“I Was Just Doing a Little Joke There”: Irony and the Paradoxes of the Sitcom in *The Office*¹

ERIC DETWEILER

ABOUT HALFWAY THROUGH THE SECOND-SEASON FINALE OF THE defunct Fox sitcom *Arrested Development*, the viewer is confronted with the following situation: teenager George Michael Bluth is attempting to break up with his girlfriend, Ann. As he tries to do so, however, Ann—a blossoming member of the Religious Right—invites him to come along to protest the premiere of a racy film: “I want to get the whole gang from church together: we’re going to picket those bastards” (“Righteous Brothers”). Upon hearing Ann swear, George Michael enters a brief flashback, which the viewer is guided through by the show’s narrator, Ron Howard: “George Michael had only heard Ann swear once before: when he joined some of her youth group to protest the home of Marc Cherry, executive producer of the hit show *Desperate Housewives*.” The youth group is shown standing outside Cherry’s house, holding signs with such slogans as “God doesn’t care about ratings” and chanting, “There’s nothing funny about fornication!” As the scene unfolds, Cherry appears in the window and stares perplexedly at the protesters. After a moment’s pause, he opens the window and shouts, “It’s a satire!” An exasperated Cherry then disappears back inside, an emotionally charged Ann plants a kiss on George Michael, and the flashback ends.

Although *Arrested Development* is not the central text at hand here, this scene gets at the layers of narrative and irony present in post-millennial sitcoms—layers central to this article’s investigation. In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,”² David Foster

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2012
© 2012, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Wallace makes the following comment regarding an episode of the television show *St. Elsewhere*: “Every character and conflict and joke and dramatic surge depends on involution, self-reference, metatelevision. It is in-joke within in-joke” (32). Wallace’s essay was written in 1990, but his comments hold true in the case of the *Arrested Development* episode referenced above—an episode that originally aired in 2005. The humor of the scene stems in large part from the fact that the characters are not in on a joke that the episode’s audience gets. The scene depends on the audience recognizing the metatelevision reference to *Desperate Housewives*, as well as the ironic tension between the shouts of the naïve young protesters and the institutionally empowered Cherry’s defense of his show as satire. Even if there’s nothing funny about fornication, there is certainly ironic humor to be found in misguided protests of it.

Wallace’s argument thus maintains some relevance to post-millennial sitcoms, and was particularly apt given its televisual contemporaries, coming as it did on the cusp of *Seinfeld*’s rise into the 1990s sitcom limelight. Later in the essay, Wallace claims, “the tension between what’s said and what’s seen is irony’s whole sales territory, classic televisual irony works via the conflicting juxtaposition of pictures and sounds” (35). In accordance with this statement, the quips of *Seinfeld*’s four protagonists were often contemptuous, sarcastic critiques of the situations in which they found themselves. Whether these situations were the result of George’s desperation, Kramer’s eccentricity, or the various unironic orientations of minor characters, Jerry’s one-liners invited the viewer to “laugh at characters’ unending put-downs of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form” (Wallace 63). The show thus banked on “irony—exploiting gaps between what’s said and what’s meant” (65). In *Arrested Development*, however, and in NBC’s *The Office*, the gaps are often between not “what’s said and what’s meant,” or “what’s said and what’s seen,” but between what’s said and what’s said—what’s said by Ann and what’s said by Marc Cherry—or what’s seen and what’s seen—the naïvely offensive antics of *The Office*’s Michael Scott and the ironic facial expressions of protagonist Jim Halpert. The layers of television discourse are no longer limited to the metatelevision references and subtle cameo appearances documented by Wallace (cf. Wallace’s aforementioned discussion of *St. Elsewhere*). *Arrested Development* inserts the “real” person of Marc

Cherry to make explicit the ironic in-joke at work in the episode, whereas *The Office* breaks the fourth wall entirely, providing Jim as a sympathetic ironic guide for viewers.

Seinfeld “taught no moral lessons and held no opinions on major world issues” (McWilliams 77), using irony as a means of distancing itself from and relieving itself of responsibility for the earnest moral and political issues of the world. The show exemplified “the postmodern project” (D. Hall 75), using irony as a nihilistic tool—not a means to find a workable system with which to make sense of the world, but a steamroller in “the effort ... to discover if there is a system that works at all” (73). *Seinfeld* demonstrates a “hyperawareness of plotting and ... consistent parody of its own genre” (McWilliams 79), thus engaging in a self-reflexive critique of the sitcom itself that simply offers “TV’s vision of ... TV” (Wallace 33), bypassing all the earnest concerns of life outside the box. The lead character is, after all, a comedian living in New York City who at one point nearly gets a sitcom deal for a show that is essentially *Seinfeld*, so the show is well positioned to perform reflexive parody. *The Office*, on the other hand, is set in a veritable Mecca of American banality—a suite in a squat, rectangular office complex—and features the everyday employees of its eponymous place of work. For many of the show’s characters, the bustle of New York City represents a glamorous cultural ideal rather than an urban reality (“Valentine’s Day”).

Unsympathetic ironic mocking of the banal and everyday has continued after *Seinfeld* in such shows as *Family Guy*, *South Park*, and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and is frequently present in the dysfunctional family dynamic of *Arrested Development*. *The Office*, however, as another trend-setter and trend-shifter in the post-90s sitcom scene, uses irony to different ends. Although portions of Wallace’s essay are still applicable to *The Office*, the program also turns some of the tropes he describes on their heads. Even those portions of “E Unibus Pluram” that seem outdated, however, remain illuminating insofar as they throw into relief the changing uses of irony present in *The Office*.

This article complicates two primary aspects of Wallace’s description of late-80s- and early-90s television, exploring where and how *The Office*—a notably successful sitcom in the first decade of the 2000s—diverges from the picture Wallace presented 15 years before the show’s premiere. There are two threads to be followed: (1) an examination of how *The Office* twists and creates new genre

conventions to use irony in ways not common in previous sitcoms, and (2) the argument that the show creates a new hybrid of “ridicule as ... the mode of social intercourse” and “those old commercial virtues of authority and sincerity” and, in addition, sentimentality, in a way that simultaneously undermines and reinforces the ideals, dreams, and realities of the post-millennial American middle class (Wallace 61).

The Ironic Mr. Halpert

The premise of *The Office* is this: a television crew is making a documentary about the typical American workplace, recording the everyday events that transpire at the Scranton, Pennsylvania, branch of the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company. Jim Halpert, an affable prankster in his upper twenties, is a Dunder Mifflin salesman and the ironic center of the show. The central cast is rounded out with Michael Scott (the office’s bumbling, desperate-to-be-liked boss, played by Steve Carell), Dwight Schrute (another salesman whose exaggerated survival-of-the-fittest behavior regularly renders him ridiculous), and Pam Beesly (the office receptionist, Jim’s romantic interest and frequent confidante).

This mock documentary setup is what makes possible the characters’ frequent breaking of the fourth wall. One-on-one confessional sequences are a mainstay of the program, and characters often cast sidelong glances at the camera during particularly sensitive conversations. Jim, however, is the audience’s primary ironic connection with the in-jokes of *The Office*. He makes consistent eye contact with the camera as a way of explicating ironic situations, raising his eyebrows or shaking his head when his coworkers are behaving (as they often do) in inane or ridiculous ways—perhaps Michael makes an unintentionally racist comment or Dwight takes a minor office responsibility far too seriously.

Jim’s ironic glances serve a number of important functions for *The Office*. For one thing, they are for the show’s audience a sort of surrogate laugh track and rhetorical guide to the show’s humor. His gaze thus anticipates viewers’ potential misreading of irony, a tendency addressed in Stanley Fish’s “Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony.” In his essay, Fish discusses the controversy

surrounding the Randy Newman song "Short People." The song "rehearse[d] in detail the shortcomings of short people, which included small voices [and] beady little eyes" and provoked extensive political backlash from certain short citizenry (Fish 180). Newman responded by insisting "that he had been misunderstood: it was not his intention to ridicule short people; rather, he explained, it was his hope that by choosing an object of prejudice so absurd, he might expose the absurdity of all prejudice.... He was, in short, or so he claimed, being ironic" (180). Television shows are no strangers to such controversial mismatches between creator intention and audience interpretation. The *Arrested Development* clip above is representative of this sort of slippage: it is not that the writers' views are really offensive, but that a certain naïve segment of the audience has failed to realize, as Cherry states, "It's a satire!" Those producers and writers who did not make cameo appearances on *Arrested Development* have attempted to deflect such criticism in a number of ways. In a piece on Comedy Central's *South Park*, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock discusses the show's "'all or nothing' approach to satirizing identity politics," a

cagey stratagem that the program deploys to ... [provide] the necessary alibi for socially sensitive viewers to laugh at "politically incorrect" humor—the idea being that if everyone is offended equally, no one is singled out, and therefore anyone who takes offense is being overly sensitive and "can't take a joke." (13)

The Office, as a primetime, broadcast-network sitcom, does not push the envelope as far as *South Park* (nor does it generally push the same envelopes). Jim's implied eye contact with the viewer, however, does serve a similar purpose to *South Park*'s "all or nothing" approach.

South Park, "Short People," and *Desperate Housewives* leave substantial room for slippage between intended irony and interpreted sincerity because they all use irony implicitly. The "incongruities" between what is shown or said ("fornication," anti-short-people propaganda, etc.) and what is meant "do not announce themselves ... rather, they emerge in the context of interpretive assumptions, and therefore the registering of an incongruity cannot be the basis of an interpretation, since it is the product of one" (Fish 183). Opponents of "Short People" are thus afforded "various ways of discounting [Newman's

rebuttal],” while the protesters outside Cherry’s house continue to shout their slogans (180). This is not to criticize the implicit use of irony. Irony’s effect certainly can be diminished when explicitly announced (imagine “A Modest Proposal” opening with a disclaimer revealing Jonathan Swift’s purposes). Jim’s mugging at the camera in *The Office*, however, provides a mediated way out. As Jim is purportedly in a documentary, he is aware of the camera. Given that he is often the only Dunder Mifflin employee aware of the ridiculousness of his coworkers’ actions, he seeks to extend the in-joke beyond himself through a commiserating glance. If Pam is not immediately available, the camera (and, by extension, the viewer on the other side) becomes the coconspirator. Although *The Office* eschews the canned laughter of sitcoms past—a direct, earnest cue that risks patronizing an ironically inclined audience by suggesting that its members wouldn’t get the in-joke on their own—Jim’s glance prevents slip-slide by making explicit the fact that the situation is ironic, while still leaving viewers with a “feeling of canny superiority” in that they have caught a joke Dwight and Michael have missed (Wallace 63).

His gaze, whether directed at Pam or the camera, also endears Jim to the viewer. His ability to recognize irony, combined with the breaking of the fourth wall that often accompanies that recognition, leads the viewer to trust and sympathize with Jim’s perspective. Michael, in contrast to Jim, is often unintentionally rendered ironic by his situation. When, for instance, he hits an employee with his car right after stating, “This is going to be a very good year,” the irony of the situation is beyond his control (“Fun Run”). Jim, however, is consciously ironic, and thus places himself in the in-joke with the audience. Even when things are beyond his control, he joins the ranks of TV characters “who can communicate some irony about themselves, make fun of themselves before any merciless Group around them can move in for the kill” (Wallace 62). In one episode, for instance, Jim and Pam confess that they “don’t know how” to illegally download movies from the Internet (“Stress Relief”). Andy Bernard, another salesman, does. When Jim and Pam want to watch a pirated movie during lunch, then, they are necessarily joined by Andy. By demonstrating an ironic awareness of and disinterest in their lack of technological savvy, however, Jim and Pam beat their coworkers and viewers to the punch line and remain good protagonists.

And so, at this point, it becomes difficult to address Jim in isolation any longer. Pam and Jim often operate as a unit in the show—"PB and J," as Dunder Mifflin accountant Kevin puts it ("Fun Run")—and much of the show's dramatic tension in its first three seasons is the result of their unrealized romantic relationship. For most of this stretch, Pam is engaged, while Jim hops half-heartedly from one relationship to another—all the while clearly smitten with the receptionist. Jim eventually transfers to Dunder Mifflin's Stamford branch to escape the emotional turmoil he feels due to Pam's upcoming wedding, only to have Pam break off her engagement. When the Stamford and Scranton branches merge shortly thereafter, Jim and Pam are reunited, but Jim is dating a woman from the Stamford branch and the situation is reversed. The viewer, of course, is presumably much distressed.

In addition to being consummately ironic, then, Jim is also half of the convoluted courtship that constitutes the primary sentimental storyline of the show's early seasons. Because of this, his use of irony is often instrumental: a method of indirectly acknowledging his sincere, earnest romantic affection for Pam. Jim's irony builds a sort of camaraderie and ethos with the viewer that causes the viewer to trust him and, perhaps counter-intuitively, invest in him emotionally. Even though Jim's life is—to a certain extent—banal, his ironic awareness of that banality fleshes him out as a character and renders serious his ventures into sentimental romance. In a way, Jim's recovery of the possibility of romance follows the path Søren Kierkegaard attributes to Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*: "after having made the movement of resignation, then by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get one's desire totally and completely" (48). It is only after Jim ironically resigns himself to the banality of daily life in an office that he can recover Pam as the object of his desire, and that she can emerge from within that daily grind to become Jim's salvation from his environment.

Kierkegaard aside, what Jim practices is a sort of selective, instrumental irony: irony for sentimental purposes. In an episode from season five of the show, after Jim and Pam have finally gotten together, the recently dumped Andy tries to talk Jim out of being with Pam. Jim, of course, responds ironically: "It's so scary how right the things you're saying are, and you're coming at it with almost no knowledge, so of course I trust your opinion on

this" ("Heavy Competition"). Andy reads Jim's ironic comment as sincere, and Jim spends the rest of the episode dumping his emotional concerns on Andy, at one point literally sobbing on his shoulder. At the end of the episode, however, one of Andy's coworkers reveals the trick: "I think Jim is messing with you." Andy finally knows what the viewer knew all along: Jim's behavior was ironic. Especially interesting, however, is what comes next. Instead of judging or belittling Andy for the "crime" of naïveté (Wallace 63), Jim uses the occasion to teach Andy a sincere lesson: "That stuff that happened with you and Angela [Andy's ex-fiancée] is a bummer, and I know you don't think you're ever going to find someone else, but you will. I promise you, you will." Jim's ironic stance is only the vehicle for delivering what is ultimately a sentimental perpetuation of American romantic ideals.

Another example of such an overlap between irony and sentimentality is Jim and Pam's reunion upon his return from Stamford. Jim walks in the door of the office and up to Pam's desk:

Jim: Hi, I'm Jim. I'm new here.

Pam: Oh my God! It's really you!

Jim: I was just doing a little joke there, about how we'd never met.

Pam: I know. I don't care. ("The Merger")

At the beginning of this exchange, Jim holds his hand out as if for a handshake. Pam responds, however, by running toward and enthusiastically embracing him. Jim's comments and actions are ironic, but given the underlying attraction the viewer assumes he still harbors for Pam: his irony is part of a rapport with her that has definitively sentimental ends.

Pam, however, directly rejects Jim's ironic stance. Instead, she cuts through Jim's ironic detachment and demonstrates the sincere joy of reunion with a beloved friend. Her sincerity thus stands in contrast with Jim's perennial irony, a dichotomy reminiscent of traditional gender roles. This is complicated, however, by the fact that Pam and Jim's deep friendship and potential romance are largely premised on their mutual use of irony. Pam's positioning with regard to sentimentality, sincerity, and irony is thus complex, and worth considering in its own right.

"I Would Like You to Take Notes": Irony, Gender, and Literacy Practices

In chapter two of their book *Popular Culture and Representations of Literacy*, Bronwyn Williams and Amy Zenger examine the ways in which movie characters' literacy practices are bound up in issues of gender. Among many other things, they conclude, "Female characters are shooed or shamed away from writing for academic or other public purposes" (38). This also holds true in the case of *The Office*, but only in a certain way. Pam, as a secretary and receptionist, is employed in a job historically marked as female in both sitcoms and the "gender-segregated workplace" (Kutulas 218). In this position, however, she is engaged in writing to the point of absurdity. Michael's constant demands that Pam takes notes are a frequent source of frustration for her. As the staff is getting ready to leave for a day at the beach, for instance, Michael walks up to Pam's desk and says, "I would like you to take notes, and I want you to find out about people's character.... [W]rite down everything that people are doing all day, and then type it up in a way that is helpful" ("Beach Games"). In a confessional interview just after the conversation, a disappointed Pam asks, "I have the most boring job in the office, so why wouldn't I have the most boring job on beach day?" Pam is thus encouraged to practice public literacy, but only in reluctant support of a patriarchal capitalist system: Michael plans to use her notes to select his replacement from a list of male candidates.

The Office is part of the sitcom genre, and it thus deals with established cultural norms differently than two films Williams and Zenger discuss: *As Good As It Gets* and *In the Cut*. In the romantic comedy *As Good As It Gets*, the literacy practices of the female lead reinscribe broader cultural and generic conventions: "Representations of women associate them with writing and reading as private, emotionally charged activities" (30), as opposed to the "public, sometimes ironic" ways in which men practice literacy (32). The dramatic film *In the Cut*, on the other hand, offers a "scathing critique" of "literacy and gender" (33). *The Office* walks a line somewhere between these two positions. Pam's obligation to use literacy as a corporate activity clearly grates on her. Her dream and desire, in terms of composing, is to become a visual artist—to escape the constraints of written literacy entirely, using her pencil to sketch instead. Her longing for "private, emotionally charged activities" echoes the traditional literacy

and gender roles of *As Good As It Gets*. At the same time, Pam's ironic awareness of the banality of her (gendered) position at Dunder Mifflin does offer a critique of cultural and institutional constraints on women's literacy practices, albeit a subtler one than *In the Cut*. Her visual art resonates, to a certain degree, with the assertion that "women compose texts in new forms in order to use writing itself as a means to intervene in patriarchal structures of gender encoded in texts and language" (Williams and Zenger 24). In fact, Pam's artistic aspirations suggest a wholesale abandonment of the patriarchal structures of workplace literacy practices. Later in "Beach Games," after all, Pam walks across a pit of burning coals, an act that symbolizes her coming into her own and refusing to be stepped on by others any longer. In the broader scheme of the show, Pam's desire to use writing utensils for the sake of art suggests an escape from the literacy practices mandated for the middle class by their corporate employers, even as Dunder Mifflin often becomes the sponsor of her artistic pursuits ("Weight Loss").

Pam's actions are a less vindictive variety of "the M*A*S*H-inspired savaging of some buffoonish spokesman for hypocritical, prehip values at the hands of biting witty insurgents," of which "boss by typing pool on *Nine to Five*" is an example and a precedent (Wallace 62). Her ironic, beleaguered position toward the literacy practices imposed on her by Michael simultaneously resists and reaffirms traditional female uses of literacy, challenging the constraints of the institution while at the same time ascribing to culturally approved means and dreams of escape.

Another tension between sentiment and irony occurs in the way in which Pam interacts with Jim. Key to their relationship is the fact that Pam can keep up with Jim's irony, detachment, and sarcasm. Jim provides opportunities for Pam to use literacy ironically. When Dwight sets out to out-sell the company's new website, for instance, Pam chats with him via an instant-messaging program, assuming the persona of the newly sentient site ("Dunder Mifflin Infinity"). In another episode, she conspires with Jim to convince Dwight that the CIA is interested in hiring him by sending cryptic text messages from an unknown number ("A Benihana Christmas"). In the former situation, Dwight suspects Jim of deception, and Pam's ability to keep up the charade without Jim's help is central to its success. Pam is thus independently successful in using literacy for ironic ends. In

the latter case, however, the prank temporarily collapses when Jim decides to privilege his job over irony and his relationship with Pam. Pam does not attempt to continue on by herself, which suggests a certain lingering dependence on Jim when it comes to using literacy ironically.

On one level, Pam's abandonment of the CIA prank gets at an axiomatic issue of irony that stretches beyond *The Office*: If no one else is in on the joke, is it a joke at all—at the very least, is it even worth making? On another, the implication that Jim's interest is what empowers and motivates Pam to pursue ironic literacy practices has a range of connotations regarding how the show affirms and elides traditionally gendered uses of irony and literacy, as well as whether irony or sentimentality wins out in *The Office*. Clearly, mutual ironic detachment and a sort of meta-awareness of their office environment are critical elements in Jim and Pam's romantic chemistry. Even after they do start dating, their conversations and actions continue to suggest that compatibility with regard to irony is central to their relationship. When the office employees are forced to participate in a 5K Michael organizes to benefit rabies victims, Jim and Pam choose to walk, rapidly falling behind their coworkers. Pam ironically laments, "Oh, we're in last place," to which Jim responds, "Oh, would you look at that." Pam closes the conversation with a simple "Darn it," and the two hold hands—a sentimental, romantic solidarity bred by irony ("Fun Run"). A few seasons later, during Jim's first day back at work following the birth of his and Pam's first child, the couple is speaking on the phone. Jim is looking at a picture of the baby that Pam has emailed to him. As Jim expresses genuine regret over not being able to spend the day with their daughter, Pam cheerfully comments, "I get the sense that she's very ironic" ("St. Patrick's Day"). Even the newest member of the family is in on the joke.

The tensions at work in the characters of Jim and Pam are complex. They serve as ironic commentators on the state of the American workplace, offering "oppositional ideas" and critiquing the "corporate capitalist order" (Hamamoto 2). They are also, however, the realization of a sentimental American romantic ideal, with Pam at one point asserting that the two are "soul mates" ("Stress Relief"). What results from this carefully balanced dialectical meeting of nihilistic irony and earnest sentimentality is the instrumental irony referenced above: a

different sort of irony from *Seinfeld*, and one that often leaves Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" behind. But what is the function of this and other tensions in *The Office*, and what are their ideological implications for the show?

Irony: (Pros)pects and (Cons)equences

In writing about the ideology of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s premiere episode, Darrell Hamamoto makes the following argument:

In the person of Mary Richards [the show's protagonist], two contradictory aspects of liberal thought were held in momentary equipoise. The quest for individual autonomy, previously restricted to men, was now extended to Mary Richards.... Yet the equally compelling communal values represented by the family were kept intact by Mary, her friends, and coworkers as they resolved mundane problems and minor crises. (115)

In this sense, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* clearly foreshadows and creates a model for *The Office*. Like Mary, Pam eventually sets out to pursue her autonomous dreams (albeit still within the confines of the corporation), attending a graphic design program in New York City. Jim also challenges and reacts against the corporate system, using irony to maintain a sense of control over his position in a capitalist order—although he is also implicated in that system as a white(-collar) male—and to "[reflect] a critical consciousness that stops just short of political mobilization" (Hamamoto 2).³ In the end, however, Pam returns to Scranton without completing the program, opting instead to be with Jim and pursue "the communal values represented by the family." Jim likewise gives up his ironic *reductio ad absurdum* of the corporate environment insofar as he adopts a sentimental perspective in his relationship with Pam. Once again, *The Office* both critiques and reaffirms.

The titular setting of *The Office* creates another set of tensions and paradoxes. Wallace describes one of these in "E Unibus Pluram": "Given that television must revolve off basic antimonies about being and watching, about escape from daily life, the averagely intelligent viewer can't be all that happy about his daily life of high-dose [television] watching" (58). This is, according to Wallace, a problem for

television programs: they must (1) let the viewer feel as though he or she is “escap[ing] from daily life” and transcending the banality of the everyday, while (2) keeping the viewer engaged in a medium that is very much a part of that banal everydayness: television. This, Wallace argues, is where irony steps in.

Televisual irony, for Wallace, “evolved as an inspired solution to the keep-Joe[-or-Jim]-at-once-alienated-from-and-part-of-the-million-eyed-crowd problem” (59). Wallace’s Joe might adopt an ironic stance toward television, reject it as banal, and stop watching. Television programs must thus beat Joe to the punch by presenting narratives that presuppose Joe’s ironic stance, fostering a sense of ironic commiseration and thus maintaining Joe’s viewership. The ironic stance does not require action, but simply a shift in attitude. It ridicules the everyday, but does not drive the viewer to turn off the television (or the salesman to quit his job with the paper company). This tension between the everyday and escapism is especially at hand with *The Office*, which takes place in a stark, white-walled office: a sort of synecdoche for middle-class American banality. Even if the employees of actual offices do not tune in, if *The Office*’s audience consists entirely of college students and those who work in unofficial environments, how does one make a banal office setting entertaining? As Wallace argues, by viewing it ironically.

Though it realizes some aspects of Wallace’s argument, the ironic perspective *The Office* forwards via Pam and Jim flips an assertion made by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The only escape from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time” (109). Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the monotonous plotlines of mass entertainment serve to further condition factory and office workers to the monotony of their employment. The movie is predictable, which naturalizes predictability and thus accustoms the worker to the condition of daily life. “Donald Duck ... and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs” (109). *The Office* reverses this notion by bringing the personal into the corporate sphere. Jim and Pam may not enjoy their jobs, but the setting of *The Office* suggests that work dominates their lives. Indeed, they would never have met if they did not work together, and even though the existence of their personal life beyond Dunder Mifflin is hinted at and implied, the viewer has few direct

insights into that life.⁴ The characters and their romance are primarily developed at the office—not at home, with family, or with non-coworker friends. Jim and Pam thus upset the system by bringing the personal into the office, instead of allowing their personal lives to reflect the conditions of their working environment.

In addition to complicating Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Office* poses a challenge to Stuart Hall's description of television discourse. Hall outlines four basic ways in which a viewer can "decode" or interpret the message of television programs. At one end of the spectrum is the "dominant or hegemonic code," which is used when "the viewer takes the connoted meaning [of the program] ... full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference-code in which it has been coded" (32). At the other end is the "oppositional code." The viewer who uses this code "detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference" (33). The user of the hegemonic code, that is, drinks the televisual Kool-Aid straight, while the oppositional viewer mixes it into a cocktail and slips it to the boss. In the case of *The Office*, however, the oppositional is the hegemonic. *The Office* is a product of NBC Universal, a powerful and dominant disseminator of culture.⁵ The viewer who accepts point-blank what NBC Universal presents is thus accepting the hegemonic code. In the case of *The Office*, however, the overt meaning of the show is that hegemonic corporate structures are inherently ridiculous, and the only way of surviving is ironic opposition and the fellowship of one's coworkers: an oppositional retotalization of corporate America's message. The oppositional code is thus already presumed by the product of dominant culture: "avant-garde irony and rebellion," as Wallace writes, "have been absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment they had originally set themselves athwart" (68).

If *The Office* suggested political upheaval, its oppositional positioning would be a call for uprisings and economic reorganization—subverting hegemonic modes of distribution to spread an anti-hegemonic ideology. What the show truly suggests, however, is that surviving the oppressive banality and inanity of corporate capitalism is primarily an existential, affective matter—an issue of how one positions oneself in relation to the economic system, not a matter of challenging the capitalist order via political action. In "Situated

Language and Learning," James Paul Gee outlines what he calls "old capitalism" and "new capitalism" (Gee 95): *The Office* ridicules them both. Old capitalism, Gee claims, is centered on the production of standardized commodities. Paper, Dunder Mifflin's primary product, is an exemplar of the standardized commodity. After all, what could be more standard than the blank, white, 8.5"x11" sheet of paper? This product is what drives the banal workings of Dunder Mifflin. The new capitalism, on the other hand, is centered around "design" (Gee 97). Central to success in the new capitalism are the abilities to design and shift between identities, and to design networks. In *The Office*, the new capitalism is exemplified by Ryan Howard. Ryan starts the series as a temp in the office, but by season four has attained a corporate position that puts him above Michael in the company hierarchy. Ryan effectively shifts identities, growing a beard, touting a Blackberry, and moving from backwater Scranton to bustling New York City. He is also the mind behind the company's new website, to which the concepts of network and design are central. In the end, however, Ryan becomes addicted to stimulants and is arrested on charges of fraud by the Federal Trade Commission ("Goodbye, Toby"). This does not stop him, however, from eventually returning to the Scranton branch and creating an ultimately doomed social-networking site ("WUPHF.com").

The Office thus winks ironically at the ambitions of both old and new capitalism, but provides no alternate ways of finding meaning and surviving capitalist environments other than dating or befriending one's coworkers, or adopting an ironic stance toward one's situation. After all, almost every romantic relationship in *The Office* (Jim and Pam, Pam and Roy, Dwight and Angela, Angela and Andy, Andy and Erin, Gabe and Erin, Andy and Erin, Ryan and Kelly, Kelly and Darryl, Darryl and Val, Michael and Jan, Michael and Holly) is an intra-office romance. In "Ideological Analysis and Television," Mimi White relays Gramsci's concept of hegemony, writing, "Hegemony appears to be spontaneous, even natural, but it is the historical result of the prestige enjoyed by the ruling class by virtue of their position and function in the world of production" (167). Jim's ironic subject position challenges hegemony by rendering Michael foolish, thus revealing his authority as arbitrary at best and the folly of capitalism at worst. This was even clearer in *The Office*'s British predecessor, which ended with Michael's British analogue

being fired ("Charity"). As the American iteration of *The Office* has progressed, however, the show has occasionally worked to justify Michael's position (perhaps recognizing the difficulty of sustaining viewers' suspension of disbelief over the course of seven seasons). Michael is presented as a sort of business savant, with his business savvy stepping in as a sort of *deus ex machina* at various points in the series (cf. the denouements of season two's "Valentine's Day" and season five's "Dream Team" and "Broke").

The Office once again works at cross-purposes, challenging hegemony but refusing to ultimately reject it. An attempt by the blue-collar warehouse workers to unionize is hastily squashed ("Boys and Girls"), and Pam's artistic ambitions fail, bringing her back to Scranton ("Business Trip"). Characters' inability to overcome their economic position is presented as frustrating, but irony allows them to cope without politicizing.

It would be possible to end on this dour note, seeing *The Office* as reinscribing a hegemonic capitalist system and robbing the viewer of a potential avenue of agency by pulling the rug out from under irony. As White states, however, "it is important to realize that viewers are not forced to watch television but choose to do so freely, as individuals" (172). *The Office* does not condemn viewers to a lifetime of monotonous white-collar office work any more than *Seinfeld* doomed them to lives as stand-up comedians. *The Office* does differ from *Seinfeld* and the other "tyranny[cally]" ironic television shows implicated by Wallace in one important way: compassion (Wallace 67). Regardless of whether Jim and Pam have been duped and are duping viewers into pursuing a mythologized, unrealistic romantic ideal, they are framed as individuals who are ultimately empathetic and compassionate. Jim, as we have seen, is sensitive to Andy's romantic disillusionment. Pam helps rebuild Michael's spirits when an awards show he puts on begins to go awry ("The Dundies"). Even Dwight, who is consistently placed in an antagonistic position relative to other characters, comforts Pam when she is upset by Jim's romantic relationship with Karen, another coworker ("Back from Vacation").

Jim and Karen's relationship itself serves as an interesting counterpoint to Jim and Pam's, as well as an illustration of *The Office*'s privileging of compassion over irony. Karen's frequent unwillingness and occasional inability to strike up an ironic rapport with Jim causes momentary hiccups in their relationship. Their ultimate

break-up, however, is precipitated by her unwillingness to sympathize: while she and Jim are sitting in the lobby of Dunder Mifflin's corporate headquarters in New York City, Jan—the company's freshly fired vice president of sales, whose job Jim and Karen are both being interviewed for—is escorted out by security. After Jan is gone, Karen leans over to Jim and comments on the “serious, hard-core self-destruction” they just witnessed. “Yeah,” Jim admits, “I kind of feel bad for her, though.” Karen will have none of it, replying, “Don't. She's nuts.” Karen departs shortly thereafter, leaving Jim to wait for his interview alone and ending what is literally the last scene in which she and Jim are romantically linked. By the end of the episode, Jim has returned to Scranton to ask Pam out on a date (“The Job”).

Such incidents are hard to imagine in *Seinfeld* or its progeny—take, for example, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, in which a group of four friends (three males and a female) residing in a large northeastern city live lives in which their primary motivation seems to be out-debauching each other. Perhaps the writers of *It's Always Sunny* would chastise a viewer's judgment (“It's a satire?”), but *The Office* forwards an ethic of compassion frequently absent from the brand of television sitcom discussed by Wallace. Compassion and heart in sitcoms are certainly nothing new—consider the communal family values of *The Andy Griffith Show* or *Happy Days*—but *The Office* synthesizes such heart with critical irony, “[occupying] a subjunctive space, a liminal realm in which cultural mediation can occur” (Zrzavy 205).

An Adorno-esque approach might gloss *The Office* as a new opiate for the masses, with its romantic subplots distracting the viewer from the real political and economic issues at hand, perhaps especially by depicting a specific variety of middle-class working life and forwarding a depoliticized humanist agenda. Insofar as the show implies the importance of empathy for those in one's occupational milieu, however, the show suggests a compassionate solidarity among workers that trumps irony as an instrument for combating corporate banality and oppression. Paul R. Kohl writes, “Television writers are part of the professional and managerial class, and as such, they are part of the same class as blue collar and manual workers” (228). Although their “wealth and position may far outweigh” the average member of the working class, television writers are “ulti-

mately just as dependent on selling their labour power as blue-collar workers." If this is the case, the Jims and Pams of *The Office* are also in league with its blue-collar warehouse workers. Both groups are basically selling their "labour power" to Dunder Mifflin, and both are shown as equally affected by the corporate office's⁶ disregard and constant threats of downsizing and reorganization. Blue-collar- and white-collar characters alike are humanized in *The Office*, and their exasperated reactions to Michael and other corporate representatives occasionally highlight the inequalities and insults implicit in capitalist systems.⁷ The frustration and unintentional racism nonwhite employees experience with Michael likewise works against a "celebratory multiculturalism" ignorant of the political issues in which race and ethnicity are bound up (Jay 100). *The Office* thus challenges some ideas about class, race, and gender, while upholding others, using irony to both undermine and restate American cultural norms—a negotiated position Hamamoto and Zrzavy suggest is central to the sitcom form.

This solidarity and compassion between workers echoes a more recent Wallace piece: an edited version of a commencement speech he delivered at Kenyon College in 2005. Widely circulated and published both in several newspapers and as a book entitled *This is Water* following Wallace's suicide in 2008, the piece admonishes compassion and empathy as ways "to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default-setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out" ("David Foster Wallace," para. 5). Wallace suggests empathizing with others embedded in the "day-to-day trenches of adult life" (para. 13) is a potential way to "experience a crowded, loud, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love" (para. 12). The words recall Wallace's earlier assertion in "E Unibus Pluram" that irony can be "difficult and painful, but productive" (66), but "tyrannizes us" when used over extended periods (67). *The Office* may not be "on fire with the same force that lit the stars," but the mediated union of compassion and ironic critique embodied in its characters complicates both the "jim dandy confectionary" of nostalgized sentiment and the bored detachment of postmodern irony (Zrzavy 208), creating a sitcom ideology that echoes Wallace's call.

Regardless of *The Office*'s current ideological positioning, its ultimate conclusion has yet to be seen. In Williams and Zenger's discussion of action films, the authors cite James Welsh's assertion that "genre movies have to strike a balance between predictability and variety" (87). As a sitcom, *The Office* must similarly answer to certain generic and formal demands, while also varying and challenging those demands so as to keep viewers engaged. As an episodic television program, it also works to challenge viewers' expectations of individual characters, making it possible for, say, Michael's occasional flashes of business know-how to surprise viewers. One of these flashes in the season-five episode "Broke" results in Pam being hired as a salesperson, thus building on her earlier coming-out in "Beach Games," and making a potential turn toward "emphasiz[ing] the processual aspect of female identity formation and the articulation of complementary, polyvalent identity iterations in response to variable conditions" ("Broke"; Zrzavy 214–15).

The Office, that is, is reworking itself—shifting some expectations while satisfying others. Indeed, the show's sixth season sees another self-made career shift for Pam—this time to the position of office administrator—and the seventh ends with the departure of Carell's Michael Scott ("Goodbye, Michael"). Tellingly, one of the final episodes before Michael leaves the office and the show resolves with the character learning to laugh at himself: initially petulant when his employees mock a film he wrote and starred in, Michael ultimately learns to laugh at the film's absurdity, establishing an ironic distance between himself and his creation ("Threat Level Midnight"). Key to the show's continuing success following season eight's fluctuations in plot and cast will be its ability to balance its tropes with new twists, as it does in simultaneously ironizing and sympathizing with promising new manager Nellie in "Welcome Party."

As a successful sitcom, *The Office* has—its own future aside—popularized and thus paved the way for a new television subgenre: the single-camera mockumentary sitcom (cf. *Parks and Recreation*, which shares *The Office*'s network and production company, and ABC's popular and Emmy-winning *Modern Family*). As these shows and others like them develop, genre expectations will be stretched and mediated, exploiting irony and sentiment in ways not yet seen, and sitcoms, as "part of a polysemic signifying system that 'contain

within them unresolved contradictions” (Hamamoto 10), will continue to redefine what it means to be in on the joke.

Notes

1. I would be remiss if I did not thank Bronwyn Williams for his thorough and thoughtful feedback on drafts of this article, and my wife Megan for introducing me to a remarkable TV show and love story.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all in-text references to Wallace are to this article.
3. Jim’s complicity is further complicated by his stint as co-manager during season six. The promotion of the likeable and reasonable Jim could be interpreted as suggesting that corporate success is ultimately an individual rather than a systemic concern, and thus that there is some order in the office. Jim’s quick decision to return to his old job as a salesman, however—prompted by his discovery that sales staffers out-earn managers—reemphasizes the arbitrary nature of the company hierarchy (“Manager and Salesman”).
4. At times, season six shifts this expectation: Jim and Pam’s wedding and the birth of their daughter occasion the show’s relocation to Niagara Falls and a hospital, respectively (“Niagara,” “The Delivery”). Even as we see Jim and Pam exist and develop beyond the physical context of the office, however, their coworkers’ attendance at and interruption of their nuptials, honeymoon, and the delivery of their child highlight the constant tension between the personal and the professional.
5. Insofar as it is indebted to its British predecessor, the show has roots in the BBC as well as NBC. In terms of irony and sentimentality, however, the American iteration has taken a markedly different tack.
6. Eventually run, interestingly, by one David Wallace.
7. This seems especially pertinent given that *The Office*’s fourth season was interrupted by the Writers Guild of America strike, a strike that positioned television writers against the corporations disseminating their work, and that some of the show’s writers are also prominent cast members.

Works Cited

- “Back from Vacation.” *The Office: Season Three*. NBC, 2007a. DVD.
- “Beach Games.” *The Office: Season Three*. NBC, 2007b. DVD.
- “A Benihana Christmas.” *The Office: Season Three*. NBC, 2007c. DVD.
- “Boys and Girls.” *The Office: Season Two*. NBC, 2006a. DVD.
- “Broke.” *The Office: Season Five*. Universal, 2009a. DVD.
- “Business Trip.” *The Office*. NBC. 1 Feb. 2009b. 29 Apr. 2009. Web.
- “Counseling.” *The Office: Season Seven*. Universal, 2011. DVD.
- “The Delivery.” *The Office: Season Six*. Universal, 2010a. DVD.
- “Dream Team.” *The Office: Season Six*. Universal, 2010b. DVD.
- “Dunder Mifflin Infinity.” *The Office: Season Four*. 2007. Universal, 2008. DVD.
- “The Dundies.” *The Office: Season Two*. NBC, 2006b. DVD.

- Fish, Stanley. "Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony." *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 1989. 180–96. Print.
- "Fun Run." *The Office: Season Four*. 2007. Universal, 2008a. DVD.
- Gee, James Paul. *Situated Language and Learning*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- "Goodbye, Michael." *The Office: Season Seven*. Universal, 2011. DVD.
- "Goodbye, Toby." *The Office: Season Four*. Universal, 2008b. DVD.
- Hall, Dennis. "Jane Austen, Meet Jerry Seinfeld." *Seinfeld, Master of its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom*. Eds. David. Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne. London: Continuum, 2006. 70–76. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "The Television Discourse – Encoding and Decoding." 1973. *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*. Eds. Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan. London: Oxford UP, 1997. 28–34. Print.
- Hamamoto, Darrell Y. *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology*. New York: Praeger, 1989. Print.
- "Heavy Competition." *The Office: Season Five*. Universal, 2009b. DVD.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzelin S. Noerr. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002. Print.
- Jay, Gregory. "Whiteness Studies and the Multicultural Literature Classroom." *MELUS* 30.2 (2005): 99–121. Print.
- "The Job." *The Office: Season Three*. NBC, 2007. DVD.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. 1843. Eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983. Print.
- Kohl, Paul R. "'Who's in Charge Here?': Views of Media Ownership in Situation Comedies" *The Sitcom Reader*. Eds. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder. Albany: State U of New York P, 2005. 227–38. Print.
- Kutulas, Judy. "Liberated Women and New Sensitive Men: Reconstructing Gender in the 1970s Workplace Comedies." *The Sitcom Reader*. Eds. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder. Albany: State U of New York P, 2005. 217–26. Print.
- McWilliams, Amy. "Genre Expectation and Narrative Innovation in *Seinfeld*." *Seinfeld, Master of its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom*. Eds. David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne. London: Continuum, 2006a. 77–86. Print.
- "Manager and Salesman." *The Office: Season Six*. Universal, 2010a. DVD.
- "The Merger." *The Office: Season Three*. NBC, 2007. DVD.

- "Niagara." *The Office: Season Six*. Universal, 2010b. DVD.
- "Righteous Brothers." *Arrested Development – Season Two*. Writ. Mitchell Hurwitz. 20th Century Fox, 2005. DVD.
- "St. Patrick's Day." *The Office: Season Six*. Universal, 2010c. DVD.
- "Stress Relief." *The Office: Season Five*. Universal, 2009c. DVD.
- "Threat Level Midnight." *The Office: Season Seven*. Universal, 2011. DVD.
- "Valentine's Day." *The Office: Season Two*. NBC, 2006b. DVD.
- Wallace, David Foster. "David Foster Wallace on Life and Work." *Wall Street Journal*. 19 Sep. 2008. eastern ed.: W14. ProQuest. 29 Apr. 2009. Web.
- . "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. New York: Little, Brown, 1997. 21–82. Print.
- "Weight Loss." *The Office: Season Five*. Universal, 2009a. DVD.
- Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. Introduction. *Taking South Park Seriously*. Eds. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. Albany: State U of New York P, 2008. 1–22. Print.
- "Welcome Party." *The Office*. NBC Universal. Hulu. 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 7 May 2012.
- White, Mimi. "Ideological Analysis and Television." *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*. Ed. Robert C. Allen. 2nd edition. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1992. 161–202. Print.
- Williams, Bronwyn T. and Amy A. Zenger. *Popular Culture and Representations of Literacy*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Zrzavy, Phyllis Scrocco. "Women, Love, and Work: *The Doris Day Show* as Cultural Dialogue." *The Sitcom Reader*. Eds. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder. Albany: State U of New York P, 2005. 205–16. Print.

Eric Detweiler is a PhD student in English specializing in rhetoric at the University of Texas at Austin. In addition to irony, popular television, and David Foster Wallace, his interests include writing pedagogy, critical and rhetorical theory, and ethics. His work has previously been published in the *Kentucky English Bulletin* and the anthology *Disneyland and Culture* (edited by Jackson and West), and is forthcoming in *Kairos*.