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Shows that Shape Us: The Office

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Shows that Shape Us: The Office

Abstract

"Laughter might express a diagnosis of what's wrong with the world, or it might point the way to things somehow being made right."

Posting about the television series *The Office* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/shows-that-shape-us-the-office-beauty-in-ordinary-things/>

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in things

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Shows that Shape Us: The Office

Justin Bailey

In the previous post, I shared a series of questions for understanding the popular culture that shapes us. I wrote of how many of the students in my Theology and Popular Culture class are hesitant to share the pieces of pop culture that shape them.

One of the ways I try to get students to lower their defenses is by sharing one of my own favorite pieces of pop culture. *The Office* is the first show where I ever fell off the couch laughing watching the episode “Diversity Day” (season 1, episode 2) when it premiered in 2005. It was the first episode I ever saw of the series, and it’s a good thing it was, since I may not have kept watching if I had started with the pilot. These were still the days when people bought DVDs of their favorite shows, two years before Netflix started its streaming service. I bought each season as soon as it was released, and when it started streaming on Netflix, began making regular laps through the show. Here, for better or for worse, is a show that has shaped me.

I am not alone in my affection for *The Office*. It’s the most-watched show on Netflix (its home until 2021), accounting for 45.8 billion minutes watched over a 12-month period.^{[1](#)} Why do so many resonate with the stories of Michael Scott, Dwight, Jim, Pam, and their friends at Dunder Mifflin?

Surely one reason for the resonance has to do with the setting. Unlike sitcoms set in a traditional home (e.g. *The Cosby Show*), an urban apartment (e.g. *Friends*), or a third space (e.g. *Cheers*), *The Office* is set in the workplace. Almost everyone has to work; almost everyone spends a large part of their lives with people who are neither friends nor family.

Though certainly not the first show to take the workplace as its setting, the choice to present the show as a documentary yielded wonderful results. Intercut between the action (if we can call it that) are interviews with characters who offer their own commentary. These interviews shed light on the inner lives and motivations of characters; they remind us that people are much more complicated, contradictory, and comical than we think.

But, perhaps the deepest reason why *The Office* is culturally and personally resonant is because it reveals the world to us by making us laugh. Occasionally the jokes are crass, but more often than not they are simply, well, funny. What *The Office* offers us in its characters are caricatures—of people we might know, of our own co-workers, of our friends, of our enemies, and of ourselves.

Take just a few of Michael Scott's many misquotes (which are often repeated around our house):

- "Just tell him to call me as ASAP as possible."
- "They are trying to turn me into an escape goat."
- "The progital son returns."
- "I'm not superstitious; but I am a little stitious."
- "Fool me once, strike one; Fool me twice, strike three."

W.H. Auden once wrote that we may enjoy caricatures for divergent reasons: "We enjoy caricatures of our friends because we do not want to think of their changing, above all, of their dying; we enjoy caricatures of our enemies because we do not want to consider the possibility of their having a change of heart so that we would have to forgive them." What we laugh at is spontaneous, largely outside of our control. But, why we laugh reveals something about our hearts, and about our sense of hope for ourselves and for the world. Laughter might express a diagnosis of what's wrong with the world, or it might point the way to things somehow being made right.

Although laughter is often used as a weapon in contemporary culture—exposing and lampooning our enemies—laughter is more organically connected to joy, humility, and grace. For we ourselves are just as often comically exposed. When we laugh, we are overpowered; we give in to the joke. When we laugh, we feel a visceral response to a reality that defies our expectations and offers us grace.

Perhaps then, *The Office* works because it is a show about finding meaning, incongruity, and joy amid the mundane. This strikes me as a deeply "Reformational" intuition. That is not a claim about the intention of the showrunners so much as a claim about reality

itself. There is magic in the mundane. Our everyday work has dignity. Everyday people are more interesting than you could imagine. Everyday life is graced.

As Pam Beesly put it in the last words spoken in the finale of *The Office*: “I thought it was weird when you picked us to make a documentary. But, all in all, I think an ordinary paper company like Dunder Mifflin was a great subject for a documentary. There’s a lot of beauty in ordinary things. Isn’t that kinda the point?”

FOOTNOTES

1. Nina Metz, “‘The Office’ Is Netflix’s Most Popular Show, Even Though It Was Made for and Originally Aired on an Old-School Broadcast Network. Oh, the Irony,” Chicagotribune.com, accessed December 21, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-mov-netflix-the-office-0705-20190703-fjlo4pkt5jb7llpo2aixl7o2pe-story.html>.