

Cindy Sherman's Office Killer: Another Kind of Monster

Watching *Office Killer* (1997) is a curious experience. Despite its impressive pedigree as the only movie directed by Cindy Sherman, one can be forgiven for not being aware of the film, about a mousey copyeditor (Carol Kane) turned serial killer: boxofficemojo figures suggest it barely scraped \$76k at the US box office (an office killer in more ways than one, then). But whether one goes into a first viewing knowing about the existence of the film or not, the experience is likely to be much the same; an unsettling 82 mins that raises far more questions than it answers and leaves one feeling oddly perturbed about the status of what one has just watched (what's meant to be funny here? Why does it all feel so out of joint, and out of time? What the hell are Molly Ringwald and Jeanne Tripplehorn doing in it?)

Dahlia Schweitzer's book takes *Office Killer's* strangeness and relative obscurity and painstakingly unpacks them, in the process escorting her readers on a tour that takes in Sherman's oeuvre as one of the most celebrated photographers of our times, the matrix of cinema/Hollywood/genre, and the industrial, social and political landscape of late 1990s America. What comes through is Schweitzer's desire both to make sense herself of her own responses to the film as someone clearly invested in Sherman's work (she opens with a wonderfully disarming story of writing to Sherman to ask for advice on 'what to do with my life') and to elucidate the larger 'puzzle' that it represents: what is at stake in the disquieting experience *Office Killer* provokes and the fact of its critical and commercial failure?

In this sense, then, and to take the tour analogy a little further, Schweitzer constitutes an astute but always accessible guide through the film itself and the multiple relevant critical contexts she points to incisively as informing it. At a micro-level the close reading provided by her textual analysis meticulously works through key images and sequences, reflecting on how the film's often flat sense of palette and cinematography unnerve. But at the same time she is able to weave in and explore the film's connection with such diverse references and events as Tess McGill in Mike Nichols' *Working Girl* (1988), the AIDS 'crisis', and the corporate economy of 1990s America. Whether one is an older, intrigued reader who lived through all of this, or a curious young undergraduate to whom these are distant cultural moments, Schweitzer joins the dots between them in unfailingly persuasive and lucid fashion to underline *Office Killer's* heretofore undocumented status: as an 'important film' which serves both as a 'cultural archive' and a central locus point in our understanding of Sherman's work.

You may not *like Office Killer* any more by the end of the book. But you will feel that you have new insights into it. Schweitzer shows compellingly that this seemingly forgotten film cannot be positioned simply as a 'failure' or aberration, to be excised from histories of either 1990s US cinema or Sherman's CV, but rather is an exercise again in how Sherman likes to take what we (think we) know and 'complicate the code'.