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# **The Temporal Aesthetics of Cindy Sherman's Photography: *Revisiting the "Centerfolds" as Single-Frame Cinema***

James M. Magrini

## **I. Introduction: Purpose and Methodology**

Cindy Sherman was originally commissioned to produce *Centerfolds* by Ingrid Sischy for *Art Forum*. They were ultimately rejected by the editor because of the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the photos. In more accessible terms, Cindy Sherman's photographs were rejected in great part due to their tendency to evoke the idea of violence against women, i.e., "women-as-victims," women as both physical and psychological casualties of love (*eros*). It is indeed possible to legitimately read many of the photographs in terms of their potential to perpetuate, for aesthetic effect, the egregious cultural stereotype of females as vulnerable and subservient underlings to their superior male counterparts, all of whom remain conspicuously absent from the frame.

Despite the unfavorable decision of *Art Forum* to refrain from publishing the photos, Sherman went on to display the series of oversized photographs (2 X 3 feet) at New York's *Metro Pictures* (November 7-28, 1981). The reception they received at that time was captured nicely by Lisa Phillips, who described them as "shocking, seductive, and controversial" (Phillips 2003). Today, this collection of photos seems as visceral and alive as ever, for they continue to enthrall and bewitch us. Why do they remain so provocative, meaningful, and powerful more than two decades after their original unveiling? For what reasons do they continue to sustain our interest as spectators, art lovers, and critics of art? In what follows, I provide several responses to these queries by arguing that Sherman's work gathers its meaning and acquires its power to move and inspire us because her photography is analogous to the art of cinema.

In what follows, I will read her photography as a type of art that acquires the ability to communicate when understood within the context of film conceived as an integrated system of codes woven seamlessly into a text that inspires the processes by which meaning is produced, established, and controlled. Therefore, I adopt a two-pronged approach in order to first, understand the notion of "meaning" as it applies specifically to Sherman's art of photography, and second, to explicate and analyze the elements that are unique to the production of film, most

specifically classic narrative cinema, which Sherman readily incorporates into her work. Although analyzing the “classic” story-film, I will de-emphasize the strict relationship of film to reality (*realism*) and focus instead on the underlying structures governing the production of meaning, which includes the analysis of the phenomenon of *spectatorship* that emerges, i.e., Sherman’s relationship to her postmodern audience as participants in the meaningful and pleasurable experience of her art.

## **II. Cindy Sherman’s Photography as Art in the “Temporal” Context of Classic Hollywood Narrative Film**

### **1. The Cinematic Elements of Sherman’s Photographs**

When Sherman’s work first came to the attention of the art world, she portrayed actresses from nonexistent films (*Untitled Film Stills*, 1978). Importantly, beyond merely paying homage to the cinema, the collection of photographs played directly on the viewer’s acquired cognition for interpreting and understanding the images of mass media. Sherman demonstrated that when her imaginary Hollywood female leads were lit and dressed in a certain manner, positioned within fabricated sets, or tableaux, in order to create a photographic analogue to the *mis-en-scene* and *mis-en-shot*, the cinematographic elements designating the filmed events within Classic film, the women were immediately identifiable as representing iconic “feminine types,” or *archetypes*, from the silver screen.

Thus, the idea of Sherman simultaneously assuming the personae of photographer, actress, costume and lighting designer, and director (a virtual protean “filmic” artist) is familiar to those who know her work. Peter Schjeldahl is but one of several insightful critics who have suggested the relation between Sherman’s photographs and modern cinema, with its unique set of production techniques, cinematic aesthetics, and signs and codes, which are also associated with production and the apparatus of cinema. Since Schjeldahl’s remarks are relevant, they are reproduced in full. In what follows, he speaks exclusively about the style and form of the photography Sherman employs in *Centerfolds*.

This is photography as one-frame moviemaking. The pictures feature widescreen proportions (2 X 4 foot), high-angle midshot compositions, “classy” cinematographic lighting, punched up color, and the look of Method acting. The subtlest and most effectively cinematic technique is the way of framing that does not crop expressively, as is usual in photographs, but functions as the passive container of the complete fictionalized reality (or real fiction), a world in a rectangle that addresses itself directly to the imagination. Film aesthetics seem to me far more about this kind of charged containment than about, say, motion (Schjeldahl 1990).

Schjeldahl’s observations are correct in that these cinematic techniques that Sherman employs in the photographs give the impression of single-frame cinema, and further, that each of these aspects of film production (e.g., lighting, framing, cinematography, the use of tableau - the so-called “micro properties” of film production), all unique to the medium of film, work to foster the understanding of Sherman’s women as characters in imaginary films.

When employing the term “motion,” Schjeldahl is undoubtedly referring to the literal movement of the subjects in the photographs, e.g., the technique of capturing the blurred movements of the subjects, capturing them in the midst of moving from one spacial location (within the tableau) to another, a technique that Sherman obviously avoids. However, while focusing on this obvious conception of motion, Schjeldahl overlooks outright the idea of motion conceived in an even more important sense with respect to meaning and the cinema, i.e., the “movement” associated with plot and story, or the narrative structure of the film and the film’s narration. Therefore, what Schjeldahl and other critics neglect to consider is perhaps the most important mechanism responsible for meaning at work in Classic Hollywood cinema: the element of temporal movement linked with the film’s overarching narrative structure, and indeed, Sherman is undoubtedly referencing the genre of the Hollywood story-film.

Importantly, in the discipline of *narratology*, such film theorists as Tzvetan Todorov have suggested that the narrative structure of the film is not simply another code interwoven within the text, but rather represents the overarching principle of order, a macro property of the film’s production, which is necessary for the integrated system of signs and codes to function efficiently in the first instance. As argued by contemporary film theorist Dudley Andrew, beyond

a mere tool for the cinema, “narrative” is a human capability that allows us to understand the world of which we are a part, as a system of reference relations and meanings.

Over and over in the study of cinema the issue of narrative arises not simply because it has been the historically dominant mode of cinema production, but because it is above all a tool for conceptualization, a logic determining meaning (Andrew 1984).

In order to understand the manner in which Sherman’s photos speak to the spectator, cinematic motion, in terms of the “movement” of the film’s story and plot (i.e., events occurring in succession, driven by the logic of cause and effect, within the compressed temporal locus of the manufactured world of the film) must be addressed. However, prior to detailing the manner in which Classic Hollywood cinema functions to produce meaning as related to Sherman’s photographs, I examine the medium of photography by briefly outlining Roland Barthes’ influential critique in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. According to Barthes, the experience of viewing a photograph opens the spectator, in a moment of ecstatic displacement, to a unique mode of temporality that differs from the everyday notion of chronology, or linear progression of time, which includes the familiar understanding of the temporal moments of past, present, and future.

## 2. Barthes, Heidegger, and Sherman: The Time of the *Kairos*

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes does not seek to explicate the semiology of the photograph, rather he argues an ontology of the medium by describing, in a phenomenological manner, the essence of the photograph. Three components are present to his analysis of the photograph: the *studium*, the *punctum*, and Time (a notion of time in which the past is privileged). The concepts of *punctum* and Time are of critical importance to this study, while the *studium*, being concerned with the photos presentation of reality, as might be related to cultural interest and historicity, represents something of a peripheral concern, in that Barthes places far more emphasis on the last two components in his analysis. These aspects of Barthes’ study deal specifically with the “pleasure” of the photograph (*jouissance*) and the event of “the *kairos* of desire,” which suggests that the

object in the photograph references and gives precedence to a specific mode or moment of temporality above all others.

The *punctum* is at once associated with desire, surprise, and wonderment; it is that which is added by the spectator to the photograph, but it is also that element of the photograph which is, according to Barthes, “nonetheless already there” (Barthes 1981). The pleasure of the photograph evokes a transcendence beyond the immediate text, it is the moment of an unexpected, intense flash (*kairos*) that takes hold of the spectator, interrupting a passive, disinterested, and uninvolved reading of the text, and, in an “ecstatic” moment of rapture, transports the spectator beyond the traditional modes of cognition and the everyday manner of understanding time as a chronological phenomenon.

According to Barthes, the photographic referent, the essence of the photo, lies in the fact that it refers the object in the photograph for the spectator to the past, as manifest and residing in the time that is gone, the time that is no more, which has been captured for posterity by the photographer. For Barthes, what we experience in the moment of the *kairos* is unlike what we might experience when encountering a great work of art, such as a painting, which might include an ecstatic experience in which the spectator is temporally projected into a “hopeful” or unique future. Such a notion of fine art is espoused by Aristotle in *Poetics*, wherein he writes of the ideal portrait painters, whose greatness is measured by the way they portray the human not as she is, but as she ought to be. Against this notion, Barthes states explicitly that the encounter with the photograph (as referent) and the subsequent experience is, “not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution, a piece of Maya, such as art lavishes upon us, but reality in a past state at once the past and real”(Barthes 1981).

The essence of the photograph is neither its status as a work of art, nor its ability to communicate in a symbolic or allegorical manner truth or knowledge. Rather, according to Barthes, its essence is restricted exclusively to its effectiveness to “reference.” This distinguishes photography from the other arts such as painting and cinema and other forms of discourse relying on representational imagery. However, with respect to Cindy Sherman as a photographer, this notion undoubtedly requires reassessment, it is necessary with respect to her work as an artist, to rethink Barthes’ conception as presented in *Camera Lucida*, for Sherman is, first and foremost an artist, who happens to work in the medium of photography. It is Sherman’s status as artist that separates her from the type of photography, or the essence of the type of photography,

that Barthes analyzes, whose images (objects) reference a reality firmly located in the past. Such a notion of Sherman as photographic artist, against Barthes interpretation of the essence of the medium, is expressed eloquently by critic Lisa Phillips, “Through her method and approach to making pictures, Sherman exposed the myth of the photograph as index of the real” (Phillips 2003).

How is it possible to rethink Barthes notion of time in the *kairotic* moment of the *punctum* as it relates to the form of temporality that Sherman’s photographs evoke? I argue that Sherman’s photos refer neither to a time of the past nor “real” time as experienced in our every day waking moments, but rather the experience of her *Centerfolds* opens the spectator unto the artificial temporality that is consistent with the experience of the compressed, manufactured time of narrative cinema, time as re-presented within the mimetic spectacle of film. Briefly examining the etymology of the term *kairos* will shed light on the issue.

For Barthes, time is discernable in terms of the *kairos*, which is a moment referencing specifically the time of the past. As stated, it is an ecstatic moment in which the spectator, “stands out” of the moment of the present. Transcending the everyday ways of experiencing the world, she is transported to another time. *Kairos* in the Greek has a variety of meanings and applications, but it is perhaps understood most readily in philosophical circles as it relates to Aristotle’s virtue ethics (*Nicomachean Ethics*) wherein *kairos* means “the right time,” or decisive moment of action. It is the moment when the “one who deliberates well,” the *phronemos*, comports to the ethical situation in a moral manner, the instant when dilemma, deliberation, choice, and action merge. For Aristotle, the *kairos* is associated with the time of the *nun*, i.e., the time of the “now,” or present.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, also incorporates the understanding of the *kairos* and reinterprets this Aristotelian concept when philosophizing his notion of ecstatic temporality, the moment in which the human is thrust into its authentic relationship with time, as time. It is the instant when we are opened up to the elliptical configuration of time in which future and past are united indivisibly in the present, or time of “enpresenting,” i.e., the “flash of the eye,” or *Augenblick* (Heidegger 1962). It is interesting to note that Barthes refers to the *kairos* as the “unexpected flash.” Common to all of these thinkers is the kindred notion of the *kairos* representing the moment in which the human is thrust into a unique relationship with time, which transcends the common understanding and experience of time and the world.

However, both Barthes and Heidegger are concerned with doing ontology: the essence of photography (with its own unique time) and Time (as ecstatic temporality), respectively. We are concerned with understanding the time in which we experience the meaning of Sherman's art as spectators. If there is something present to Cindy Sherman's photographs that seizes us and transports us temporally, I argue that it is not, as in Heidegger and Barthes, either a fundamental mode of attunement (the mood of *Angst*) or a distinct, "photographic referent" that manifests its intimate relationship to the time that has-been (the past). Rather, is it a *kairotic* opening created in great part by the formal, cinematic elements Sherman has chosen to incorporate into her photographs, as outlined previously by Schjedahl, working in concert with the "look" of the subject set within the cinematic tableau of the photos, which also includes, most importantly, the subject as envisaged within the narrative context of an imaginary, fictionalized Hollywood drama.

The *kairotic* moment of Sherman's photographs is best conceived as a mechanical derivative of essential time (the ontological nature of time) and everyday time, or "world time" (ontic time). As opposed to "real time," it is best referred to as "reel-time," or time-of-the-cinema. For it is a time that has been manufactured exclusively for creating and perpetuating the spectator's consciousness of fiction, the way we have, as spectators, acquired the consciousness for understanding the "story-film," with its truncated, imitative re-presentation of events within time. When describing the characters in Sherman's photographs, in a telling statement, art critic Andy Grundberg writes, "The net effect is a non-specific characterization that tempts one to speculate about the situation and mood of the female protagonists" (Grundberg 1981). In short, we are sutured into the photographs, drawn in as participants within her single-frame "stories," and this is why it possible for us to become so genuinely concerned for the women that Sherman portrays, and to subsequently experience stimulation and pleasure through our intense involvement with the fictional scenarios of the *Centerfolds*, scenarios that we as participants in great part create through our imaginative involvement in Sherman's art. Thus, with great concern, we find ourselves speculating on the "situation" that each woman finds herself in (present), what events may have led up to this point, or situation (past), and what events might occur to rectify this situation (future).

### 3. The Formal Properties of Narrative Logic and Consciousness



The narrative structure of film organizes the spacial and temporal elements, based on the logic of cause and effect (and *the principle of sufficient reason*) into a causal chain of events. The time that is specific to the narrative film has been described by Todorov as circular in nature (recall that for Barthes the essence of the photograph is based on a model of time that is linear and for Heidegger time is conceived as elliptical). In representing what is depicted in the film, the action, events, characters (the plot), the mechanism of narrative functions in three distinct phases: (1) a state of initial harmony or equilibrium exists which is disrupted by (2) a catastrophic event that serves to destroy the initial state of harmony, and this is the element of dissonance in the film, which is then rectified and marked out by (3) a return to a state of harmony or equilibrium, i.e., a moment of consonance resolves the problem, conflict, or the element of dissonance in the plot.

This notion of conflict and conflict-resolution is expressed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* as two pinnacle components in the unfolding of the tragic plot, which arouses in the spectator the experience of pleasure-*cum*-pain, and for Nietzsche, this expresses both the Apolline and Dionysiac elements at work in Greek theater of the “tragic age.” This dramatic phenomenon as philosophized by Nietzsche is expressed succinctly by Silk and Stern in the following manner:

The essential character of dissonance, therefore, is that it evokes a need for resolution which it cannot itself satisfy. Since it does not satisfy the need, it evokes the feeling of pain, and since it is without resolution, it invokes infinitude. It is consonance, resolution, that removes the pain by imposing limits. Dissonance therefore, is Dionysiac; consonance, Apolline” (Silk & Stern 1981).

Interestingly, we first encounter Sherman’s fictional female protagonists *in medias res* - “in the middle of things” - which is to say, in the second phase of the narrative cycle, during which time a radical break from normalcy has occurred. This is the so-called “liminal,” or critical, stage in the transition of the events. At this juncture, we have witnessed a problematic disruption to the equilibrium of the film’s events, and now anticipate the eventual resolution of the problem. This adds a sense of immediacy and cinematic drama to the photos as the spectator enters the “filmic” world conjured by Sherman’s formal production techniques at the moment of a disjunctive state of crisis, which induces a pervasive sense of uneasiness, agitation, and anxiety in the spectator.

Noting the disheveled physical and disturbed mental states that the women are experiencing, Roberta Smith points out that in every one of the centerfolds, to a greater or lesser degree, some sort of disruption to their life has occurred.

These women are depressed, dreaming, wanting, fantasizing, thinking, sulking [...] Some images have disturbing details: a torn piece of newspaper clutched in the hand of a plaid-skirted blonde sprawled on linoleum; the wet hair of a fully clothed crouching woman, another's infantile grip of a blanket, an unusually sweated t-shirt, black shorts. In others the disturbance is more internalized. Either way it is always there (Smith 1981).

For example, when confronted with the women in *Untitled # 93*, we are drawn into the *kairotic* time of Sherman's single-frame film, when all the elements of her mock-cinematic staging are operative. Recall Schjeldahl's previous description wherein the spectator encounters "widescreen proportions, high-angle midshot compositions, 'classy' cinematographic lighting, punched up color, and the look of Method acting." As he rightly concludes, "The photos function as the passive container of the complete fictionalized reality," and in the moment, we stand outside our everyday ways of conceptualizing the world and time, we are at once transported, in an ecstatic flash, into the fictional world of the protagonist - a character with a past, present, and future (Schjeldahl 1990, p. 128). We are reflecting and then projecting our imagination from that initial "liminal" moment where we find her in bed, presumably *post coitus*, humiliated and vulnerable, through the various phases of the narrative cycle. We long to know where she has come from and where she might be going after this erotic, and perhaps, violent (at least in the psychological sense) sexual encounter.

She is dripping sweat, clad in a long, lace nightgown, drawing up the covers in such a way to suggest intense shame for what has just occurred in the sweltering confines of the bedroom. She has given herself, but not without trepidation, to a man who has just proven himself unworthy of her love. Reverie this is not, and through Sherman's use of omniscient narration, the spectator, as voyeur, feels the man's presence, intuits his gaze which transforms her into the object of his sexual desires. The spectator experiences the lingering and hauntingly oppressive presence of the male at the exclusion of his appearance, due in fact to his conspicuous

absence. The man, lingering just outside of the frame, in a literal and figurative manner, casts his glance down on her from above.

She pursued this man against the advice of her well-meaning friends, against their persistent warnings that this “wild one” had nothing valuable to offer, only the potential for pain and anguish. She ignored the clarity and logic of their advice, for her heart cried out, and she recklessly heeded its beckoning, and now she was paying the ultimate price. Now, in this moment of crisis, the “liminal” moment of the narrative, she feels vulnerable, violated, and ashamed, she knows that any hope for a meaningful and lasting relationship has evaporated. If indeed this scenario were occurring in a typical Hollywood film of the 1950s and 1960s, harmony would more than likely be restored to this young woman’s troubled life in the final reel, in time she would eventually find happiness. However, as I have argued, when experiencing the immediacy of Sherman’s photographs we are not privy to the artful handy work of Hollywood film-making, rather we are called to the task of providing the final reel, so-to-speak, with the concluding scene by way of invention and imagination. In short, when confronting the *Centerfolds* we are experiencing, in a participatory sense, what Nietzsche termed the “dissonant” moment of the plot’s rupture to which we must bring a sense of closure, of resolution, or “consonance.”

Time and again critics have commented, and rightly so, on the seemingly paradoxical nature of Sherman’s women: they are at once ambiguous and yet somehow strikingly familiar. We have been denied the opportunity to encounter any of the “centerfolds” in a full-length Hollywood melodrama, in which we trace the character’s development, e.g., coming to know the protagonist in the same way as any of Elizabeth Taylor’s characters in such film as *National Velvet*, *Butterfield 8*, or *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* However, perhaps we know these centerfolds in an even more powerful and primordial sense of identification, i.e., in terms of modern Jungian *archetypes*, which reside in a latent state as part of a “modern” collective unconscious, which has been formed as a result of our contact with and immersion in the many and varied modes of mass media in the modern technological age, with television and cinema being perhaps the most dominant and prevalent technological sources of representational imagery.

According to Jung, *archetypes* produce a wide variety of psychic forms, and one way in which the material demonstrating these forms manifests is within dreams. *Archetypes* are

involuntary and spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche. Certainly, the cinema's power to re-produce both the environment and the logic of the dreamer has been well-documented (e.g., Jean Goudal's "Surrealism and Cinema," 1925), for cinema is analogous to the dream.

According to Grundberg, Sherman's photography, "creates a series of dramatic personae (or, in Jung's psychological version of the word's plural, *personas*), each with its own aura, its own particular presence" (Grundberg 1981). Building on Grundberg's observations, we might argue that in the postmodern landscape of pop culture and cinematic iconography, we might include to Jung's *child, trickster, God, daimon, mother, father, wise man*, the "Hollywood Starlet, the suburban housewife, the sexually curious and libidinous Catholic school girl, the pubescent bobby-soxer," to name but a few *archetypes* that we encounter in Sherman's work (Grundberg 1981). In fact, Jung himself clearly opens the possibility for this very line of speculation, in "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious" when he writes,

There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engendered these experiences into our psychic constitution. Not in the forms of images filled with content, but at first only as forms without content, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action (Jung 1936).

In addition, such a conception as stated above is explicitly outlined by Jung in *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, wherein he speculates on the intersection of modern, "space age" technology and the *archetypes*. Technology, Jung concludes, holds the power to influence and actualize the meaning potential of the archetypes associated specifically with religion, e.g., the *mandala*, the image of psychic totality found recurring in various mythologies is related to God and the immortal soul.

Sherman's women are "ambiguous" because they are part of a reservoir of latent archetypal images, they do not form clear and distinct representations, they are nameless, they are not explicitly known as familiar, particular individuals, they are not understood as fully developed pictures in the mind. Rather, they are more reminiscent of the ghost-like negatives of photos waiting for the spectator to bring her unique "psychic content" to the photographic text in order to fully develop them, i.e., to enact their latent potential to communicate in a personal and

highly visceral manner. The “familiarity” of these women is linked with the fact that their full development and expression requires the spectator’s unique experiences, and this too, we might associate with the pleasure (*jouissance*) that enraptures the spectator as a participant in Sherman’s art work.

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

It has been the aim of this essay to explore Sherman’s ability as artist to uniquely re-present elements of the modern cinematic experience within her photographs, incorporating both micro and macro elements of the film-making process, and further, to specular on why the *Centerfolds* continue to exercise such a powerful hold on us, why they continue to enthrall us after all this time. For this analysis, I have focused on the mechanism of narrative structure in cinema for two reasons. First, the obvious, it is the most common form or genre of cinema with which we are acquainted. Second, because narrative is not only a mechanism employed in literature or film, beyond this, according to Andrew, “it is the innate capability, like language itself, which surfaces in many areas of human life and is dominant in the sense of these. Narrative competence holds our signification in place to give them order and thrust” (Andrew 1984).

Andrew argues that the power of narrative cinema is grounded originally in the fact that the mechanism of “narrative” is a unique category of the rational mind. He claims that it is the innate capability to order the world by structuring the chaotic flux and flow of brute sensory stimuli. It is present in nearly all of our communications and a wide variety of arts depend for their immediacy and meaning on this temporal logic of cause-and-effect. If what I have suggested is accurate, we might add to the list of arts that affect us so dramatically because they rely in varying degrees on narrative structure (e.g., painting, dance, opera, literature, and the cinema), the unique photography of Cindy Sherman’s *Centerfolds*, a form of photography that gathers and acquires its power to deeply and profoundly move us because it functions in an analogous manner to narrative cinema, as single-frame film-making.

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