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Nietzsche in *The Office*: The Aesthetic Justification of Capitalist Realism

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In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claims that in the absence of a moral justification for the suffering of existence—which, following Schopenhauer, he denies is possible—only an aesthetic justification can be offered in its place. But, in response to Schopenhauer's advocacy of life-denial, aesthetic justification is meant, in some respect, not merely to reconcile us to life, but to enable us to love and affirm it, including its ugliest and most terrible features (BT P: §5). Nietzsche thought that Attic tragedy managed to orchestrate such an aesthetic justification for its ancient Greek audience. In this paper, I argue that *The Office* (2005-2013)[1]—the successful mockumentary-styled sitcom—offers its audience an aesthetic justification too. It's an aesthetic justification of the audience's historically-situated existence as lower-tiered white-collar workers in the era of neoliberalism.[2] In providing such a justification, *The Office* implicitly endorses what Mark Fisher (2009) calls capitalist realism, or the idea that "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." The analysis will focus on an illuminating scene in episode 16 of season 3, "Business School" (2007), which exemplifies the thesis especially well. *The Office*, I argue, aesthetically justifies those aspects of our existence that cannot be morally justified under the neoliberal capitalist order, e.g., precarity, wage stagnation, punitive austerity, cuts to

[1] I am referring only to the US version of the show rather than the original, short-lived UK version (2001-2003) created by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant.

[2] According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, most US American workers in 2022 are in the private "service-providing" sector, making up around 105 million jobs (or roughly 70% of the workforce). Most of these are in "trade, transportation, and utilities" (28 million). In other words, they have similar employment to the characters in *The Office*, who work for a company that sells and transports paper. See https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t17.htm

benefits, meaningless jobs, ruthless competition, etc.[3] In section 1, I outline Nietzsche's conception of aesthetic justification and its Schopenhauerian background. In section 2, I discuss some of the major themes from *The Office*, highlighting their resonance with the concerns and experiences of the workforce. In section 3, I bring these together in a Nietzschean analysis of the aforementioned "Business School" scene. Finally, in section 4, I close by offering some open-ended but critical reflections on this analysis via Adorno and the Frankfurt School.

1. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT), has two principal projects: (1) *historical*; and (2) *existential*. The historical project consists in accounting for the nature and development of ancient Greek tragedy, along with its subsequent "death" and rebirth in Wagner's *Bayreuth*. The historical project was deemed a failure by Nietzsche's peers, but, thankfully, Nietzsche's quasi-historical account and its plausibility aren't my concern in this paper. Rather, my concern is with the second project, the existential one. Nietzsche's existential project consists in responding to Schopenhauerian pessimism. Nietzsche's BT was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer's view of the world. Schopenhauer famously argues that the world has two 'aspects'—it can be viewed as "representation" or construed as "will." The former stands, roughly, for the Kantian notion of *phenomena*, while the latter is Schopenhauer's term for the *noumenon*, the thing-in-itself, ultimate reality, the "inner kernel" or essence of things.[4] Schopenhauer's metaphysics grounds his pessimism. He

[3] There is now a bourgeoning cottage industry of scholarship devoted to theorizing neoliberalism and its nature. It is not essential for our purposes to define it, however. I use the term simply to describe the political and economic policies, as well as the ideological framework that is typically invoked to justify these policies, which characterizes a specific historical period, especially the post-Reagan era up to the present. These policies include lowering taxes for corporations and the wealthy, deregulation, the ever-expanding privatization and marketization of public goods (e.g., undoing the welfare state), international free trade agreements—so that the movement of capital isn't constrained by national borders—and the use of the state to principally 'protect' the market. For some noteworthy contemporary discussions of neoliberalism, see Harvey (2005), Mirowski (2009), and Brown (2015).

[4] This isn't entirely accurate. As many scholars (e.g., Shapshay, Atwell, and Young) have noted, Schopenhauer changed his mind on the thing-in-itself in his later work. By 1844, he seems to deny that the "will" is the thing-

famously argues that living is essentially suffering; this is because to live is to will, and to will is to suffer. Willing denotes a painful *lack* that one is always striving to fulfill. If the will attains its object, it doesn't bring lasting satisfaction. Satisfaction is always momentary. Boredom soon follows, which motivates the formation of a new desire, which initiates the cycle once more in its endless, meaningless, repetitive motion. Human life is suffering. We suffer either from the frustration of unsatisfied desire or from the tedium of boredom. Schopenhauer's conclusion is that life is *bad*; that life and existence ought not to be. His recommendation for escaping this cyclical horror is asceticism, "denial-of-the-will."[5] The existential project of BT is to determine whether another possibility is available to will-bound creatures like ourselves.

And, indeed, Nietzsche suggests that the ancient Greeks discovered or, rather, invented such a possibility in tragic theater. Tragedy combined the Apolline and Dionysian, the visual/plastic "dream" arts (Apollo) with the non-representational "intoxicating" art of music (Dionysian). The Greeks were aware of the "Wisdom of Silenus," according to which it is best if we hadn't been born at all, and second best, if we die as soon as possible, i.e., they intuitively recognized the threat of Schopenhauerian pessimism (BT §3). The ubiquitous suffering that plagues existence made them susceptible to Schopenhauerian resignation, the denial-of-the-will. Yet, Nietzsche says, they didn't lapse into pessimism. How come? "Art," or, specifically, tragedy, stepped in as the "saving sorceress" that saved the Hellenic will (BT §7).

But how can *tragedy* compensate for the terrors of existence? Tragedy, Nietzsche suggests, provided the Greeks with an *aesthetic justification* of life. The notion of a specifically aesthetic justification is meant in contrast with a *moral* justification, or the kind of justification that's often attempted by traditional accounts of theodicy. "How," it is asked, "could God allow the creation of earthquakes, psychopaths, genocide, cruelty, and even unnecessary papercuts, if those things are *bad*, God himself is *good*, and he could easily *prevent* them all from happening?" Theodicies aim to show how the existence of such evil is nevertheless compatible with the omnipotence and moral goodness of God. Nietzsche,

in-itself qua ultimate reality. It's not a *transcendent* reality, but, rather, simply an interpretation of empirical reality as a whole (WWR II: §17). This topic isn't crucial for the argument of the paper, however.

[5] Julian Young (2005) provides an overview of Schopenhauer's argument for pessimism. For a compelling alternative reading of Schopenhauer, see Shapshay (2019).

though, thinks no moral justification is forthcoming. The world was not created for moral reasons or to fulfill moral ends—neither good nor evil—and, therefore, it is unreasonable to expect it to be justified by any moral standards whatsoever. But Nietzsche's counter-suggestion is that we can conceive of the world as the work of an amoral, Dionysian "artist-god" (BT P: §5).[6] From the perspective of such a being, we are like painted soldiers in a battlefield on a cosmic canvas: bloodied, yet beautiful, even sublime. The artist-god both creates the scenes of horror that plague individuated existence, and then immerses himself in the pleasurable, disinterested, aesthetic contemplation of them (BT §5). Tragedy, Nietzsche claims, enabled the Greek audience to view themselves as if through the eyes of this Dionysian artist-god; and, thus, to view the horrors and terrors of life as an exalting aesthetic phenomenon. They were "metaphysically comforted" by the intuition that "eternal life" continues to flow behind the destructive play of appearances. As Katie Brennan (2015) has argued, Nietzsche's mention of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in this context is crucial (BT §7). *Hamlet*'s device of the "play within a play," as Brennan argues, can be plausibly read as Nietzsche's model for life-affirmation in BT. In feeling themselves to be both the collective creators and spectators of the "aesthetic phenomenon" on stage which mirrored their individuated existence, the audience of tragic theater was capable of overcoming the threat of life-denial posed by Schopenhauerian pessimism and continue going about the business of actual living.

2. *The Office* and Alienated Labor

According to the Nielsen SVOD Content Rating service, in 2020, Americans spent more than *57 billion minutes* streaming *The Office* online. This is despite the show's last season airing in 2013, after 9 seasons and 201 episodes. (The runner-up, *Grey's Anatomy*, wasn't even close; viewers spent 39.4 billion minutes watching it).[7] When it first aired, *The Office* garnered virtually no ratings. By its sixth season, it had become a household name, eventually rooting

[6] See especially Young (1992) for this interpretation of BT.

[7] See Spangler (2021).

itself deeply in public consciousness and online meme culture. Clearly, something about *The Office* resonates with audiences. But what? Of course, it's funny and well-written; it features compelling, charming characters played by talented actors. But what makes *The Office* so relatable to audiences? Here, I think, is one plausible answer: it resonates with people's ordinary experience in the workplace. It resonates especially with those 18-49 year-old millennials, gen-x'ers, and (increasingly) zoomers, who constitute the major demographics of the show and the USA's workforce. These are the people who are attempting to establish (or protect) themselves economically and professionally, to start careers, to start families, or even just simply survive in the North American job market after the complete triumph of neoliberalism in the 1990s, the financial collapse of 2008, and, more recently, the post-COVID collapse of 2020.[8] *The Office*, I suggest, reflects the fears, frustrations, and anxieties of the workforce especially well. (I'll argue later that it also reflects, in some sense, their *hopes* for a better kind of workplace, one that satisfies the need for personal and communal fulfillment.) I note, briefly, four salient examples:

1. **Precariousness**: Employment precarity—measured by employment stability, wages, working time arrangements, workers' rights and protections, collective organization, among other things—has steadily increased over the past 40 years in the USA.[9] This precarity is exemplified in the setup of *The Office*, which is set in small-town America—Scranton, Pennsylvania—and focuses on a mid-sized company, Dunder Mifflin, that specializes in selling paper in a world that's rapidly and inevitably becoming paperless.[10] Consequently, there is a looming sense of anxiety that hangs over everything like a shadow, especially during Season 1, in the background.

[8] Millennials are the largest group (around 35% or 60 million) in the workforce today (Silver, 2019).

[9] See, for example, Oddo et. al. (2021). Consider, also, the well-known statistics about wage stagnation/decrease since the 1970s for middle and lower-income earners (Mishel, Gould, and Bivens 2015). Finally, it's worth noting the immense increase in the "gig economy" and "contingent work," especially after the COVID crisis. This kind of unstable employment rose by 34% in 2021 and is expected to increase by over 50% in 2023 alone as big companies move more towards the "contingent worker" model, which shifts costs and responsibilities to the workers themselves (so-called "autonomy"). See Molla (2021) and Akeroyd (2021).

[10] They do not even produce the paper. They simply sell it to others. The implication is that Dunder Mifflin is a typical parasitic company of middlemen, as even the children of the employees realize and call out (Season 2, Episode 18, "Take your daughter to Work Day").

Unsurprisingly, the show includes a consistent, though often latent, anxiety about "layoffs," "cuts," and "downsizing." It is understood, though, that even if the employees keep their jobs, they are likely to lose them collectively eventually. The loyalty, dedication, or excellence of the employees can't save them from the roulette of the market itself. But the precariousness isn't just about having *a* job. It also pertains to benefits, like healthcare.[11] In Season 1, the workers have their healthcare plan completely slashed. This is never addressed or restored in the future.[12]

2. **Meaninglessness:** According to a Gallup poll from 2022, worker dissatisfaction is at an all-time *global* high (roughly 70% don't find their work "meaningful").[13] In the US, 50% of the workforce report "daily stress" at work; this feeling is predictably exacerbated by differences in education, income, gender, and so on.[14] Work, therefore, isn't merely increasingly precarious, but also increasingly hopeless, boring, heteronomous, and meaningless.[15] The meaninglessness and unpleasantness of work is mostly just assumed in *The Office*. Who, after all, would base their identity on selling paper? But this theme receives special emphasis through two youngish characters with whom the audience is invited to sympathize and identify the most:

[11] The USA notoriously lags far behind other similarly industrialized nations in providing people with decent, affordable healthcare, unemployment benefits, paid vacation, paid maternal leave, and so on. See, for instance, Iacurci (2021).

[12] It's also noteworthy that unionization efforts in *The Office* are crushed immediately (Season 2, Episode 15, "Boys and Girls"), reflecting the immense decline in union membership since the 1960s. The percentage of union workers in the private sector stands around 6% today. See US Bureau of Labor Statistics "News Release," January 19, 2023, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf

[13] See Gallup, "State of the Global Workplace: 2022 Report."

[14] See "How Americans view their jobs," Pew Research Center (2016).

[15] The workers of *The Office* are in a somewhat worse position than mere meaninglessness. They mostly know that there's no future for their business, and that there really shouldn't be one. We should be cutting the use of paper. Yet they're in a position where their livelihood depends on *halting* precisely this progress. The work is therefore more than just meaningless. In a sense, it is *anti*-meaning. This isn't exactly what David Graeber (2019) calls a "bullshit job," but it's close enough. It's not just that the workers aren't really needed from the standpoint of human progress, but—somewhat analogously to the "Wisdom of Silenus"—it would be best, from that standpoint, if they ceased existing (as workers) as soon as possible! Although, the "bullshitization" of work does increasingly creep into the series, e.g., Pam literally invents for herself a new job as the "office administrator" when she realizes she couldn't possibly maintain her job as a salesman, and tries to prove its existence to Gabe, who himself *really* does have a bullshit job (he is the "Coordinating Director of Emerging Regions"). In other words, they're both useless employees. They both *know* this, moreover, and forcefully try to legitimate their respective positions. (See Season 7, episode 2, "Counseling").

Jim Halpert, a salesman, and Pam Beesly, the receptionist.[16] Pam aspires to become an artist; Jim is smart and ambitious and, especially in Season 1, often expresses how he feels like he's wasting his life in Dunder Mifflin and would rather "kill himself" than establish a career there (season 1, episode 1,"Pilot"). In other words, they both aspire for fulfilling and meaningful productive activity that Dunder Mifflin does not and cannot offer.

3. **Managerial Incompetence:** In the aforementioned Gallup poll, it's reported that the primary cause of worker dissatisfaction is "unfair treatment at work." This often involves unfair wages, discrimination, etc., but the most common thread that runs through people's complaints about mistreatment boils down to one thing: *management*. People complain about lack of support, unclear communication, unreasonable time pressures, unmanageable workloads, etc. from their bosses. The manager in *The Office*, Michael Scott—brilliantly played by Steve Carell—is the living embodiment of these complaints. Scott is the character most closely identified with *The Office*. The show's ratings plummeted after his departure. But, in Season 1, he was presented in a thoroughly *unsympathetic* light. Scott is racist, sexist, Islamophobic, homophobic, ageist, and ableist; also infantile, selfish, inconsiderate, narcissistic, mean, obsequious, cowardly, and arrogant. He's capable of neither moral self-reflection nor complex abstract or logical thought. He fundamentally misunderstands his relationship with the others in the office. He calls them "friends" and "family,"[17] treats them like neither, yet consistently expects them to behave like his servants, comfort him like parents, and 'hang out' with him like friends. He doesn't understand that the true nature of their relationship—i.e., as workers and boss—undercuts the possibility of genuine friendship (reciprocity and honesty) or

[16] The other characters in the show are, for the most part, extremely one-dimensional and often have very prominently unappealing qualities. In my view, *The Office* doesn't just invite us to see ourselves in Pam and Jim, it also invites us to think of the people we work with in terms of the characters we're *not* supposed to identify with. Likewise, we're certainly not supposed to think that Jim and Pam are mean or cruel, even though their primary bonding activity is 'pranking' Dwight.

[17] In Season 2, episode 21, Michael Scott compares the relationship between the office and its employees to a marriage contract, saying that it is "till death do us apart." When he does finally become engaged to Holly Flax in Season 7, he concedes, upon his final departure from the office, that Holly is "his family now," but the workers are still his "best friends."

familial bonds (love and care) between them. He deludes himself into thinking that people come to work because they enjoy him and his humor. In reality, his employees are a trapped audience in a hostile work environment. He harasses, offends, and sometimes borderline assaults them. He consistently prevents them from doing their work. He often generates pointless, unpaid additional work for them to do. He consistently blames them for the problems that he creates. He knows nothing about business; indeed, he's completely unqualified for his own job. It is unclear how he became, let alone remains, anyone's boss. The fact that someone so grossly incompetent is promoted—and handed control over other people's lives—is an expression not just of workers' frustration with management, but of the inefficiency, blindness, contingency, and injustice of the system in which they work. Michael Scott gives the lie to the myth of meritocracy *and* capitalism's efficiency.

4. **Competition:** A fan-favorite feature of *The Office* is an ongoing antagonism between Jim Halpert and Dwight Schrute, who is another (successful) salesman at Dunder Mifflin. This centers around increasingly elaborate pranks that Jim pulls on Dwight, e.g., putting his stapler in jello. Dwight represents, I think, the anti-solidaristic tendencies of the labor market that emerge due to the necessity of competition. Dwight is a *class traitor*: he betrays his coworkers and sides always instead with the boss, for whom he shows blind and worshipful loyalty, although he's never rewarded for it.[18] (This doesn't stop Dwight from irrationally believing that he *is* rewarded for his loyalty, for instance, because the manager confers on him the meaningless title of 'assistant to the regional manager,' and then the meaningless 'promotion' to 'assistant regional manager'). In Season 1, Dwight expresses his support for "downsizing;"[19] he is also the reason employees' healthcare plan is completely stripped of benefits. He supports providing himself and his coworkers with the *worst* (cheapest) healthcare plan because "In the wild, there is no healthcare" (Season 1, episode 3, "Health Care"). In other words, the labor market is and *ought to be* a

[18] In Season 3, episode 12, Dwight says that one of his "life goals" was to "die" in his "desk chair."

[19] In episode 3, season 3, he tells Jan that he'd "clean house" and get rid of "waste," i.e., fire half of his coworkers, if she let him run the branch instead of Michael.

ruthless competition that sorts out the strong (the "lions") from the weak (devoured by lions). In Season 2, episode 20, he subjects his coworkers to a time-consuming, demeaning drug test after finding a joint in the parking lot, only to discover his boss might have marijuana in his system. Anti-solidaristic tendencies are further exemplified in Dwight's homophobia, sexism, and racism, which promote the fragmentation of the workforce.[20] Dwight, we discover, is a literal fascist, raised (it is implied) by literal *Nazis*. In this sense, Jim's pranks are acts of righteous vengeance against an all-too-deserving target; and we're invited to vicariously enjoy them at Dwight's expense.

These features are so easily mapped onto Marx's classic theory of alienation (Tucker, 1978) it hardly merits elaborating. The workers are alienated from the labor *activity*, from the *product* of labor, from *themselves*, and from *one another*. *The Office* therefore displays immense potential as a critique of contemporary labor, especially in countries like the USA, where companies have outsourced so many jobs (e.g., in manufacturing) since the 1990s—capital always searches for the cheapest labor—but haven't offered meaningful, decent, stable employment in their place.

3. *The Office* as Aesthetic Justification

The Office thus certainly offers a glimpse into the horrifying realities of contemporary work, just as Nietzsche says tragedy offers a glimpse into the horrors of life itself. Yet, if it *only* offered the "terrible truth" (BT §7), it's unclear how it could have become so popular. Rather, I am going to argue, *The Office*—like tragedy, in Nietzsche's BT—casts a comforting, affirming, beautifying veil over this truth, thereby reconciling the audience to it. I mean, *The Office* provides an aesthetic justification of this contemporary form of alienated labor.[21]

[20] In season 7, episode 4 ("Sex Ed"), we discover that Dwight hires undocumented Latin American immigrants to work on his beet farm. He has his cousin pretend to be an INS agent, who then rounds them up, drops them off in Harrisburg PA, and tells them they're in "Canada." We're told this through a child speaking for his visibly traumatized parent, who's one of the migrant workers.

[21] One important difference between the aesthetic justification that Nietzsche attributes to tragedy and the one that I'll be attributing to *The Office* concerns the role of music. Music is the vehicle of Dionysus in

Speaking generally, there is a narratival shift from Season 1 to 2. The audience is invited to empathize with Michael Scott: his antics become lovable and charming; his vices become excusable expressions of a childlike innocence and naivety.[22] The employees themselves are more compassionate and forgiving towards him—often treating him more like a child than an adult with outsized powers over them—even as he continues to harass and insult them. There is a concerted attempt to be more *inclusive* towards him; there's greater effort to constitute the office environment as a community rather than a mere workplace.[23] Sometimes, Michael even displays competence at his job. He even looks more attractive.[24] The writers are especially keen to remind us that Michael himself is an employee, *ipso facto*, a victim, who gets used and abused by his own thoroughly unsympathetic superior (and later girlfriend), Jan Levinson, and the company more generally.[25] But I'll leave these details aside to focus on a scene that, I think, functions as an extended metaphor for how *The Office* as such offers an aesthetic justification of alienated labor in a more holistic sense.[26]

Nietzsche's account. Other than in the opening, *The Office* doesn't contain many musical elements. But, then, neither did Shakespeare's tragedies.

[22] In Season 3, episode 1, "Gay Witch Hunt," Michael outs, insults, and borderline assaults a gay employee, Oscar Martinez. When he's finally rebuked by the employee who denied his literal advances, Michael begins to cry like a child, prompting a reconciliatory and pitying response for the employee in question. The scene ends in Michael forcing a kiss onto the employee, and then, talking to the camera alone, he says, 'we have to be mature, but we can't lose the spirit of childlike wonder.' The employee, Oscar, says he would have quit, if Jan (Michael's boss) hadn't offered him three months paid vacation and a car in exchange for not suing the company.

[23] In Season 4, in an episode entitled "Money," we also learn Michael had to take another job as a salesman for a company that sells scam diet-pills. He's seen as personable, connecting with people, and hating the manager. He also recognizes that the meetings in the conference room are pointless. Of course, none of this leads him to reflect on his own identical behavior as manager. The highlight, however, is that we are supposed to recognize that the problems with Michael might stem from his job rather than from his personality. The same point is repeated in Season 4, episode 7 ("Survivor Man"), where Jim takes over for Michael and starts 'turning into' Michael within several hours.

[24] Steve Carell apparently got a hair transplant and lost 25 pounds.

[25] In Season 6, Episode 11, "Shareholder Meeting," Michael thinks he's being invited by Dunder Mifflin's board (which includes a congressman) to be praised and honored by the shareholders—they order him a limousine—but we discover that the shareholders are livid with the management of the company; the company is going bankrupt. Michael is there for the board to shield themselves from their own mismanagement, as his branch is the only profitable one in the company. Michael, in fact, only reflects their own mismanagement back onto them. The success of his branch is not due to *him*, but to his employees.

[26] The character of Dwight also undergoes a shift in later seasons as he becomes (presumably) more compassionate, helpful, and competent, although he's still bizarrely presented as sexist, ignorant, gullible, mean, authoritarian, and psychopathic.

The scene is in Season 3, episode 16: "Business School." In this scene—the last scene of the episode—Michael arrives at Pam's art show. They have both had terrible days. Michael, who was invited by a young worker, Ryan Howard ("the temp"), to speak at his business class at university, failed to answer students who pressed him on how Dunder Mifflin could survive when (a) it is competing with much bigger companies while (b) the paper market is rapidly shrinking. Pam's show was a disaster; the only coworker who showed up, Oscar Martinez, denigrates her and her art with his boyfriend behind Pam's back—referring to it as "motel art" that, like Pam, lacks "courage" and "honesty." Thus, both Pam and Michael are confronted with their own shattered aspirations. Michael has no future in business, Pam has no future in art, i.e., she'll always just be a receptionist. Here, their plotlines converge as Michael arrives before the night ends. (The reader is invited to watch the scene here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-9E-5Zm6-0) This is the dialogue that ensues:

Michael: Pam-Casso! Sorry I'm late, I had to race across town.

Pam: Oh… Michael.

Michael: Wow! You did these? Freehand? My God, these could be tracings. Oh! Look at this one [Michael points at watercolor of the office building] Wow. You nailed it. How much?

Pam: What do you mean?

Michael: I don't see a price.

Pam: Um, you want to buy it?

Michael: Well, yeah, yeah, we have to have it for the office! I mean, there's my window, and there's my car! Is that your car?

Pam: Uh huh

Michael: That… is our building. And we sell paper. I am really proud of you.

Pam: [Pam cries and hugs Michael] Thank you. […]

Michael: [Speaking to the filming crew, as Michael is later shown hanging the painting in the office] It [the painting] is a message. It is an inspiration. It is a source of beauty. And without paper, it could not have happened… Unless you had a camera.

Pam's painting of the office is a meta-reference to *The Office*. From Michael's and Pam's perspective, it represents the world; surveyed, as it were, from a 'distance,' as a totality. It's like *Hamlet*'s "play within a play." The work is meaningless and precarious ("we sell paper") and they're trapped within it to no avail. There is no alternative to the sinking ship they're doomed to share. But still, as Michael says, it is a "beauty," an "inspiration," and it couldn't exist as such without the precarity or the meaninglessness of the work, i.e., the "paper."[27]

But *who* is it an object of beauty and inspiration *for*, exactly? It is, I submit, for us, the audience. Working at the office provides Michael Scott with his redemption and justification, while Michael Scott provides redemption and justification for the work that we, the viewers, do in our own non-fictional lives and offices. It isn't, after all, the fictional employees of *The Office* who voluntarily choose to engage with Mr. Scott, but, rather, we ourselves, the audience. The employees are there because it's their job. They need to feed themselves and survive. We, on the other hand, visit *The Office* entirely voluntarily for our aesthetic pleasure. Even in the scene itself, the justificatory aesthetic object isn't the office itself, but a mere *representation* of it. For the characters, it is twice removed from their fictional truth; for the audience, it is thrice removed from the actual truth—it is a representation of a representation, "*the semblance of the semblance*" (BT §4). Recall, though, that tragedy, on Nietzsche's view, turns life into a justificatory "aesthetic phenomenon" for the audience by enabling them to inhabit the *standpoint of the Dionysian artist-god*, the "true" creator and spectator of the phenomenal world and its suffering individuals. If so, then who's the Dionysian artist-god whose standpoint we're invited to inhabit in *The Office*?

Perhaps it's the standpoint of Michael Scott himself? Like the Dionysian artist-god, he's an infantile, amoral force that wields immense (and arbitrary) power over people's lives. His playfulness—often leading to destructive consequences—is like that of the Heraclitan child Nietzsche describes in BT §24, who builds sandcastles only to demolish them in an everlasting cycle of creation and destruction. To facilitate aesthetic justification, tragedy must "convince us" that our world is the playful creation of this cosmic child (ibid.). As *The Office* progresses in its seasons, we are invited more and more to sympathize with

[27] It is worth noting that the ending of the "Business School" scene reappears as the final scene of the show in the finale.

Michael Scott, to occupy his perspective, to feel for him, to appreciate his antics, his pain, etc. Nevertheless, I think, it is a mistaken to view Michael Scott as the Dionysian artist-god of *The Office*. Like, the tragic hero, he's merely the Apolline *representative* of this god 'on the stage' (BT §8). Like the tragic hero, he too must eventually be negated, overcome, and destroyed. The non-representational Dionysian force must "gain the upper hand" and 'puncture' Apollo's deceptive veil (BT §21). The real Dionysian artist-god is the mad, irrational, myopic, arbitrary, cruel, and destructive capitalist economic system itself; the Dionysian artist-god is the invisible fist of the market, ensuring that we're too frightened to hope for or aspire to or imagine anything better than its mad rule. In BT §24, Nietzsche writes,

> Insofar as it belongs to art at all, the tragic myth participates fully in the aim of all art, which is to effect a metaphysical transfiguration; but what does it transfigure when it presents the world of appearances in the image of the suffering hero? Certainly not the 'reality' of this world of appearances, for it says to us: 'Take a look! Take a close look! This is your life! This is the hour-hand on the clock of your existence!'
>
> […] only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified; which means that tragic myth in particular must convince us that even the ugly and disharmonious is an artistic game which the Will, in the eternal fullness of its delight, plays with itself.

The Office does much the same. It invites us to view our lives—i.e., the kind of alienated labor which we, on average, spend 80,000 hours of our life doing—by assuming the standpoint of a force that, like Dionysus himself, cannot be *truly* represented. It is the hidden, essential core of life or nature, much like Schopenhauer's metaphysics of will; it is responsible for the suffering and cruelty we experience, but it cannot be abolished. It can only be heroically confronted before it annihilates us entirely. *The Office*, then, I claim, invites us to view ourselves from the perspective of the seemingly impersonal, amorphous, arbitrary, cruel standpoint of the force that governs the capitalist marketplace. This is the

unspoken Dionysian artist-god who creates, contemplates, enjoys, and redeems himself in *The Office*; and we, through him, 'redeem' ourselves. Thus, *The Office* enshrines Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism (2009). It tells us we're stuck with the capitalist labor-regime we know; we cannot think or imagine anything *beyond* it.

Fans apparently often describe *The Office* as a kind of "balm."[28] In an article for *Vox*, Emily St. James describes this 'calming' effect of *The Office* as a function of the stability and "repetition" that the show offers. She writes,

> No matter what happens here, there is a paper company in Scranton, Pennsylvania, that is always the same. Nothing really changes there, and even when big things shift, the mundane nature of day-to-day life reasserts itself. We want to believe our lives can change. We want to believe we can escape whatever cycles imprison us. But there is something comforting to believing that everything you need might be right within your immediate field of vision, that the perfect world can be so close and yet so far away.

This is uncannily close to Nietzsche's idea of the "metaphysical comfort" that tragedy is designed to generate: "The metaphysical solace which … we derive from every true tragedy" consists in intuiting that, "in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable" (BT §7). It is, of course, paradoxical that tragedy should provide *any* comfort at all if it displays the horrors of life. But, as we've seen, Nietzsche's solution to this paradox is that tragedy enabled the Greeks to experience this from a 'higher' standpoint; and from this standpoint, the horror becomes a "beauty," an "inspiration," a collective artistic creation enjoyed by the "primordial unity." The "metaphysical comfort" of *The Office* isn't the Sisyphean reality of office life—let alone a random office in Scranton PA—but the eternal, invisible, inescapable, all-consuming movement of *capital* underneath 'office life' as such; capital is that which creates *and*

[28] See Emily St. James article in *Vox* (2020). James writes, "The idea of THE OFFICE as a balm kept coming up as I talked to more than 50 OFFICE fans."

destroys the 'appearances,' the 'offices,' that constitute the reality that art is meant to redeem. This, too, is capitalist realism: since we *don't* want to imagine the end of the world, we *won't* allow ourselves to imagine the end of capitalism and, hence, its drudgery, either. "Man would much rather will *nothingness* than *not* will [at all]," as Nietzsche claims (GM III §28).

Isn't there however one glaring problem with this analysis? It seems we have forgotten that *The Office* is not a tragedy, but a *comedy*. The attitude it courts isn't one of admiration or esteem for the characters, as towards the tragic hero. Instead, it invites us to laugh. Principally, we're invited to laugh at bosses like Michael Scott and his infantilism, at workers like Dwight and their irrational deference and devotion to their capitalist exploiters, and at the absurd universe of office work that is holistically signified by the name "Dunder Mifflin." Doesn't *The Office* cultivate a critical attitude of contempt towards the contemporary realities of work, then? Isn't the comedy contained precisely in demonstrating the manifest ridiculousness of maintaining an allegiance to an economic system that demands people spend their life engaging in tedious, unnecessary, and unfulfilling labor, or the absurdity of thinking it reasonable to expect people to subject themselves to the domination of a small class of selfish, irrational, unpredictable, and incompetent corporate overseers? If so, then perhaps *The Office* doesn't facilitate an aesthetic justification of capitalist realism after all but offers a critical challenge to our implicit faith in the neoliberal order. *The Office* prepares us to recognize and reject neoliberalism through the comedic exposure of its contradictions. "Not by wrath does one kill," says Zarathustra, "but by laughing" (Z I, "Reading").

But, first, for Nietzsche, comedy doesn't necessarily stand in opposition to aesthetic justification. In BT §7, Nietzsche claims that tragedy's function as the savior of "the will" comes from its capacity to redirect the terrible truth that it reveals into "representations with which man can live." These representations are the "*sublime*" and, more surprisingly, the "*comical*." Unfortunately, Nietzsche doesn't elaborate on the comical in BT; fortunately, he does elaborate in GS §107:

> At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking *down* upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing *over* ourselves or weeping *over*

> ourselves. We must discover the *hero* no less than the *fool* in our passion for knowledge; we must occasionally find pleasure in our folly, or we cannot continue to find pleasure in our wisdom.

This "artistic distance" is needed to enable us to confront and affirm the terrible truths that, Nietzsche suggests (in *The Gay Science*), are being revealed to us by the advancement of science in modernity.[29] Scientific inquiry pulverizes the grand metaphysical meta-narratives that have infused human life with meaning and dignity: humanity is an insignificant 'speck of dust,' a mere blip in the space-time continuum, adrift in an infinite cosmic and unimaginably complex ocean; humans aren't the pinnacle of creation, they're not even the pinnacle of the earth. The assumed unbridgeable ontological chasm between 'man' and 'animal' has been decisively crushed by Darwin. But, viewed through the lens of the tragic and comic, the futile strivings and concerns of the human animal can be perceived aesthetically as admirably heroic (sublime) and/or laughably foolish (comic). This tragi-comic sensibility enables us to reconcile ourselves with, or even affirm, the human condition, in its absurdity and horror.[30]

That, however, is precisely the problem. If we allow the 'human condition' to be framed in the terms set *by* neoliberalism, then even laughing mockery becomes a concession to a seemingly inescapable reality. That is why, ultimately, even Nietzsche doesn't fully manage to dissociate laughter from the standpoint of divinity.[31] The gods laugh "at the expense of all serious things … Gods enjoy mockery: it seems they cannot suppress laughter even during holy rites" (BGE §295). And, even the most baleful historical episodes, like the whole of "European Christianity" (in Nietzsche's view), would induce uncontrollable laugher, *if* contemplated with "the mocking and aloof eyes of an

[29] See Brian Leiter (2019) for a list of the various Nietzschean kinds of terrible truths.

[30] In BT, we have seen that Nietzsche thinks it can offer a *justification* (*Rechtfertigung*) of life. In GS §107, however, this claim is attenuated. He now says, "as an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* (*erträglich*) for us."

[31] This is despite his seeming attempt to do so. In his retrospective preface to BT (1886), he criticizes the romantic outlook of his younger self. He rejects the idea of "metaphysical comfort," and tells his readers, "You should learn the art of comfort *in this world*, you should learn to *laugh* my young friends, if you are really determined to remain pessimists" (BT P §7).

Epicurean god" (BGE §62). Laughing at Michael Scott or Dwight Schrute might provide or express a pleasant sense of superiority over bosses and suck-ups, but it is an impotent or illusory superiority. Comic amusement may be a god-like emotion, but we are not gods, for *we* still have to go to the office in the morning.[32]

4. *The Office*, again, but dialectically

The analysis I have presented casts *The Office* as an aesthetic panacea for contemporary white-collar forms of alienated labor. It reifies market forces by treating them as if they were the inescapable grounds of existence, and it aims to affirm and reconcile us with their irrationality, cruelty, destructiveness, and their fundamental incompatibility with human aspirations. This, I think, is correct. But, in this final section, I would also like to argue that perhaps it is not the whole picture. I mentioned earlier that *The Office* expresses the frustrations, fears, and anxieties of workers, but I think it also expresses, if only 'negatively,' their hopes.

To use Theodor Adorno's phrase, *The Office* offers its viewers a "negative utopia" by presenting and embodying the fundamental contradictions of social life under capital's dominion. For Adorno, Horkheimer, and other members of the Frankfurt School, modernity is characterized by the *total* domination of capitalism and its distinctive form of rationality, *instrumental rationality.* The fundamental drive of modernity is to instrumentalize and commoditize everything. This, of course, is true of art as well; it cannot escape the grip of marketization and maintain its full "autonomy" as a domain governed by its own distinctive form of normativity. Yet, as Martin Jay comments, for those first-generation Frankfurt School theorists, art constituted perhaps the final source of genuine *resistance* to capitalist totality. He writes, "What distinguished the Frankfurt School's sociology of art from

[32] For a compelling account of a "sense of humor" as a Nietzschean virtue, see Alfano (2019). Alfano argues that a sense of humor has an important epistemic role for Nietzsche. It helps agents flourish by enabling them to recognize, accept, or affirm hard truths *or*, conversely, to abandon illusory yet "cherished" beliefs (228). It's worth emphasizing, as Alfano does, that Nietzsche is a pluralist about the nature of humor. That is, we can find elements of all the leading theories of humor—superiority theory (Hobbes), incongruency theory (Kant), and release theory (Freud)—in his work.

orthodox Marxist progenitors' … was its refusal to reduce cultural phenomena to an ideological reflex of class interests" (1973). Art, to be sure, *does* express and speak in terms of the interests of the powerful, of the ruling class, of capital. But it is also, as Horkheimer claims, the final secular institution that preserves "the utopia that evaporated from religion" (1982, 275). The critical potentiality of art rests in its refusal to reconcile itself with a reality that's dominated by instrumental rationality, i.e., the mode of rationality that constitutes what Adorno and Horkheimer call "Enlightenment." Writing as German Jewish exiles in 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer famously claim that "Enlightenment … has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity" (2002, 1). Although the incredible advancement of scientific knowledge and technological capacities over the 19th and 20th centuries have made humanity literally capable of feeding and housing everyone on the planet, the promise turned into the waking nightmare of Auschwitz and Hiroshima instead. As Raymond Geuss explains, on Adorno's view, art's task in a "radically evil society," must be "to make people more consciously unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives, and especially to make them as keenly aware as possible of the dangers of instrumental rationality and of the discrepancy between their world as potential paradise and their world as actual catastrophe" (2005, 165). In a broken world, art must reflect the contradictions of that world back to itself. Art, however, has an inherent tendency towards "affirmation" that it cannot fully overcome, Adorno claims (1984, 2). Nevertheless, art *shouldn't* affirm the world as it is. This means that art must battle against *itself* to fulfill its critical potential; it must maintain the contradictions, the dialectical tensions, while resisting the urge to resolve them harmoniously. It's only in doing so that art can function as a "negative utopia." It simultaneously displays the contradictory nature of our present society and points to an un-envisioned existence beyond. Thus, Adorno writes, "A successful work, according to immanent criticism, is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure" (1981, 32).[33]

[33] Adorno's focus is really on the *formal* features of art; the critical potential of art is manifested in its rebellion against the forms it has inherited from the aesthetic tradition in question. That's, for instance, why Schönberg and Beckett are so central to Adorno's aesthetics. It will take us too far afield if we discussed how and whether

Does *The Office* express the "idea of harmony negatively," though?[34] Is it a successfully dialectical artwork? It certainly seems to contain some genuinely dialectical moments. Consider the closing scene of episode 1, Season 1. Here, speaking to the camera (i.e., to us), Michael Scott expresses a persistent theme of the show—that it's all about connecting with *people*; it's about family, friends, community, etc. He asks,

> What's the most important thing for a company? The cash flow? Inventory? No, it's the people, the people; my proudest moment here wasn't when I increased profit by 17% … It was a young Guatemalan guy, first job in the country, barely spoke English, came to me and said [in a racist accent] "Mr. Scott, would you be the godfather of my child?" Wow. Wow. Wow…" [After a moment silence] Didn't work out in the end. Had to let him go. He sucked.

The dialectic of Michael Scott is the persistent, basic, and universal human desire and need to connect with others coupled with the impossibility of forging such a connection in the context of an alienated, capitalist workplace. The problem isn't just his personality, although that is how it is often presented, but, rather, his productive function. As an agent of capital, profits always necessarily come before and at the expense of people, including the *most* vulnerable among us, e.g., impoverished migrant families from Guatemala. In "Business School," Michael, after being criticized for his faith in Dunder Mifflin's long-term profitability, rebukes Ryan—the employee who manipulated him into delivering the lecture—and claims that business is about "people," and "people will never go out of business." This comment brilliantly expresses the dialectic at the heart of *The Office*. There is a double meaning here: (a) people *outlive* business; they're more important than

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The Office subverts the formal aspects of comedic television and of the mockumentary in particular. For an expert discussion on Adorno's views on art and social critique, see Geuss (2005, Chapter 10).

[34] The theorists of the Frankfurt School weren't especially keen on the critical potential of comedy (or mass culture), though, as Nicholas Holm (2017) notes. But, as Holm also argues, there's a need to reassess this position now that there are no longer any aesthetic "sites" that are "outside the reach of capitalism" (184). As Frederic Jameson pleads, we must abandon the search for a "pure aesthetic dimension," if we'd like to uphold the politically subversive possibilities of art (1979, 133). All art is 'compromised,' so to speak.

business; they should and must take *precedence* over business; business cannot and should not exist unless it serves *humanity*; and (b) people *are* business; people are *commodities*; business is about selling and buying people. Insofar as *The Office* manages to gesture negatively at a utopian aspiration by representing the contradictions of our present capitalist dystopia, it should count as a "successful" artwork by Adornian standards, even if it cannot unshackle itself completely from its servitude to the material conditions that made the show itself possible and continue to mediate its existence.

But anyone who has watched *The Office* till the bitter end knows that it fails to maintain these moments of dialectical brilliance. It lapses, as products of the "Culture Industry" generally do, into brute reality affirmation. The tensions are resolved into resounding harmonies. The characters begin to seem invulnerable to the cruel, arbitrary, and invisible forces of the marketplace that governed their lives in earlier seasons. There is no financial storm they cannot weather.[35] The competition between Dwight and Jim is eventually resolved. Dwight's years of loyalty and sycophancy are paid off as he becomes Dunder Mifflin's (most successful) regional manager. Jim Halpert fulfills the dream of meaningful work by jumping in one fell swoop to the top of the corporate food chain by founding a successful, and completely non-descript, 'sports marketing' company. The cartoonish elements become increasingly dominant throughout the seasons as the workspace is filled with unrealistic gags, elaborate parties, games, etc. *The Office* becomes less a reality-TV-styled mockumentary and begins to look more like a safe and traditional sitcom. In undertaking this transformation, it also ceases to be relatable or funny, and it loses the critical potentiality of its dialectical qualities. Ironically, it is in fulfilling its hope for a better, unalienated kind of work life that *The Office* ceases to offer even a Nietzschean aesthetic justification for the kind of work life that made audiences so attached to *The Office* in the first place. The characters are no longer relatable because they are no longer stuck in the alienating hell that the audiences recognize in their own office or workplace. In abandoning Dionysus, Apollo is abandoned as well. In ceasing to be a tragedy, *The Office* also ceases to be a comedy. If it denies the contradictions and incongruities of labor under capitalism, then it cannot elicit our laughter over this form of labor either; we cannot laugh,

[35] As an anonymous reviewer suggested, it's worth noting that the UK version of *The Office* did not end its two-season run on a harmonious note and, in this respect, remained Nietzschean (or, if one prefers, Adornian) throughout.

as Nietzsche says, "out of the whole truth," unless we are presented, first and foremost, with the truth itself (GS §1).

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