but changed her area of study to photography after she found the medium of painting limiting. Sherman is also considered to be part of the Pictures Generation.<sup>10</sup> As she said about her school years:

When I was in school I was getting disgusted with the attitude of art being so religious or sacred, so I wanted to make something which people could relate to without having read a book about it first. So that anybody off the street could appreciate it, even if they couldn't fully understand it; they could still get something out of it. That's the reason why I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it.<sup>11</sup>

Even though her 1976 series of *Bus Riders*, *Murder Mystery People*, and *Doll Clothes*,<sup>12</sup> precede the *Untitled Film Stills*, it was with the later work that Sherman came of age in the late 70s. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, a series of 70 black-and-white photographs, addressed the images of stereotypical film archetypes of women. In the photos, Sherman would dress herself up as generic female characters from Hollywood film noir, B-movies, and horror films. Among the roles she took up were the ingénue, femme fatale, working girl, and housewife. The scenes are typically ambiguous, emphasizing the uncertainty of the narrative of the image by creating an "in-between action."<sup>13</sup> Speaking to the generic nature of her characters and the ambiguity of her photos, Sherman has said about her *Film Stills*, "What I didn't want were pictures showing strong emotions, which was rare to see; in film stills there's a lot of overacting because they're

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<sup>10</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2013) pp. 168–171.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), 65.

<sup>12</sup> Due to the early nature of these three series, and their being overshadowed by the *Untitled Film Stills*, *Bus Riders*, *Murder Mystery People*, and *Doll Clothes* are rarely exhibited to the public. In 2013 they were shown in one of their only exhibits at the Gucci Museo in Florence.

<sup>13</sup> Cindy Sherman, *The Untitled Film Stills* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art), 9.

trying to sell the movie.”<sup>14</sup> As evidenced by her interest in the murder mystery from her *Murder Mystery People* and the use of the words film still in her *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman was greatly influenced by and interested in the world of film. Even her process is reminiscent of film making in that she takes on the jobs of an entire production team during her photoshoots, becoming director, makeup-artist, hair stylist, costume shop and model. To pinpoint where much of this interest and influence came from, one can look to the films of Alfred Hitchcock. As I will discuss in more detail subsequently, Sherman would make references to his films, such as *Psycho* (1960) and *Marnie* (1964) in both her photographs and in *Office Killer*.

As several scholars have pointed out, Sherman’s photographs became more abject and grotesque over the course of the eighties. The photos that comprise the *Disasters* and *Fairy Tales* series, for example, focused on the insides of her female characters, the vomit and blood and entrails, instead of their well-kept appearances. In *Untitled #167* (Fig.10) from 1987, for example, we see a freshly dug mound of dirt. Atop the pile the first thing to come into focus for the viewer is the brightly colored mirror compact. The white of the makeup makes it stand out against the darker colors and the eye is drawn to the reflection of a face in the upside-down mirror. However, with the viewer now drawn in close, he begins to see the body parts just barely protruding from the dirt, the red of the blood and fingernail polish acting as signs of their presence. The body parts seem out of place, a nose and lips at the top of the frame but the teeth at the bottom right. Fingers are separated from hands and the eyes are placed above the single ear at the top left. There is also a tube of lipstick, standing out because of the reflection of the light in its gold tube, discarded to the top right and gives an indication that the lips are painted red instead of that being their natural shade in decomposition. In *Untitled #167*, the body is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 8.

fragmented and hidden under piles of dirt while the objects of fashion, the compact and the lipstick, take up the direct attention of the viewer, so much so that if the viewer was not already closely inspecting those items they could possibly miss the gruesome body parts. The insides, such as the blood in *Untitled #167*, for Sherman, were just as important as the outside because, as Laura Mulvey has argued, they suggested the constitution of the subject, which was a glamorized outside concealing an abject interior.<sup>15</sup> As Sherman put it in 1995, “The world is so drawn toward beauty that I became interested in things that are normally considered grotesque and ugly, seeing them as more fascinating and beautiful. It seems boring to me to pursue the typical idea of beauty because that is the easiest or the most obvious way to see the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Much like how Dorine’s psyche began to dissolve in *Office Killer*, spiraling down into the violent and grotesque, Sherman’s photographs moved from the carefully constructed and cosmeticized body to the abject otherness behind the façade. While Sherman has always professed to not reading the critical theories about her work, such as those written by authors like Laura Mulvey, I would argue that it is impossible to believe that she did not have theoretical backing behind her photographs, and subsequently her film. Writing in 1991, Laura Mulvey argued that Sherman’s oeuvre progressed in purposeful ways, noting that it can be read as a slowly unfolding narrative. The story that the photos seem to tell, through their still shots and disconnected characters, is, in some general sense, the story of woman. The story begins with the *Untitled Film Stills* in the late 70s with the stereotypical and culturally-constructed woman. Sometimes, like *Untitled Film Still #16*, 1978, (Fig. 11) she is a femme fatal from a film noire like *The Maltese Falcon*’s (1941) Brigid O’Shaughnessy. Sometimes she is a working woman

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<sup>15</sup> Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Noriko Fuku, “A Woman of Parts,” *Art in America* 85 (June 1997): 74.

from a Hollywood film a la *Honeymoon in Bali*'s (1939) Gail Allen like in *Untitled Film Still* #58, 1980, (Fig. 12). Other times, as in *Untitled Film Still* #30, 1979, (Fig. 13) she is a battered woman with dark circles under her eyes. In all those cases, Sherman portrays the woman already dolled up in the stereotypical roll that society has created for her. She is already wearing her mask. As Mulvey says in "Phantasmagoria of the Female Body," "In Sherman's early photographs, connotations of vulnerability and instability flow over on to the construction and credibility of the wider, social masquerade."<sup>17</sup> It is from that controlled, image-oriented point of origin that Sherman's oeuvre descends into the darker photographs of the 80s. Sherman takes what she had built on in the *Untitled Film Stills* and, instead of focusing on the outward appearance and the constructed façade of the women, she instead begins to show what the mask created by the cosmetics is covering.<sup>18</sup> Photographs from the *Fairy Tales* and *Disasters* display the body and at times the body is removed from the frame. When the body is displayed, such as in *Untitled* #132, 1984, (Fig. 14), Sherman's face is marred and deformed by cosmetics. Lit with yellow-tinted light in a way that casts dark shadows under her eyes and makes her skin appear yellow and sickly, Sherman presents herself with burn-like markings on her face that pull her skin taught over her cheek bones. The prosthetics, used in the place of glamorous makeup, make the figure of the female appear deformed and undesirable, but at the same time as something that would be concealed by foundation and lipstick if she were to wear any. The exterior appearance of her figure is being used to reveal the interior state of mind. When Sherman removes the body from the image, as in *Untitled* #168 from 1986 (Fig. 5) all that is left of it are minute traces of what once was. In this photo, taking place in what appears to be an office littered with computers

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<sup>17</sup> Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female body: The Works of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review*, 188 (1991), 148.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

and keyboards and screens, Sherman has left the business clothes of the woman who worked there laid out on the floor. The only remnants of the body are the dust that pours from the openings of the outfit, suggesting that the fate of the woman was disintegration. It can be read as if the woman worked herself to dust, leaving only her constructed business-casual attire behind when she vanished, or, in more of a connection with the narrative of the film, like the aftermath of a murder.

For Mulvey, Sherman was able to discuss depictions of the female body in a concrete way because of her photographs' reiteration of the feminine in infinite varieties of the masquerade. For Mulvey, these depictions served as a counterpart to contemporary feminist conceptual art.<sup>19</sup> This rise in body politics led Sherman to fall in line with Mulvey's idea of larger feminist movement of the 70s, depicting the alienation from the body that women felt due to the appropriation of that body by social and political causes, such as cultural and beauty advertisements and political discourse about the rights of a woman to control her own body. Sherman made her work a parody and critique of popular imagery, bringing attention to the "symptoms" of female oppression and repression in a patriarchal society.<sup>20</sup> As Mulvey explains,

Because Sherman uses cosmetics literally as a mask she makes visible the feminist as masquerade. And it is this homogeneous culture of fifties-like appearance that Sherman uses to adopt such a variety of same, but different, figurations. Identity, she seems to say, lies in looks. But just as she is artist and model, voyeur and looked-at, active and passive, subject and object, the photographs set up a comparable variety for positions and responses for the viewer.<sup>21</sup>

Mulvey, in her analysis, also does not hesitate in drawing attention to the erotic and voyeuristic nature of Sherman's early photographs. The women in the photographs always seem to be

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<sup>19</sup> Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 142.

vulnerable, caught in a moment of respite, often times looking back over their shoulders, off into space, or at some sort of reflection. This voyeurism is complicated by the fact that Sherman plays both character and artist, setting up a sort of trap as if she were intentionally and knowingly drawing the viewer into looking only to catch them in the act. Mulvey calls this sort of femininity “to-be-looked-at-ness,” as if to say that the feminine identity of each character existed exclusively in her appearance.<sup>22</sup> Mulvey writes, “When Sherman depicts femininity as a masquerade in her succession of ‘dressings-up,’ the female body asserts itself as a site of anxiety that it must, at all costs, conceal. And it acquires a self-conscious vulnerability that seems to exude tension between an exterior appearance and its interiority.”<sup>23</sup>

It is this notion of “to-be-looked-at-ness” femininity that causes Sherman’s photographs to be viewed as part of the masquerade. As Mary Anne Doane explains in her 1982 “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” the masquerade is a mask of womanliness that can be worn or removed. It resists patriarchal positioning, as Doane states, by denying “the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic.”<sup>24</sup> Doane’s essays draws on Freud’s theory of fetishism, derived from his 1927 essay “Fetishism.” For Freud, fetishism takes root when a young boy realizes his mother does not have a penis. The realization of his mother’s “lack” in creates for the boy a sense of anxiety that he will be castrated and lose his own genitalia. While the adult man is able to transform this realization of the lack into a heterosexual desire, for the young boy the realization is potentially traumatic. In

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<sup>22</sup> Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 68.

<sup>23</sup> Mulvey, “Phantasmagoria,” 147.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, 235. Aside from Freud, Doane bases much of her analysis of the masquerade on Joan Rivière’s 1929 “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 1929, volume 9, pages 303-313. For more of the psychoanalytical basis of the masquerade, please see that text.

order to cope with the anxiety of castration, the mind focuses on a substitute, often the next thing the boy sees after having his realization. This substitute becomes the fetish and a comfort the boy uses to compensate for the lack, creating a safeguard against castration.<sup>25</sup> Much like how the mirror stage creates a duality within the subject, the use of the fetish allows the male to live with two incompatible assertions because the fetish both disavows the castration of the woman through the anxiety it creates and affirms it by the creation of the fetish and subsequent desire felt by the male.<sup>26</sup> Doane's essay shows how the superficial attributes of femininity that women adopt, glamorous items such as makeup and fashionable clothing, much like Dorine's transformation in the film, are a disguise which can also then be taken off and put back on.<sup>27</sup> To adopt the signifiers of femininity, such as cosmetics, is not a subversive act for a woman. It's compliance with a patriarchal system to adopt the appearance of a conventional female who is socialized in a certain way. It is an internalization of the fetishistic way of being in the world. The work of putting on that appearance disappears in that the woman fits a certain build and the performance is seamless. This acknowledgement of the disguise, for Doane, then allows the female to then distance themselves from the image.<sup>28</sup> The masquerade is a deliberate subversion by calling attention to the costuming of one's self. It is a show of female agency in that the mask remains visible as a mask. This playing of the part is not transparent in the way that women perform femininity to an excess in a way that manifests the labor of masquerading. Instead of seeing a passive female object, you see the agency of the woman in constructing her own image.

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<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *Miscellaneous Papers, 1888-1938*, (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1950): 198-204.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>27</sup> Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 235.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 240.

The woman stays in the position of the object, but in a way that makes it obviously active instead of passive.

Silvia Bovenschen claims, “we are watching a woman demonstrate the representation of a woman’s body.”<sup>29</sup> Through this demonstration the woman becomes an image that exists within a gaze. The term “male gaze” was first used by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema.”<sup>30</sup> The male gaze is rooted deeply in the idea of a patriarchal society where men hold positions of power within society and females hold a more passive and objective role, which creates an asymmetrical power dynamic. In cinema, the medium addressed by Sherman in her photographs, the male gaze occurs when the audience is placed into the perspective of the heterosexual man. Thus, with the audience becoming a part of the male gaze, the female becomes a passive object that can be erotically desired by both the male characters within the film and the audience. With the woman as an object, the masquerade becomes a way for her to don the outward appearance of what society, the patriarchal society, deems both natural and attractive.

In her article, “Phantasmagoria of the Female Body,” Mulvey argues:

Any moment of marveling at an illusion immediately destroys its credibility. The lure of voyeurism turns around like a trap, and the viewer ends up aware that Sherman-the-artist has set up a machine for making the gaze materialize uncomfortably, in alliance with Sherman-the-model.<sup>31</sup>

It is the sheer number of the *Untitled Film Stills* that make the viewer aware of the masquerade, the subversion of the female image. Because of the number of them and because the viewer is

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<sup>29</sup> Silvia Bovenschen, “Is There A Feminine Aesthetic?”, *New German Critique*, Winter 1977, no. 10, page 129.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen. Oxford Journals*. 16 (3) 1975: 6–18.

<sup>31</sup> Mulvey, “Phantasmagoria,” 141.

aware that all of the women are Cindy Sherman, the audience knows that the appearance is a costume because we see costume after costume in ways that don't allow us to accept that this is simply Sherman. If it's Sherman, that how can it be so many of her? The effect of the masquerade comes through in the volume. That is the way in which the illusion is destroyed by Sherman.

Sherman's photographs can be read as a progression from the conceptual investigation of the fetishistic female body to the disintegration of form and the revealing of the abject horrors that are kept hidden on the inside. While in the 80s Sherman's photos moved from black-and-white photography that included the cultured and stereotypical film image of a woman to colored images that depicted the body either damaged or disintegrated or as a site of violence, *Office Killer* ends in a reverse of the female image where the cosmetics that Dorine adopts at the end of the film draw attention to how unnerving and unstable she has become instead of covering up her mental otherness brought to light by her increasingly premediated murders. Her hair is now worn down, cascading over her shoulders, her lips are painted in a bright lipstick, her cheeks are red with blush, and she has begun to wear fashionable accessories such as earrings and a floral scarf. Though she looks like a functioning member of society, the prosthetics that she uses are visible as prosthetics. Dorine's story follows her development from a mousy, awkward, socially stunted girl plagued by her father's abuse to the revelation of her inner violence and murderous intent, the "guts,"<sup>32</sup> per se, of her personality, to borrow a term used by Mulvey to describe Sherman's photographs. From there she takes up the masquerade of the female body to conceal the "guts." While the other females at the office do also wear makeup and the same well-kept business clothes that Dorine will assume, they do not do so to cover murderous intent. Instead

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<sup>32</sup> Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 150.

they are covering their own forms of unappealing guts. Norah dresses up in her new role as a manager in order to hide the anxiety of embezzling funds from the magazine. Kim is fashionable in a way that makes her approachable despite her abrasive personality. Even Virginia, the magazine owner, covers herself in makeup and designer clothes to hide her aging and the damage that smoking has done to her appearance. They are all hiding something about themselves and, as Mulvey puts it, “Sherman twists nostalgia to suggest its dependence on constructing images and representations that conceal more than they record.”<sup>33</sup> Sherman’s work thrives on the separation of what is on our surface and what is underneath it. *Office Killer* is the condensed pathway of the dark turn that Sherman’s photographs take, but now told in the narrative and moving form of film.

Lighting plays a large role in *Office Killer*, specifically in how it juxtaposes sanity and insanity. As the film progresses and Dorine becomes more and more psychologically unraveled and violent, the lighting of the film also becomes darker and more sinister, much like Sherman’s photographs of the late eighties. Before Michaels’ electrocution, the cultured and civilized world of *Constant Consumer* is bright, but once Dorine has her first taste of blood, the office and home where she sets up the bodies of her victims become dark and foreboding, as if a visual representation of her troubled mind. The shift in lighting can be seen in the comparison of Dorine sitting in the office at the beginning of the movie (Fig. 15), with everything brightly lit and Dorine cast in an almost innocent light with no hint of shadows across her facial features. In the final third of the film, Sherman’s lighting casts foreboding shadows across Dorine’s features in a way that act as visual shorthand for danger (Fig. 16).

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<sup>33</sup> Mulvey, “Phantasmagoria,” 141.

Typically, in horror films female characters play the role of the damsel in distress or the victim while men, by comparison, are cast as protectors and aggressors.<sup>34</sup> In terms of film, however, if there is one filmmaker who is not only widely influential on Sherman, both in photography and in her film, but also closely related to her in terms of the psychological horror of her film, it would be Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock's influence can be seen in Sherman's work in the violence of *Office Killer* and in the psychological states presented in both Dorine and Hitchcock's Norman Bates from *Psycho*.<sup>35</sup> Many connections have been drawn between Hitchcock and Sherman's photographic works, but never so between their films.<sup>36</sup> Both main characters having been psychologically damaged by their parents, Norman and Dorine act out in connection to their mothers. Dorine perpetuates violence as a means of taking control from her mother, but Norman does so under the control of his fantasy of his mother as the ending scene of the film suggests where Mrs. Bates speaks through her son while he sits in his jail cell (Fig. 17). The two main characters also can be connected in their interest in bodies and basements. While Dorine acts as a manager and director in the way that she sets up the bodies she brings home, Norman also engages in the art of taxidermy where he preserves the bodies of birds and makes them models of his own. It should also not be missed that both of them keep their bodies in basements as it is revealed the cellar is where Norman keeps his mother. In fact, direct visual comparison can be drawn to Norman as he sits in his jail cell and Dorine (Fig. 16) as she sits at

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<sup>34</sup> Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>35</sup> I would like to give thanks to Dr. Janice Simon of the University of Georgia for presenting this line of inquiry to me. The comparisons made between Dorine, Marnie and Norman stem from my conversations with her in regard to my research for this paper.

<sup>36</sup> In terms of Hitchcock and contemporary art, much has been done to connect Sherman's photographs with Hitchcock's films. In 1999, both were featured together in the exhibition *Notorious: Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art* at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. They were again shown in comparison from 2000 to 2001 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for the exhibit *Hitchcock and Art: Fatal Coincidences*. Hitchcock's influence on contemporary art, and Sherman, was again the subject of the 2014 book *Hitchcock and Contemporary Art* by Christine Sprengler.

her desk in the office plotting how she will act against Norah. The shadows across their faces and the cold, calculating looks that they both share cue the viewer in that not all is as it seems. As discussed with Dorine's appearance in that still previously, the lighting of the scenes acts as a visual shorthand for danger. In Norman's scene, his split personality of his mother narrates how she will get away with the heinous actions that Norman has committed because who could blame a little old woman who wouldn't even swat at an annoying fly? The voiceover acknowledges the crimes that had been committed through the runtime of the movie, but adds a foreboding ending in that there is a doubt put into the viewer's mind that Norman will walk free. This same foreboding narrative is echoed in Dorine's promise at the end of *Office Killer* when she states that she hopes she can get along with any new coworkers she might find at her new job, leaving the viewer to question if there will be a continuation to the violence. The final scene is also a reference to the beginning scene of Hitchcock's *Marnie* (Fig. 18). In *Marnie*, the first view we have of the titular character is from the back. She stands on a train platform dressed in a two-piece outfit with her hair curled and holding a yellow suitcase under her arm. In the same way, we see Dorine from behind, her hair done and her bag sitting in the passenger seat. While Marnie's bag is an allusion to the female genitalia, a visual clue that female sexuality will be an important part of Hitchcock's story, Dorine's bag contains Norah's head. The head is the not only the visual reminder of her murderous actions, but also can be read as a reference to the way that Sherman dismantles bodies in her *Disasters* and *Fairy Tales*.

By having the woman function as the perpetrator of violence, Sherman's film draws attention to the fetish of the female and exposes the lack behind her femininity.<sup>37</sup> By engaging in violent acts, something normally attributed to males, the woman begins to destroy her own

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., *Violent Woman*, 85.

masquerade which she has created in attempt to subvert the fetish. As examined in Mulvey's book, "nothing is left but disgust—the disgust of sexual detritus, decaying food, vomit, slime, menstrual blood, hair. These traces represent the end of the road, the secret stuff of bodily fluids that the cosmetic is designed to conceal. The topography of exterior/interior is exhausted."<sup>38</sup> This is also further explained by J. David Slocum in 2001 when he examines female violence in horror films:

The employment of narrative in mainstream cinema strongly inscribes and codes representations of violence, creating ideological and formal frameworks for spectacles of destruction and death. When depictions of violence fall outside, run counter to, or exceed those normative frameworks, the acts mount both cultural and representational challenges.<sup>39</sup>

As Dorine works her way through her coworkers, killing them and using their bodies, she draws more and more attention to the lack of her own femininity through the violence that she commits. Because males are normally the characters who commit violence, the audience becomes increasingly uneasy at the defeminized woman.<sup>40</sup> Yet, as Dorine progresses further and further through the narrative of the film, with the addition of makeup, new clothes, and different hair styles, she attempts to cover up the lack of "femininity" that has been made apparent by her violence. However, the cosmeticization of the body is also an act of violence against the self – and one the masquerade exploits to a subversive end. As Mulvey states, in order for the masquerade to be successful, the site of anxiety must be concealed at all costs.<sup>41</sup> In *Office Killer* the site of anxiety would be the murderous violence caused by Dorine. She has broken the taboo of women being the perpetrator of violence. In order assuage the anxiety she has caused in the

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<sup>38</sup> Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 144.

<sup>39</sup> J. David Slocum, "Violence and American Cinema: Notes for an Investigation," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2001): 17-18.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 147.

audience and her remaining coworkers she attempts to adopt the appearance of a typical office woman. However, due to her inability to properly adopt the image, she has created a mask that makes her performance visible and unsettling for what it is.

Making matters still more complex is the fact that Dorine appears in the film as a kind of artist, staging for her pleasure and ours various tableaux comprised of corpses. Thus, while Sherman herself is not present in the film, an obvious relationship exists between Sherman's photographic practice and Dorine's desire to create tableaux detached from a wider narrative. In Sherman's photographs, the model is depicted in isolation within the frame, an image taken out of context with no suggestion of what might be happening next or what had transpired before, as in *Untitled Film Still #13*, 1978, in which we see Sherman dressed as a young woman in a library. Is she placing the book back on the shelf? Is she removing the book from the shelf? For what purpose did she need the book? The viewer is left to speculate about this moment in which they have caught Sherman. As Mulvey writes,

the *Film Still* is constructed for this one image only, and that nothing exists either before or after the moment shown. Each pregnant moment is a cutout, a tableau suggesting and denying the presence of a story. As they pretend to be something more, the Film Stills parody the stillness of the photograph and ironically enact the poignancy of a 'frozen moment'. The women in the photographs are almost always in stasis, halted by something more than photography, like surprise, reverie, decorum, anxiety, or just waiting.<sup>42</sup>

For Dorine, when she brings the bodies of her coworkers home she does not just discard them. Instead, like Sherman, for whom she is a filmic surrogate, she also creates scenes with them as if they were still alive. As Sherman says of Dorine, "What this woman does with the bodies after they're dead. [...] She doesn't even notice the bodies are rotting."<sup>43</sup> Dorine sets up bodies at

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<sup>42</sup> Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 142.

<sup>43</sup> Fuku, "A Woman of Parts," 74.

desks, smoking cigarettes, watching TV. To her they are not necessarily dead. They are models and she is the director much in the same way as Sherman is photographer manipulating her own image in the context of complex tableaux. For instance, at the end of the film at 1:10:00, Michaels is sitting at a desk with a phone placed to his ear and a computer part sitting in front of him. Is he making a call about the part? Did he receive a call that interrupted his work? Is he on a break and avoiding finishing the task that he has been given? Again, much like the photographs, the viewer, in this case Norah who has been trapped in Dorine's basement after being abducted, is left to speculate. The purpose of Dorine setting up an office for herself, as well, returns to the stunted growth of her character that the movie wrestles with throughout its runtime. As various details bear out, such as her inability to make direct eye contact with figures of authority at her work and the way her oversized clothes make her appear to be smaller, Dorine has been stunted at an adolescent phase, and the murder spree that she commits is a way of her regaining control of her life and pushing herself past the childlike mentality that she has. In creating an office, one filled with coworkers forced to be near her and interact with her by the sheer circumstance of them being dead, Dorine has created an adult workspace and adult environment where she will not be shunned and left to the outside looking in.

I am arguing that Dorine stands-in for Sherman, but Dhalia Schweitzer, in her book *Office Killer: Another Kind of Monster*, addresses Sherman's visual absence from the film. Sherman had built her career from her own image, repurposing herself in to various personae and appearances in her photographs. As Schweitzer puts it, "her absence from the film felt conspicuous."<sup>44</sup> Not only was the film titled, leaving behind the conspicuous narrative of the photography series, but Sherman herself was nowhere to be seen, which led some critics to see

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<sup>44</sup> Dhalia Schweitzer, *Another Kind of Monster* (Chicago: Intellect, 2014), 5.

the film as a departure from her previous work. Yet, I would argue that such a reading fails to see important affinities between Sherman and Dorine. Sherman works as both model and photographer while Dorine works as a copy editor at *Constant Consumer*, both professions in which they arrange what is seen by the viewer. The difference between the two is that one is with bodies and the other is with words on a paper. However, Dorine soon moves from paper to people, arranging bodies as does Sherman. While Sherman's photographs do eventually come to depict death, made either more or less bearable for the viewer by the recognition of the fact that it is her "dead" body being displayed, it is Dorine who actually works with and poses death. Her models are the dead bodies of her coworkers, objects that have lost their own autonomy and have surrendered to her, much like the body posed in a specific way by a photographer. Sherman, as the model in her photos and through the "surrogate"<sup>45</sup> of Dorine, dresses up as a character, while Sherman the photographer and director uses the characters to reveal the feminine struggle to conform to the desirability of society.<sup>46</sup> Dorine, standing in for Sherman in front of the camera, and wearing a costume that was first tried on by Sherman in *Bus Riders* (Fig. 2), finds herself as the newfound director and manager of the office set up in her basement. She adopts the stereotypical appearance of a woman to cover her quickly devolving psyche and violent tendencies while simultaneously drawing attention to the abject horror of her crimes through the posing of the bodies she collects.

Yet, an important discrepancy marks the "story" told by the film stills and the film's narrative: mainly that in Sherman's photographs, the women she presents are already fetishistically adult and sexual. Sherman takes careful care to depict the women as they are

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<sup>45</sup> Sherman used this term to describe the character of Dorine at the 50th Locarno International Film Festival.

<sup>46</sup> Cindy Sherman, "Cindy Sherman: Office Killer," *50<sup>th</sup> Locarno International Film Festival*, August 1997.

shown in popular culture, films and advertisements, mainly as objects to be looked at. The film, however, does not begin in the same way. Dorine, at the beginning of the film's narrative, as repeated by Molly Ringwald's character, Meg, is the freak. She is an outcast in her office, socially inept and awkward because of her stunted psyche caused by the abuse by and tragic death of her father, which she caused. Dorine is unable to look into the eye of authority figures, fidgets nervously, and, through the circumstances of the crash that left her mother paralyzed, is forced to remain in the family home with her, much like an adolescent. It is through the narrative of the film, something that the moving medium of film is able to provide which still photographs cannot, that the viewer is able to experience the construction of Dorine's facade, beginning from the moment that she causes the accidental death of Michaels. From that moment, with the reliving of Dorine's prior trauma with her father, Dorine begins to move past the trauma that has stunted her in an adolescent mindset. It is in this progression that the underlying theme of the story of Dorine exists: Control.

The aspect of control, control of one's life, control of one's image and control of one's environment is the main theme with which the storyline of Sherman's film contends. Throughout the film, Dorine is placed in situations that have her struggling for control after her infantilization and stunted mental growth due to the presence of her father during her early years. As her mother states at 39:00, "He sure knew how to keep us girls under his thumb." From the control of her father, and progressing chronologically through the narrative of the film, Dorine instigates minor acts of rebellion before the sudden and accidental killing of her coworker, Gary Michaels, takes place. From that moment with the resurfacing of her sexually traumatic past with her father and of her revenge on him in the form of murder, her progression from lack of control in her life begins to change and culminates in the ending scene of the film with her realizing full control of

her mental state and appearance. Through the adoption of a glamorous appearance that was indebted to her female coworkers Kim and Norah, she progresses from the stunted infantile state and has taken back control of her life as she seeks to start fresh in a new office position where no one would have known the mousy and awkward woman she was before.

*Office Killer* is a perverse coming of age story. The conclusion of the film completes the cycle of Dorine constructing her image and moving along in order to continue her newfound act in a place where no one would know of the old Dorine, the awkward and stunted adolescent in a woman's body. The overarching story of the film is one of the construction of one's exterior as a way to gain control. That control, despite Dorine's spiraling psyche, allows her to complete her murder spree and set the bodies up in an office that she now manages, at least until she leaves to find greener pastures. According to Muley, the "story" that the *Film Stills* tell, over the course of Sherman's photography, is that of the disintegration of the body that occurs beneath the masquerade adopted by the characters that Sherman portrays, beginning with the glitz and the glamour and ending with the total absence of the physical body with the grotesques of the insides remaining, the vomit and gore and dust. *Office Killer*, in showing the overarching narrative of Sherman's photos through the descent into the genre of horror, ends in the reverse as well. Dorine has become one of the characters of the *Untitled Film Stills* while also leaving the audience with the knowledge that was gained through the oeuvre of Sherman's photographs: the fetish is the control that the woman asserts in order to cover up the anxiety caused by the carnage of the inside of her own body and mind.

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Appendix I  
Figures



Fig. 1  
Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer*, 1997, Dorine in the Early Film.



Fig. 2  
Cindy Sherman, *Bus Riders*, 1976.



Fig. 3  
Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer*, 1997, Dorine in the Late Film.



Fig. 4

Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer*, 1997, Movie Night.



Fig. 5  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #168*, 1987.



Fig. 6  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #175*, 1987.



Fig. 7

Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer*, 1997, Ending Scene.



Fig. 8

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978.



Fig. 9  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #23*, 1978.



Fig. 10  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #167*, 1987.



Fig. 11  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #16*, 1978.



Fig. 12  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #58*, 1980.



Fig. 13  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #30*, 1979.



Fig. 14  
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #132*, 1984.



Fig. 15  
Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer*, 1997, Dorine in the Early Film.



Fig. 16  
Cindy Sherman, *Office Killer*, 1997, Dorine in the Final Third.



Fig. 17  
Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho*, 1960, Ending Scene.



Fig. 18

Alfred Hitchcock, *Marnie*, 1960, Opening Scene.