

Serial Mom [1994]

by

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To convey the flavor of *Serial Mom*, I will simply describe the first few minutes. After that, you're on your own. It opens with a statement that this is a docu-drama based on a real-life incident (which, of course, it is not). What a delicious send up of the made-for-TV true crime movies and reality television that are "based" on "real" incidents.

After the disclaimer that names have been changed, each of the film's titles slowly comes into focus over a perfect sky: puffy, white, Johnson & Johnson clouds on a perfectly blue background – a sky that will always have clouds yet will never storm. It is over this hyper-idealistic background, the film is saying, that reality will come into focus.

One title is different – the name of the film. It appears sharp and in focus, but illegible because the letters are scrambled, pointing in various directions. Rather than changing focus, they begin to move – to twist and turn – and become a legible title, “*Serial Mom*.” Another message about the film: it will unscramble seemingly meaningless single incidents into an intelligible whole. That intelligible whole is, of course, about mothers who are serial murderers and the ironies of all that this implies.

After most of the credits have run, the camera sweeps down from the sky to a house. We are invited to compare the two. It is a house with a blue roof and white siding – a color scheme that makes the house an obvious continuation of this heavenly perfection. This then, is the house of heavenly virtue and domestic bliss. Within, we observe the perfect breakfast at the household of the family Sutphin (an anagram of "shtupin," Yiddish for sexual intercourse).

A disturbing element now enters: a fly. An interloper – an insect in a mammalian world, a buzzing noise in a quiet world, a disease bearer in a world of sterility. It skips from healthy food group to healthy food group, thus aptly prolonging its life. But once it lands on a non-nutritious surface, mom squashes it into fly gore – and with great glee. Thus, anything that doesn't nourish her family must be destroyed – a theme that is continued, relentlessly and in myriad variations, throughout the film. In his first bit of outright black humor (but certainly not the last), director John Waters places his own name as director over the squashed fly's gory remains!

John Waters, in his earlier films, has always had a propensity for casting odd people in normal roles. In his hands, Divine, a 300-plus pound transvestite becomes attractive and charming. He consistently shows that humanity wears many clothes. But now day-time television talk shows have replaced early Waters films as windows to the world's trashiest people. Dysfunction becomes fame. People from *Pink Flamingos* [1972] are now guests on talks shows . . . and without irony. His response to the mainstream media imitation of his outrageousness (that is, raising our national shock ceiling), as been to reverse his tactics. His subversiveness is now straightness and black comedy.

Serial Mom plunges us into the days of the ideal family – the Cleavers, the Bradys, the Nelsons, even the Arnezes. Yet here, Mom is a criminal. The crimes, however, are low brow, more the crimes of a paperback book or a tabloid headline, of Tanya Harding or Lorena Bobbitt. The murderer's victims are a high-school math teacher who dares suggests a family problem may exist, a boy who stands up mom's male-hungry daughter, someone who refuses to recycle, a woman who returns video rentals un-rewound, a boy who doesn't wear his seat belt, and a woman who wears white shoes after Labor Day.

In this world, private darkness becomes public shadow. And here is the central paradox of many of Waters' films. At the social level, by not living out these secret lives and desires, we keep society functioning. On the other hand, at the personal level, we must pay for the consequences of these repressions in the form of Serial Moms and a hundred variations that now plague our society. And as a palliative to this psychological dilemma, Waters offers us black comedy!

What is a black comedy? The easy answer is that it is comedy where we laugh at the worst-case scenario. A better answer is found in archetypal psychology. It posits that when any portion of an archetype is embraced blindly and totally, the remaining portions do not disappear, but constellate in the unconscious. Inevitably, these repressed aspects return to confront us. The specific nature of that return determines whether the film will be a horror film or a comedy. In the horror film, the embraced and the repressed do battle. Black comedy allows them to coexist, overlapping in mutually exclusive archetypal frames of reference.

Both must be shown with equal conviction. Thus, the filmmaker must love what he or she hates. A black comedy must convincingly construct a positive archetype and at the same time view it through a glass darkly. If we look honestly, as will happen often in any black comedy worth its bile, we will see there the dark mirror image of ourselves.

What makes *Serial Mom* different from most other black comedies is that Waters has undertaken an attack on what America hold most sacred – Mom. In the Western world, we have tended to separate our world into good and evil – a simple Manichean distinction. God, for instance, is all good while “his” opposite, the Devil, is all bad. Here, the Great Mother archetype appears in two aspects: "mother" and "destroyer." As *Serial Mom* demonstrates, when only the divine side is glorified – as it has been by patriarchal culture – the opposite is constellated in the unconscious, both in the personal unconscious

and the collective unconscious. Thus, the *femme fatale* in films is not, as many feminist critics have claimed, an icon of male hate against women. Rather, it is a constellation of the forces needed to balance the one-sided approach to women that society has saddled itself with.

Many writings on women today have an *a priori* assumption that women are basically harmless. Anything destructive women do, these writers claim, is simply a reaction to the original evil done to them by men. (This has always struck me that this is an interesting variation of the "doctrine of original sin" that these women find so offensive.) By denying any culpability, by turning a blind eye to their own destructive power, women, at one stroke, deny the very power they seek. They are reducing themselves to powerless children, blaming someone else for actions that they, themselves, should take responsibility for. By denying their own destructive power, women simultaneously deny their regenerative and curative powers. Black comedy, specifically *Serial Mom*, is a step toward this balance. It recognizes and celebrates both the generative and the destructive power necessary to achieve balance in the mother archetype – within everyone.