

It is the most watched licensed show on Netflix. Carried out much farther than its UK counterpart, the US version of *The Office* is a hit comedy television show that introduces the idea of a documentary type sitcom. While there are 9 seasons worth of great comedy and moments that warm the viewer's heart, there is much more to *The Office* upon further digging. Released in 2005, this comedy comes at the forefront of the controversy of surveillance and public monitoring. My goal is to pull apart the overarching visual techniques *The Office* uses, identify what the show denotes and what could be connoted, and argue the idea of complacency in surveillance perpetuated by this sitcom.

So, *The Office* is a "mockumentary." Basically, the premise is that Michael Scott, Manager at a fictional paper company Dunder Mifflin, grants a film crew access to monitor and watch the entire branch for a documentary. This is the basis for the plot as relationships grow, hilarious problems ensue, and Michael Scott shows how incapable (but somehow capable at the same time) he is at managing an office. One of the most important denoted parts of *The Office* is the camera footage types and handling. There are three types: Character interviews (or talking heads), Regular documentation, and the "Spycam" footage. Each film type I have taken the liberty of placing .gif files to show what that footage looks like, and there is a following snippet of S2E16 "Valentine's Day," to show all three footage types together. The main importance of these footage types is the level of character awareness with those surveilling the cast. In the talking head, the character interviewed has full acknowledgement of the film crew's monitoring and even interacts with the camera crew by talking to them. It is a confrontation of the camera and complete willingness to comply. Another interesting fact about the talking heads is that throughout the show, they are often done in front of a window that shows other employees working (see the gif of Dwight talking with Stanley working behind him). There is this contrast of complete acknowledgement of being filmed and none at all. The second film type is the regular documentation of the office events. This film type is where there is some general awareness of the camera is there, but the awareness shows less interaction (except for certain times where characters like Jim will look at the

camera as if they are questioning why they even work there). The awareness here is less than the talking heads but more than the “Spycam” footage. This last footage type is the most voyeuristic of the three types. They are obvious examples of eavesdropping as the characters are interacting with each other with absolutely no awareness of the camera filming them. These scenes are often filled with drama or events the viewer would not want to miss. In final regards to the film style, the handling of the camera is rough and contrasts against most stereotypical “smooth” camera panning. This handling of the camera itself allows for a reminder that the film crew is sitting there watching these workers every day.

There are a few other important aspects of the show that is important to discuss. One of those is the character appearance. Unlike other casts for shows, the cast of *The Office* is not glamourized or perfect in any way. These characters are made to look like an average group of individuals working at the average 9-5 job. The appearance of the characters also tends to visually narrate some of the stereotypes of the personalities. For instance, Dwight is serious/stern yet also odd and sometimes creepy. His character design of an oversized brown suit, aviator glasses, pocket protector, hair parted down the middle, and mix of serious and childlike facial expressions amplify his personality (see the cold open video). Angela’s appearance of being dressed conservatively and rigidly controlling her appearance also fits her stereotyped personality of a judgmental crazy cat lady. Another important factor to consider is setting. The setting of *The Office* is most often an office building. The environment is built to have limited views of the outside world, and most of the employees are placed at desks facing each other. Object placement allows for business and progress-oriented items like office supplies and paper to be everywhere. The Object placement holds contrast though, as toys and pop culture items interrupt the space to provide bits of personality. Michael Scott’s desk is a major example of this contrast. His desk is supposed to be the most professional, and yet his actual items related to work are almost drowned out by all the trinkets and toys on his desk. The Homer Simpson doll in the middle of the main office is another example as Homer stands out in a room immersed in productivity.

Now that we have an idea of what is denoted throughout *The Office*, what is going on behind the obvious? In the connotation procedures by Roland Barthes, I elected to isolate Trick Effects, Pose, Objects, Photogenia, and Syntax.

For Trick Effects, I think the most important thing to realize is the mirage of the surveillance itself. There are two levels of deception going on in *The Office*. First off, this is a selection of film chosen by the “film crew” in order to satisfy the need for an exciting narrative. The syntax of episodes only tracks major holidays and problems that arise. How much footage exists of them doing nothing but work? This subjective showcase of content creates a false narrative that this workplace is full of drama and crazy events and contrasts the stereotypical visual of surveillance mostly showing non-exciting information. The second layer is the fact that these are all actors hired to play characters being filmed. None of the documentary is real. This show denotes a group of people being monitored at work when it is all subjectively created content for entertainment. For me this creates a counter visual for the ideas of the indexical quality of the camera. There is subjectivity to the events that happen in front of the camera, and just because something is acted out doesn’t mean the event was legitimate or genuine (a natural occurrence and not acted).

Pose and Objects work in conjunction. For pose, we have the character designs mentioned previously. The non-glamourized appearance combined with the visual narratives that are used to amplify their personalities creates a visual that fits into character stereotypes that we as viewers create. Angela is an example of the pre-existing stereotype around women who like cats, Dwight is a stereotype of the worker who takes the job too seriously (or “the suck up”). The amplification of their personalities works together with the object placement mentioned earlier as well. With the setting and built environment of the office promoting work and productivity, the objects interrupting the space (Michael’s toys and the Homer Simpson doll) creates a counter visuality of the stereotypes in Western Culture surrounding the premise of work. Work in the US is based heavily on productivity, and the

personalities of employees are often seen as unimportant. The items overflowing Michael's desk overwhelm the idea of productivity and are a symbol of the counterproductivity that Michael Scott embodies. The Scranton branch is somehow seen as the most successful branch in the company, and this combination questions the imbedded ideas about productivity and success. The office basically becomes the background for the personalities to shine.

Finally, Syntax and photogenia play into the most important topic, surveillance. For photogenia, the handling of the camera becomes a consistent reminder of the person filming, the presence of being monitored. For syntax, the types of footage come into play. Notice how in the episode clip, the acknowledgement of the camera transitions smoothly, from interacting with the camera to talking to another character and then the spy cam watching a secret conversation. The syntax used here blurs the lines of acknowledgment of the camera apparatus, and therefore introduce ideas of acceptance of being watched. As the viewer we are placed in the film crew's position, and there is control imbedded in that. Knowing the crew is aware of the cameras makes watching them not be aware much less threatening or problematic. On top of this film type syntax is the syntax of plot, comedy, and romance that ties you to the characters. That connection makes watching them much more justifiable. The show's documentary as entertainment quality creates a counter visual for the intended purpose of surveillance. Often through drones or CCTV, surveillance has been long used for panoptic control. In *The Office*, this surveillance is used for relationship building and entertainment. In the end characters become thankful for being filmed even when they weren't aware of it. This provides for my final argument of *The Office* building complacency. According to David Lyon, author of "Surveillance Culture: Engagement, Exposure, and Ethics in Digital Modernity," there are three areas that build complacency of surveillance: fear, familiarity, and fun (Lyon 829). Fear is based on events such as 9/11 which prompt surveillance for safety of the masses. Familiarity and entertainment are *The Office's* main contributions to Lyon's ideas of surveillance culture. Familiarity arises with the staff being constantly followed by cameras, like how

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society is now. Entertainment comes in the form of using the idea of a documentary as a format for entertaining viewers. Seeing surveillance as something that can be positive feeds the idea that surveillance isn't always used for control of the masses. It is this counter visual and others that makes *The Office* an integral example of the critique on surveillance and 21<sup>st</sup> century work culture.