Working Girl Turned *Office Killer*: The Onscreen Politics of Office Dressing Takes a Gothic Spin / Gilda Williams

By deciphering their highly readable codes of dress, we instantly recognise three types of working women in the popular film *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988), just as we readily recognise the four kinds of urban working women in the comic-horror *Office Killer* (Cindy Sherman, 1997), released some nine years later.

Working Girl told the late-1980s, post-feminist story of hard-working young Tess who discovers that her new female boss, Katharine – whom Tess had expected to be her same-sex supporter – proves even more ruthless than her previous male bosses, attempting to take credit for Tess's brainy new business idea. Taking advantage of Katharine's forced absence due to a skiing accident and encouraged by her straight-talking best pal Cyn, Tess gradually usurps Katharine's position and even her man. Meanwhile we, her appreciative audience, are meant eagerly to root for her well-deserved if somewhat deceitfully acquired success.

Office Killer instead tells the dark, late-1990s story of a doomed and misguided consumer magazine whose production is chronically blighted by malicious office politics, not helped by the staff's habitual ignoring of business culture's Big Rule No. 1: *Never, ever get romantically involved with a colleague.* Snarling über-boss Virginia sleeps with co-worker Gary; motherly temporary-consultant Norah is romancing computer guy Daniel; and the delectable, ambitious Kim is also involved with the indefatigable Daniel. Surely all this must be stopped, concludes pathetic and repressed copyeditor Dorine, who, it turns out, was sexually abused as a child and still lives at home with her cranky mother. Presumably as a result of all her personal misfortunes, coupled with the news of her office's need to "downsize" which will force everyone to work from home, Dorine falls prey to her barely suppressed rage and homicidal urges which will, by film's end, kill off almost the entire office. Downsizing indeed.

Two of *Working Girl*'s late 20th-century female archetypes find quite neatly their direct, updated counterpart in the later film: *Working Girl*'s boss-lady Katharine, sporting 1980s voluminous shoulder pads and bold, solid-colour power dresses, matches her late '90s version in *Office Killer* via the leggy, bejewelled, tough-talking office manager Virginia, chain-smoking in her dark grey "intimidation suit". And *Working Girl*'s ambitious and clever heroine, Tess (Melanie Griffith), looks uncannily like the similarly smart-but-frustrated career-girl Kim in *Office Killer*, played by Griffith's near-twin, Molly Ringwald. These latter two parallel characters, Tess and Kim, are obviously thinking as hard about what to wear to the office as they are thinking about the demands of the job; the results they achieve on both fronts will gain them – in tandem, they have learned – the success and respectability that has until now eluded them, enjoyed instead by their better-dressed female superiors.

In contrast with the parallel figures of Katharine/Virginia and Tess/Kim, the remaining three principal female characters suggest how the genre has been updated in these two films, and how Sherman's *Office Killer* sheds a Gothic light on the malaise and petty politics that surround the women and men in these corporate (and wannabe corporate) workplaces. These three figures include *Working Girl*'s Cyn (or is that "Sin"?), Tess's marriage-minded and working-class best friend, all big hair, bad advice and cheap miniskirts, and *Office Killer*'s Norah, the maternal figure positioned somewhere between the terrifying boss (Virginia) and the ambitious nobody (Kim). Sometimes dressed like a kind of office-minded mother-of-the-bride in pastel suits and shoes dyed to match, Norah slots into the company's hierarchy in a perfectly ambiguous 1990s fashion. She is the decade's ubiquitous "outside consultant", hovering somewhere between the upper and lower tiers of her host organisation, her style of dress shifting between reassuring den mother (beige jumpers and practical brown trousers) and better-than-you skirt suits, appropriately worn when handing out those hateful envelopes to staff, informing them that from now on they will be woefully reduced to part-time work from home.

Where the cultish *Office Killer* – in contrast to the mainstream *Working Girl* – takes off in a radically Gothic direction is in the introduction of a heretofore unconsidered type of working woman: the nerdy Dorine, the unrelenting misfit, with her shapeless skirts and orthopaedic shoes. Incomprehensibly to the surrounding office culture, Dorine seems patently uninterested in pursuing a career; she is satisfied simply with just keeping down a job, doing it well, and going home to mother. This is a woman whom John T. Molloy, in his hugely influential *Women's Dress for Success Book*, never even took into consideration as worthy of sartorial advice. That style bible, originally published in 1978 and revised in 1996 as *New Women's Dress for Success*, went virtually unchallenged for over a decade; like many real-life working women, all the female characters in both films – save for "crazy Dorine" – seem

Office Killer, dir. Cindy Sherman, 1997. Courtesy The Cinema Museum

Working Girl, dir. Mike Nichols, 1988. Courtesy The Cinema Museum

to have heartily committed its dogma to memory (even when, on occasion, they refuse to go along with its rules). Dorine is not, as Molloy assumed, any "normal" working woman would be, struggling over whether her mode of dress is grooming her for a promotion; she abhors any such change. Nor is she cautiously assessing whether to wear a skirt above the knee to the office – she does not own such a "mini"; or how much jewellery can be deemed professional – she wears none; or whether she might be perceived as sexually provocative – her every garment, accessory, word and gesture betrays an overwhelming asexuality. She dresses with almost Quakerish modesty, her greenish-brown formless skirts and dirndls hanging well below the knee – though not quite long enough to conceal her cheap white polyester slip, forever dangling geriatrically in view, falling from her breastless, hipless, sexless body. Her clothes tell us immediately that she is interested in neither sex nor money – so it comes as no surprise, really, that such a "freak" turns out to be a rapacious serial killer. Disguised behind her unthreatening grey façade, Dorine methodically knocks off all her unsuspecting colleagues, collecting their corpses to form a macabre family scene, huddled round the TV, hideously decomposing on her increasingly blood-soaked and crowded basement sofa. And isn't that just what you might expect from someone so perversely indifferent to their appearance and career trajectory!

Dorine's ailing mother, bedridden and unaware of the chilling scene down in the basement, ought to provide a fifth female archetype among *Office Killer*'s medley of women characters; however, permanently attired in a flowery nightgown and thus never offering a publicly presentable persona, mother barely counts as a woman at all. One is reminded of Tess's tired remark in *Working Girl* to her boyfriend Mick when he gives her – yet again – the gift of sexy lingerie: "Y'know, Mick, just once I could go for like a sweater or some earrings ... something that I could actually wear outside of this apartment?" In both instances, whether for the elderly unsexed mother or the young woman in lacy undergarments, both are dressed only for the privacy of the bed; clothes only really seem to count for a woman when they are seen by an admiring public at large – which includes the response of the women she wishes to impress, not just the men. When Jack, Katharine's boyfriend who is "accidentally" seduced by Tess, tells her – as if to compliment Tess's dress sense, "You're the first woman I've seen ... that dresses like a woman, not like a woman thinks a man would dress if he was a woman," Tess replies, "Thank you – I guess." Her "I guess" suggests a suspicion that, if Tess were really dressed right, would he have the nerve to talk to her this way? It is not, in fact, either of the two potential compliments that her choice of clothing is really fishing for; he says neither "You look great!" (signalling sexual success) nor the even more elusive, "You look important!" (promising career advancement).

With stories told wholly from the female protagonists' perspectives, *Working Girl* and *Office Killer* are unmistakably women's films. Many young women in the late 1980s are said to have identified with Melanie Griffith's character as she discovers that office politics do not necessarily ease up when the ship is captained by a woman. By the late 1990s, however, a woman boss was (thankfully) no longer such a novelty, and the rules of corporate dressing had been so well digested by the culture at large that *Office Killer* could put a comically Gothic spin on the kinds of fashion dilemmas being thrashed out a decade earlier. And who better than artist Cindy Sherman could be recruited to orchestrate so many versions of womanhood, so convincingly? Yet despite their marked contrast in tone – *Working Girl* is Hollywood's romanticised reply to a recent gender change in the workplace, while *Office Killer* is an edgy horror/comedy aimed at a young art-house audience who appreciate this sort of black humour – both films, as it turns out, prove in the end to be feature-length makeovers. Griffith is transformed from the teased-up, poorly dressed back-office gal to the smartly coiffed (she deflates her massive, gravity-defying hairstyle to produce almost exactly the same sophisticated short red crop of *Office Killer*'s Kim), smartly dressed, smartly careerist success story. Dorine, in turn, unexpectedly swaps her school-marmish appearance in the very last scene for a moviestar-like *femme fatale* look, all eyeliner, platinum-blond hair and painted red lips as she drives off, in *Office Killer*'s surprise final image, to a new life with a better job, a changed name, and a flattering look – and Kim's murdered body slumped in the front seat beside her.

The life-changing makeover is a Cinderella-like staple in so many "women's" (or "girl's") films from the period, from *Pretty Woman* (1990) to *The Princess Diaries* (2001). In the horror-film spin on the makeover exemplified in *Single White Female* (1992), one "evil" woman makes herself over to become the unsuspecting female's unwanted *doppelgänger*, not just stealing the "good" woman's look but her identity, social position, possibly even her apartment and dishy boyfriend. *Office Killer* hints at such a

Working Girl, dir. Mike Nichols, 1988. Courtesy The Cinema Museum

Office Killer, dir. Cindy Sherman, 1997
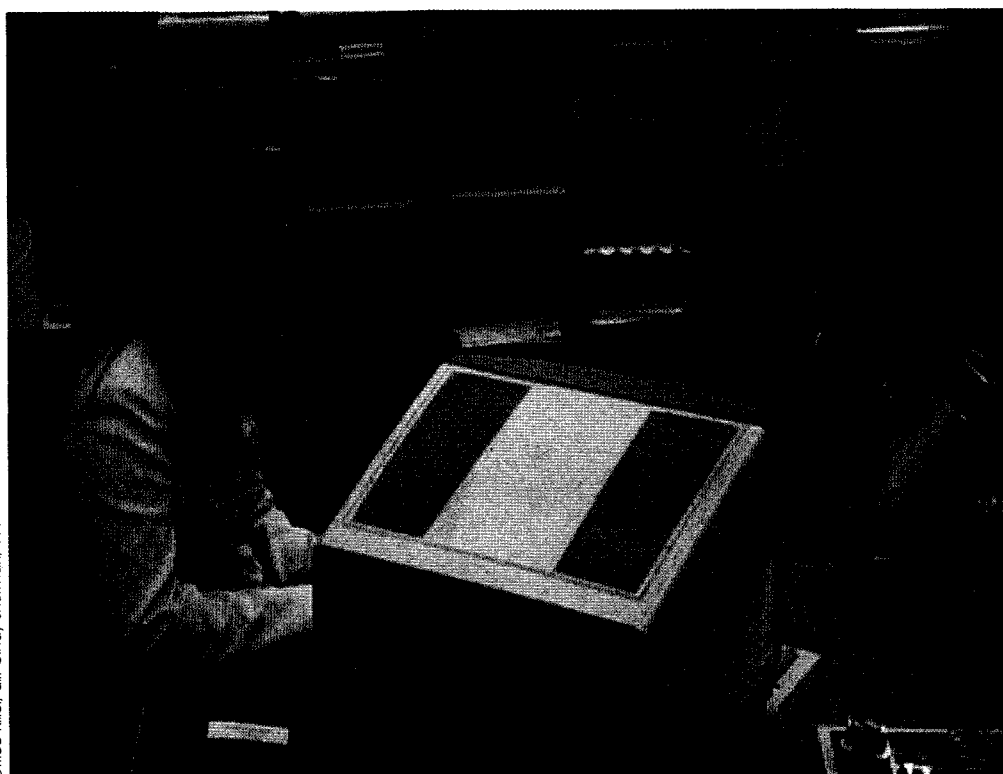
doppelgänger ending; the story sets up Dorine's sartorial transformation when Norah kindly gives her drearily dressed co-worker a bag of her discarded clothes. This secondhand power-dressing, combined with the earrings of the recently murdered Virginia which Dorine has the reckless gall to wear to the office, suggests that Dorine will be replicating one or all of her murdered female colleagues, finally assimilating the dress-for-success rules they, and so many business-minded women, have made their own. But no: Dorine opts most unconventionally for a pre-feminism kind of *femme fatale*, the sort of treacherous, unemployed female that populated old-fashioned *films noirs* before women entered the workplace. Dorine effectively replaces one of *Women's Dress for Success*'s "wrong" looks (the prudish, powerless blank) for another equally "wrong" and un-businesslike choice: the super-glam, super-sexy, hot blonde. By dropping the mousy look we all assumed was integral to her submissive, crazed personality – by denying the "unity of its image"[1] – and donning an equally all-encompassing vintage look, Dorine's character exemplifies the point we knew all along and which is especially visible in Cindy Sherman's hands: all of these women's looks are a masquerade, a disguise that can be manipulated at will.

Throughout the film Dorine "surprises" us by revealing that there is considerably more to her than we assume from her appearance. She takes command of the new computer technology before her more "up-to-date" colleagues; she is able, overnight, to re-write the crucial missing magazine article the whole office is sweating over; she is able, despite her slight frame, almost to overpower Kim in an attack on the stairwell; and, most tragically, she hides a dark and abusive past, somehow psychologically responsible for the dead bodies accumulating in her basement. All Dorine's secrets are safely concealed behind her unassuming look. Moreover, her uncoiffed, badly made-up face – all crookedly painted eyebrows and stringy hair – has the cinematic advantage of shifting her appearance from the librarian-like invisible woman at work to the unkempt and witchy, wild-haired and wide-eyed woman hideously distorted by her thick oversized spectacles and strangely pendulous skirts (think the frankly unsexual, homey Annie Wilkes turned vicious killer in *Misery*, Rob Reiner, 1990). When Dorine begins to flirt, finally, with a man – but only feels comfortable doing so with the decaying corpse of a former co-worker who regularly insulted her – the heretofore unreadable sexuality of this "madwoman in the basement" (a counter, perhaps, to the much-theorised, Victorian-era "madwoman in the attic"?[2]) begins to take on disturbing shades of necrophilia. The secrets behind Dorine's innocent façade multiply by terrifying increments.

Although there are direct parallels between four characters in these films (Katharine/Virginia; Tess/Kim) and the remaining women contrast in their on-screen personality (Cyn, Norah and Dorine), all the women in the films find a corresponding character if we base their positions on the unspoken dress-for-success code that each embodies. Thus the pre- and post-makeover Tesses, offer, in terms of appearance-based female roles, two different women.

**The boss:** the power-dressed career-obsessive
Katharine/Virginia

/ \

Transition staff: aware of the rules of appearance, but still committing faux pas
pre-makeover Tess/Norah

Rising careerist: polished, but still trying to be sexy
post-makeover Tess/Kim

\ /

The failure: chronically committing corporate-dressing errors
Cyn/Dorine

In both films, female viewers are implicitly asked to identify with the "normal" women occupying the central two positions; the uppermost and bottom women are effectively hysterics, signalled by their scare-hair and either excessive ("male-like") aggression (Virginia/Katharine) or excessive indifference to the rules and demands of the competitive workplace (Cyn/Dorine). Pre- and post-makeover Tess are obviously versions of a single female identity; but, analogously, in some ways *Office Killer*'s Norah and Kim also switch or share a single role. For example, they co-occupy the figure of "The Final Girl", which film theorist Carol Clover brilliantly identified in her 1992 book *Men, Women and Chainsaws:*

Office Killer, dir. Cindy Sherman, 1997
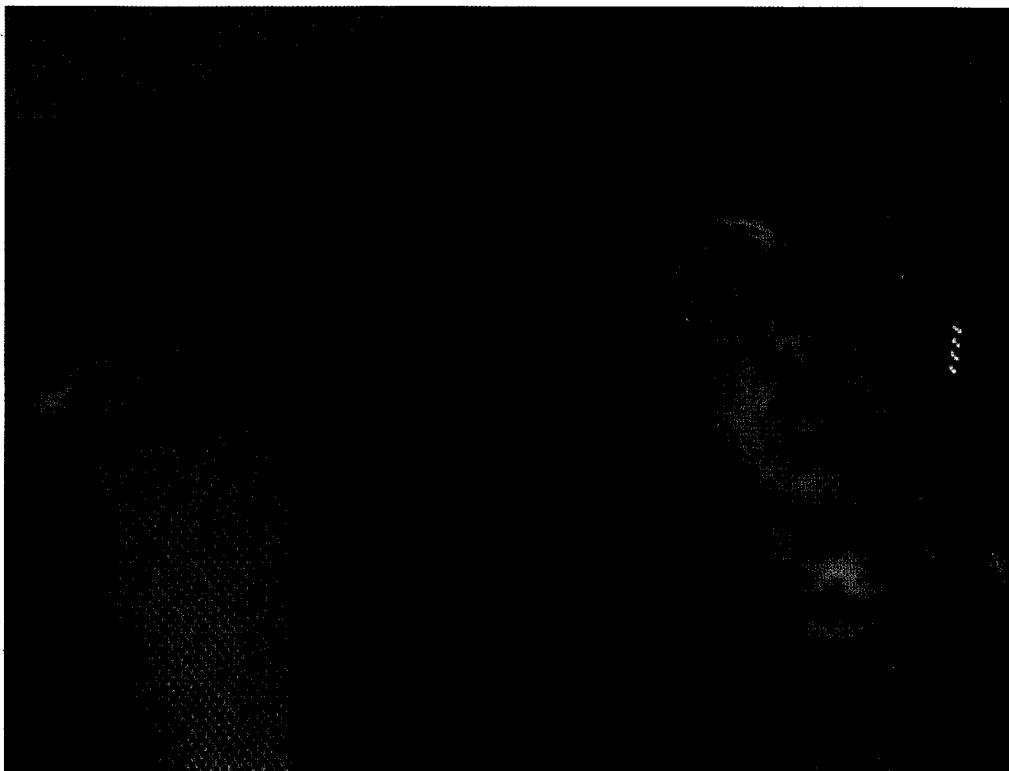
Office Killer, dir. Cindy Sherman, 1997. Courtesy The Cinema Museum

Gender in the Modern Horror Film as: "intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense something is amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation."[3] Throughout the film Kim alone fulfils the Final Girl's "intelligent, watchful, level-headed" comprehension of the situation, having detected single-handedly Dorine's viciousness. Yet, although Kim had been groomed for her final violent, prolonged encounter with the demented killer, it is instead Norah who is ultimately trapped in Dorine's demonic basement, hopelessly attempting to hide between laundry appliances and finally murdered in the obligatory, culminating chase scene. (Kim's demise is unseen, left to the viewer's imagination.)

Office Killer injects the *Working Girl* narrative with other horror and Gothic elements as well, for example the continual return to Dorine's home, the film's house of horrors. We are repeatedly presented with the spectacularly bland façade of this forgettable example of American tract housing, just as so much contemporary Gothic, whilst still centring on the Gothic novel's haunted house, replaces the distant Transylvanian castle or the mad scientist's hidden laboratory with the ordinary suburban home, a trope that is evident from *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) to *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), to *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996). Moreover, at the centre of *Office Killer* is a classic Gothic prop: the missing manuscript. Like the decayed manuscript in such Gothic novels as Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), central to *Office Killer*'s plot is a missing magazine article, lost to cyberspace thanks to the office's cheap new computer technology, and which Dorine conjures virtually out of thin air one night, reinforcing in Kim the suspicion that Dorine is a deceitful, backstabbing monster. To Kim's disbelieving eyes this is not merely a display of exceptional writing skills on Dorine's part; her ability to rewrite the text is more like witchcraft, and furthers Kim's (and our) sense of Dorine's spookily superhuman, unpredictable abilities.

Borrowing further from the Gothic, Dorine is effectively a satanic twist on the reassuringly demure figure who crops up repeatedly in Gothic novels, from *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1847) to the second Mrs. de Winter in *Rebecca* (Daphne du Maurier, 1938). Like Dorine, Jane Eyre spent a loveless childhood finding her own strategy for handling her unsupportive environment. As Michelle Masse wrote, "We see [Jane Eyre's] early training in deprivation, separation, and injustice that begin to make her into the spectator who will control herself rather than allowing anyone else to assume the role and who will keep her own distance,"[4] a description equally apt for *Office Killer*'s chronic loner, Dorine. Jane Eyre's suffering makes her stronger and eventually more attractive to sensible men like Rochester looking for an unspoiled, level-headed companion who will return his life to domestic peace. The second Mrs. de Winter, again like Dorine, "by being silently still … hopes to remain safely invisible to others".[5] And like Rochester, Max de Winter ultimately prefers his modestly dressed, resolutely unglamorous new wife – who foolishly and self-punishingly spends most of the novel dismally contrasting herself with the tall, fabulous (and, of course, treacherous) Rebecca whom, as we discover, Max is only too happy to have lost. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* present a fantasy, "revenge-of-the-nerd-woman" plot; their heroine's common sense and unspectacular appearance prove infinitely more valuable to the rich and desirable men whose hearts these homely women have managed to capture and keep. Where such men – who prefer plain women to glamour goddesses – have vanished to today is anyone's guess; most modern women have probably never met any.

In contrast to these earlier homely Gothic heroines, late 20th century Dorine is never remotely desired by anybody. It has been said that women "want everything", but the suspicion today might be that men "want everything" in the woman herself: someone who can cook, tell jokes, look stylish, make money, demonstrate skill and inventiveness in bed, get along with their mates, offer sound financial advice and balance seductively in high heels. All the women in both *Working Girl* and *Office Killer* (with the notable exception of the *deranged* Dorine) are all trying so hard to be perfect – perfectly dressed, perfectly polished, perfectly desirable, perfectly professional, perfectly perfect in the eyes of both the men and women around them. Both films end when our plain-Jane female protagonist, Tess or Dorine, emerges from the career and style drought in which she was languishing to find happiness and success in a new job – indispensably furnished, of course, with a corresponding new and improved look. The body count in *Office Killer* is considerably higher than that in *Working Girl*, but the female protagonist's happy ending – "she looks *so much better* at the film's end than she did at the beginning!" – remains disquietingly unchanged.

Notes

1. Stephen Heath, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade" (1986), quoted in Helen Stoddart, "*The Passion of the New Eve* and the Cinema: Hysteria, Spectacle, Masquerade" in *The Gothic*, ed. Fred Botting (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), p.120.
2. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) [1979].
3. Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws, Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.44.
4. Michelle Masse, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism and the Gothic* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.195.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.166-67.