

Sigmund Freud hypothesized that humor was a verbal act of aggression directed toward those who hold power over us—a person, an idea or an institution—in an attempt to free ourselves from that power momentarily. Satire is a form of political communication because it channels human emotion in an effort to promote positive change (Gray, 2009, 12). As G.K. Chesterton writes, “The essence of satire is that it perceives some absurdity inherent in the logic of some position, and draws the absurdity out and isolates it, so that all can see it” (Gray, 2009, 12). The uncanny reality of NBC’s *The Office* exposes the day-to-day of “Corporate America” creating a comedy that satirizes the truths of the typical office environment in an agonizingly aggressive, critical yet humorous manner—as exemplified in the character of Michael Scott—it brings audiences to be engaged, while also hailing them to be critical by means of meta-disparagement humor.

By exposing and ridiculing the bigoted attitudes associated with the business world, *The Office* plays on the typical sexist and racist stereotypes. Michael Scott serves to be a comic representation of the hypocrisy of American business. As he aims to be the “World’s Best Boss” that is both tolerant and likeable, he is unable to move beyond his prejudices. In his inability to see beyond the traditional views of Corporate America, a world based on white male privilege, Michael often critiques a co-worker’s race or sexuality. For example, in Season 1 Episode 2 titled “Diversity Day Training” Michael makes a racist comment to Oscar, a Mexican native, by yelling “Buena Vista!” At face value this remark is aggressive in that it pinpoints Oscar’s race, which is both disparaging and inappropriate, especially in the workplace. However, it is through

Michael's comments that audiences are able to discern whether it is appropriate to either laugh or protest in response to his attempt at humor. It is in this manner that *The Office* is satirically driven and that the idea of meta-disparagement humor shines through. Michael is the epitome of meta-disparagement humor. Though he is surrounded in a diverse office environment, he continuously belittles the women as sexual objects or unintelligent, while also attacking the minorities through racial slurs.

The irony of Michael's comments is what makes them acceptable and humorous at face value, rather than aggressive and belittling. The training meetings as well as Michael's behavior are over-the-top and emphasized to the point of ridiculousness. Michael's absurdity characterizes him as a buffoon. By portraying him in this manner, it furthers the tolerance of his remarks because audiences are not necessarily laughing at the butt of the joke; rather they are making fun of Michael. Furthermore, the humor is reasonable because of the acknowledgement of the problematic. When Michael makes reference to a racist joke, the recognition of the offensive nature of his comment by his co-workers makes the humor acceptable. In "Diversity Day," he attempts to teach the employees to disregard prejudices and be more acceptable of race. He has the employees put a "race" card on their foreheads (Jewish, Asian, Black etc.) and have the others explain to them what stereotypically their race is, and or does. The workers participate in the senseless activity, but their facial expressions, attitude and ability to recognize Michael's stupidity makes the otherwise controversial comments, acceptable.

The meta-disparaging humor expressed in *The Office* allows audiences to detect that Michael is satirizing stereotypes in a playful manner, rather than attacking individuals, and or social groups in an aggressive and critical way. It is for this reason that audiences can accept Michael's buffoonery and be entertained by his seemingly prejudiced criticisms.

References:

Gray, J., Jones, J.P., & Thompson, E. (2009). *Satire TV: Politics and comedy in the post-network era*. New York: NYU Press.

“Diversity Day Training.” *The Office*. NBC. Netflix. Season 1: Episode 2. Television.