

THREE TALK OFFICE

Bronwen Payerle

Projected on the main wall with a Hollywood aspect ratio and supersaturated colour is *Office*, a narrative video by Matilda Aslizadeh about the everyday activities in the Western Life Insurance company. Unlike a Hollywood film, *Office's* gossip and corporate merger do not serve to incite drama. Instead they provide a droning, meandering foreground against which computer monitors, lusciously vibrant flora, and black glass reflects back an endless, empty objectified world somewhere beyond Los Angeles. The screen is often geometrically divided, a device that allows one to see several perspectives at once, lending a sense of structured splendour to each shot. A static, locked-off camera keeps one's eye focussed on the banal drama that creeps from this Californian set.

SCENE 1.0 INTERIOR, Or Gallery, NIGHT

Three people, **JOHN**, **NATASHA**, and **THEO** stand before the video, observing, responding, and communicating.

JOHN Natasha, I look at this video and it's a world I know, so that helps me to understand what's going on, but for people who don't know about a corporate environment, how do they see *Office*? Why is it more than surfacey attractive? So the flowers and shiny surfaces are pretty, even all the divided screens look anally cool, but what does it all add up to? I don't get why an artist would make such a realistic view of something when the story is all chopped up and you don't seem to get a unified message.

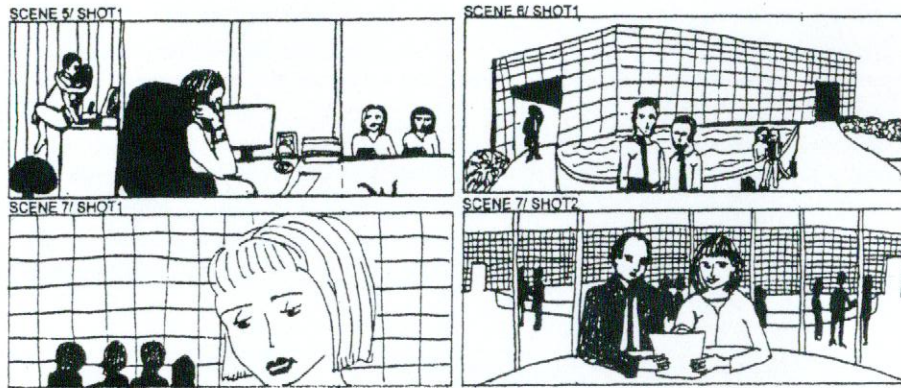
NATASHA Well, I guess you have to start with an assumption that the public that wants pretty pictures won't even know a gallery like this exists, so right away the audience is selected for people who are up for a challenge. You

probably wouldn't have come if I hadn't explained the relationship between your job in advertising and the subject of *Office*. What about you, Theo? You're used to critiquing movies. What's a viewer going to take away from *Office*? I think the absolute ordinariness of the piece, from the way the characters are dressed to the drone of reception, helps us to place it as real or understandable, even though it's highly formal and stylized.

THEO Well naturally it is the way that we, as viewers, become accustomed to the *mise-en-scène* that aids our acceptance of a false scenario. When one is constantly shown a background of uninterrupted flora, one feels that all is normal despite the divisions of office space in the foreground. If the proverbial mountains haven't moved, you know...I appreciate a tactic like this in a film that otherwise strives to confound me as much as possible. Disjointedness can only be carried so far before a director completely loses his audience. The difference between the size of characters onscreen can be understood by our brains as a difference in planes. One character is simply sitting further away from the camera, and therefore obviously appears smaller. Having everybody separated by the split screen triad is a clever formatting reference to a multitude of mathematical rules and religious hierarchies, and one absorbs such information not in an overt manner but on a subconscious level. Aslizadeh keeps us entranced with aesthetics so that she can mess around with our perspective.

JOHN There is a sense of looking at a model. It's as if this is a demo for how a space will function with all the views squashed together, but still look slick. I can see the creative guys at work making a short film like this to give to a developer. That just shows my ignorance about film, and art, and advertising, 'cause if it's live action then they all kind of look the same. Couldn't you guys see this playing at Tinseltown? It's Hollywood, except the interesting bits are missing. All you have to do is add in the sex and the car chases – to spice it up – and you've got a regular movie. Without that marketable stuff though, why stay around to watch? There aren't even any chairs.

NATASHA I don't think you're meant to feel aroused or excited or even comfortable. We are looking at a critical comment on society – our language and philosophy of life is under inspection. What I feel, and what maybe one is meant to consider, is claustrophobia and fear. We're placed in a seemingly hermetically sealed world, right inside Western Life, and the anxiety that's generated is amazing. The insurance company mandate of "protecting" our lives and possessions, coupled with crazily lush plants and all the reflective glass, creates a hyperreal atmosphere. Surrounded by things that want to take you over, there is an intense sense of being controlled. The building grid pins you down at a set location, mapping latitude and longitude points, and the motionless camera forces the gaze relentlessly.



JOHN I totally can empathize there. You know the terror that that poor dude is going through who loses it outside? When the camera is jerking around everywhere after being completely still for so long? I've felt that oppression descending when deadlines and clients and the whole shit ball comes crashing down on me.

THEO Politically speaking, Aslizadeh has captured the paranoia and anxiety of our time. What with the Bush administration bombing Iraqi civilians and child soldiers killing their own families in Sudan, the demon of war is ever-present. People in Canada may not be so familiar with the day-to-day atrocities, except in an arm's-length mediated way, but certainly we feed off of American fear mongering. I think in *Office* there is excellent reference made to a hidden but omnipresent power.

JOHN It does feel so in-tune with my own concerns about being a pawn in a company versus enjoying individual agency. See this part where the guy gets fired for taking breaks that are too long? She really captured the sense of loneliness in

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your cubicle too – like I tried to decorate with photos and some reminders of who I am away from advertising, but it really is a kind of cookie cutter cage – and then sometimes I just get so excited by our little beehive of activity. Think about how much energy exists in an office building. It's totally as if we're a giant photocopier.

THEO Yes, John, perhaps one can think of the many points of view we see here as a by-product of copy-culture. The split-screen usage quite alters the usual continuity editing.

NATASHA Theo, I think you're about to burst with another political read. Maybe this time it'll be about Michael Moore and his new documentary. Will we see it in your article on Saturday?

JOHN Yeah, and I think I should take off. I *do* feel like I'm still at work.

OFFICE: MATILDA ASLIZADEH, FEBRUARY 12 TO MARCH 12, 2005
Storyboard images from Matilda Aslizadeh's *Office*, 2004