

Being-in-*The Office*: Sartre, the Look, and the Viewer

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Imagine this: you're fixing your hair, trying to impress someone you are secretly interested in, and someone who knows about your crush catches you in the act. Knowing that you've been caught, a feeling of shame washes over you, and you look away. This is exactly what happens to Pam in an episode titled "Hot Girl" in season 1 of *The Office*, only Pam doesn't get caught by just anybody. She gets caught by the camera—and by us.

We've all been caught doing something we were ashamed of. Curiously, we may not have known that we were doing it, or were ashamed of doing it, until we got caught. But there are also those moments in which we almost get caught—where we hear the wind slam the door shut and quickly extinguish a cigarette, and where we realize it's not someone else catching us that brings the uneasiness and the shame, but us catching ourselves—from the outside, so to speak.

The famous French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) makes much of this "getting caught." Calling it "the Look," he tells a story of a man walking down an empty hall who decides to stop and look through a keyhole. The man clearly is not thinking of what he is doing, and is consumed for the moment by curiosity. For the moment that he is looking through the peephole, he ceases to exist, consumed by what he sees . . . until he hears a noise down the hall, and glances up to see that there is someone else down the hall, looking at him looking through the keyhole. All at once the peeping tom is brought back to himself, away from the keyhole, realizes he's been caught, and blushes.¹

In the routine of everyday life, it's easy to get so caught up in ourselves that we forget that the proverbial cameras are rolling—that we could be seen at any moment. It's this phenomenon that Sartre analyzes, and which we can see in virtually every moment of *The Office*.

Bad Faith and the Look

One key idea of Sartre's existentialism is that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 438). This statement is a response to the age-old question, "What's the meaning of life?" Sartre claims that the meaning of life isn't something we discover in the world or within ourselves. It's something we create through the lives we live: it is through our actions and choices that our lives acquire meaning. There is no model of how to live or who to be, and there's no single, prescribed meaning to discover. This is the core of a profound freedom: the freedom to be whatever we have the courage to be.

But sometimes we shirk this freedom and pretend that we have to be this, that, or the other thing. When we pretend we cannot change who we are or our situation, we are acting (or not acting) in *bad faith*. Consider Pam's attitude toward her relationship with Jim. By the end of the second season, the viewer is well aware that Pam is interested in Jim. And yet while Jim at some point voiced his feelings to Pam, Pam does not voice her crush either to Jim or the camera until the end of season 3. (You will see that Pam becomes more truthful and comfortable with herself as she becomes more truthful with others. This is why at the end of season 3 she actively confesses her care for Jim in "The Job.") But up until that point, her view of their relationship is quite the opposite: there are several times she refers to them as "friends" (Yeah right!). This is partly due to the fact that she was engaged to Roy. Pam didn't want to deal with making a choice between Jim and Roy, so she pretended that there was no choice to be made and stayed with Roy. This is an instance of what Sartre calls bad faith, a kind of self-deception. In bad faith we fool ourselves into believing we have no control over a situation, when actually we do. Pam pretends she has to remain engaged to Roy, even though she's into Jim. Pam pretends that once engaged, there is nothing she can do to end her relationship with Roy and begin one with Jim. She

pretends that she has no choice—which amounts to choosing not to choose between the two men.

Even at the beginning of season 3, when Pam has broken off her engagement to Roy (conveniently after Jim left Scranton), she still cannot face the idea of Jim as anything but a friend, saying, “That’s always a thing that makes people happy: to have an old friend back” (“The Merger”). In order to so successfully pull the wool over her own eyes, Pam must teeter-totter between pretending she is capable of choosing and pretending that she cannot choose. Consider how awkwardly Pam acts when trying to avoid the issue of being into Jim in a conversation with Karen (“Ben Franklin”):

Karen: Hey, um, I want to talk to you. I know this is weird or whatever, but Jim told me about you guys.

Pam: Whad’ya mean?

Karen: Well, that you kissed . . . I mean we talked it through and it’s totally fine. It’s not a big deal; it’s just a kiss. [Pause] Wait, you’re not still interested in him?

Pam: Oh, yeah.

Karen: Really?

Pam: Oh, no. I was confused by your phrasing. You should definitely go out with Jim. I mean, you are going out with Jim. You’re dating him, which is awesome ‘cause you guys are great together.

Karen: Ok . . .

Pam: And I’m not into Jim . . . Yeah.

Karen: So, um, we’re good?

Pam: Yeah . . . sorry.

Karen: What are you sorry about?

Pam: Um, what?

Karen: What are you sorry about?

Pam: Nothing, I was just thinking of something else.

Pam is clearly avoiding responsibility for her feelings. Her inability to choose her own feelings so befuddles her that she can barely get out a complete sentence. While Karen chooses to play it straight and attempts to clear the air, Pam continues avoiding the decision to face, or once and for all forget, her attraction to Jim. Sartre calls something that can choose a “being-for-itself” and something which cannot choose a “being-in-itself.” Thus, when we are in bad faith, we’re pretending to be what Sartre calls the *in-itself*—some object that cannot change—instead of being a person who can. So by acting in bad faith we attempt to bridge the opposition between a for-itself

(a person) and an in-itself (an object). But pretending we are unable to change ourselves can also be seen (no pun intended) as a matter of changing perspective. Sartre says about bad faith that: “We can equally well use another kind of duplicity derived from human reality which we will express roughly by saying that its being-for-itself implies complementarily a being-for-Others. Upon any one of my conducts it’s always possible to converge two looks, mine and that of the Other” (Sartre, 57). What Sartre means by “the Other” is really just understanding ourselves from the perspective of another person. We recognize that other people exist, and yet we cannot get into their heads. All we have of them is the way they look at us and the interpretation we give that look. In being looked at, we become the object (in-itself) of the Other’s gaze. If someone catches me staring inappropriately at a woman, in that person’s eyes I am a pervert. I become a pervert through *their looking* at me. But we can also take this external view ourselves, seeing ourselves as though from the outside. In other words (and here is the key connection between bad faith, “fooling ourselves,” and the look, “being seen”), to be in bad faith is to imagine ourselves being seen from the outside, from the standpoint of the Other. It’s to be under the intense pressure of the Look.

For Sartre, the Look is an everyday event that informs how we understand other people and how we understand those other people understanding us. In fact, analyzing someone else looking at me can give me some key insights into what it means to be a person surrounded by other people. It can also help us see how we are able or unable to connect with others. One thing we can say about being looked at by someone (the Other) is that it’s not in our control.

I cannot control what the Other is doing or thinking in looking at me. If we could control the thoughts of the Other, we could save ourselves explaining a lot of embarrassing situations! Imagine the reaction of his co-workers when Michael burns his foot on the grill (“The Injury”), or when Michael attempts to stop the spread of a private photo (of Michael and Jan) that he accidentally sent to the entire packing email list (“Back from Vacation”). In each of these situations, if it were possible for Michael to control what his co-workers think he could save himself a lot of trouble and embarrassment. When the Other looks at us, Sartre tells us, “The Other’s freedom is revealed to me across the uneasy indeterminateness of the being which I am for him” (Sartre, 262).

Of course, all of this embarrassment could also be avoided if the employees of Dunder-Mifflin were constantly aware of the presence of the camera, but this is nearly impossible. Were we to see such awareness, the camera would show its true nature as that view which controls what it views without being controlled in return. A few decades after Sartre, the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) appropriated the perfect scenario for such an uncontrolled-controller from the earlier English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). The scenario was the panopticon. In its original form it was a plan for a highly efficient prison. In the panopticon there is a center tower with obscured glass surrounded by stories of cells that only have an opening toward the center tower. The result is that the guard in the center tower *could* be looking at you at anytime, but as a prisoner you are unable to see him. As a result, the prisoners learn to police themselves. The power, as Foucault puts it, is *visible*, but *unverifiable*. Power is always looking.² Sometimes such an awareness of power can be seen by certain Dunder-Mifflin employees. Consider how Dwight and Angela act around each other when they anticipate the camera's presence ("Phyllis's Wedding"):

Dwight: Hello Angela.

Angela: Hello Dwight.

Dwight: You look as beautiful as the Queen of England.

Angela: Thank you.

[Then a pause and for no apparent reason]

Angela: Don't linger. Break left.

[Pause, Dwight walks to the right.]

Angela: LEFT!

[Frustrated, Angela goes left.]

Or consider the conversation between Michael and Jan on Michael's cell phone while he is driving Dwight to a company cocktail party ("Cocktails"):

Michael: Hewo you.

Jan: Michael?

Michael: I'm on my way right now. I should be there in about fifteen . . .

Jan: Let's just blow this party off.

Michael: That's what she said.

Jan: [Laugh] Am I on speaker phone?

Michael: Ummm, yes you are.

Jan: Is anybody else . . .

Dwight: Hello Jan.

Jan: Hi Dwight. Ok Michael take me off speaker phone.

Michael: No le probleme. [Michael can't seem to take the phone off of speaker model]

Jan: Ok, let's just go to a motel and get into each other like we did on the black sand beach in Jamaica.

Michael: Ok, Jan. Jan, this party is actually a big step for us so, I . . .

Jan: Am I still on speaker?

Michael: Uuum, I th . . . Uh, I don't know. [Michael knows they are still on speaker]

Jan: Are the cameras there?

Michael: Maybe. [They are and Michael knows this]

Jan: Alright. See you soon.

Dwight: Talk to you later Jan.

Michael: Alright. Bye.

In these two conversations it's abundantly clear how people would act if the cameras were not rolling. Thus, in the very possibility that a camera could be watching Dwight and Angela, or listening to Jan, they shut down. This is the effect of the panopticon: even though no one may be watching, people act as though they are being watched. They essentially internalize the possibility that the Other is always watching, and act accordingly. (There is a convenient and hilarious contrast to the "awareness" of Jan and Michael later in "Cocktails." On the way home from the party Michael and Jan are sharing an intimate "make-up" conversation, when to the viewer's surprise Dwight has been in the back seat all along!)

We are intimately and unknowingly affected by the possibility of being seen. When people are around we must adjust ourselves to the "permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for an object seen by me. 'Being-seen-by-the-Other' is the *truth* of 'seeing-the-Other'" (Sartre, 257). When we see someone like ourselves, we realize that they can see and think just as freely as we can see and think. This leads us to why we react the way we do to getting caught. In the Look, I have my freedom to be what I want taken away by the way that the Other sees me. Angela, who is notorious for being judgmental, demonstrates this well, and her judgmental glance can be

seen in the following two conversations. First, from "A Benihan Christmas":

Angela: Phyllis, I need you to pick up green streamers at lunch.

Phyllis: I thought you said green was whorish.

[Angela quickly looks up and down Phyllis' orange blouse]

Angela: No. Orange is whorish.

[Pam has a look of disbelief on her face]

And we can see the same judgmental look in this scene from later in the same episode:

[Angela looks at Kevin collecting another plate of food at her poorly attended Christmas party]

Angela: Uh-uh. No one has seconds until everyone's had some.

Kevin: You've got to be kidding!

[Angela stares directly at Kevin's gut]

Angela: You've got to be kidding.

In each of these cases the Other's look removes Phyllis' and then Kevin's ability to determine how they are to be seen. In implying with her glance that Phyllis dresses like a whore, and that Kevin is a pig, the look says more than her words and determines who Kevin and Phyllis are at that moment, much to their dismay.

In bad faith, on the other hand, I take away *my own* freedom by pretending that I do not have a choice and by determining myself as the Other *might* see me. Both the Look and bad faith concern our relationship to our freedom, whether we accept it and whether we have to give it up for the moment.

Let's now turn to how bad faith and the Look play out in Pam Beesley's visible shame, and David Brent's obvious pride.

Pam Beesley's Shame and the Camera's Unwelcomed Look

Even though the camera does not have eyes, it serves to grant us that outside position of the Other from which we can imagine ourselves. In the third season, Jim returns from Stamford. It's in the next few episodes that our suspicions about Pam's feelings for Jim are

confirmed. And they are confirmed by the way Pam looks at Jim and Karen. Keep in mind that all of this is shown through Pam's looks—at Jim and Karen, at the camera, and at the ground.

In the episode "The Merger," Michael, for the sake of solidarity between the newly united offices, stages a prank by letting out the air in the employees' tires. When he calls them out to see what "someone" has done, people are awkwardly milling about in the parking lot. The camera focuses in on Jim and Karen walking back inside when suddenly Karen affectionately scratches Jim's back. The camera then pans back to find Pam looking at the exchange between Jim and Karen—she looks right at the camera, devastated, and then looks down. Here we see Pam ashamed at getting caught looking at Jim. It's painful moments like these when we want to be seen the least. This is precisely it—all of a sudden, Pam cannot rise out of that situation. "Shame reveals to me that I am this being, not in the mode of 'was' or 'having-to-be' but in-itself" (Sartre, 262). In other words, one of the most disturbing aspects of being ashamed, though we may not often realize it, is that in shame we are ultimately turned, by way of the Other looking at us, into an object *not* of our own making. Surely, Pam's crush on Jim is innocent enough. However, in getting caught pinning over Jim being with another co-worker, it becomes real and serious. Pam all of a sudden becomes responsible for her feelings—which she had never really felt before, precisely because she is not willing to face up to them. She takes up the burden of her feelings on someone else's ground—at someone else's choosing. Being ashamed is being imprisoned in the position opposite the Look that the Other throws at us. We can feel this lack of freedom when we respond indignantly: "How dare you look at me that way!" Shame, on the other hand, is almost a silent acceptance of being how the Other sees us.

This means that shame—when we take it up as our own and listen to what it says about us—can be a good thing. We can learn from understanding what the Other, as a subject, sees us as and the feeling we get as a result of that representation. In getting caught pinning over Jim, Pam can understand that she does actually like Jim. (Getting caught in the act is no fun, so we might as well get something out of it!) We can, at least in theory, own up to the person we see ourselves as through the Other's Look. As we will see with pride, this ability to make the best of the Other's look is foreclosed by the prideful person's turning the Other into an object first.

David Brent's Pride and the Welcomed Look of the Camera

But what if we could control the effect that the look of the Other has on us? The arrogant person attempts just this. Like shame, pride and arrogance are common responses to the Look. But these differ from shame in that the one looked at actively tries to take control of the situation. In other words, arrogance is the move to use the Other's look to eliminate shame and replace it with affection, camaraderie, or respect. The epitome of this reaction is found in David Brent. One of the hallmarks of David's managerial style is his over-the-top striving for self-promotion. He's constantly selling himself to his employees, the camera, and, ultimately, to himself. In the language of Sartre, by recognizing himself as an *in-itself* (an object), David attempts to use the Look of the Other to rewrite the situation as well as the way that he is viewed by himself and Others. But because the Other is *for-itself*, that is, a free subject, this attempt to control the look necessarily fails, leaving David to face his own bad faith.

In the first episode of the second series³ of the British version of *The Office*, an employee stands at a fax machine next to David's office. As he types in the fax number, David appears in the open doorway of his office, glancing quickly at the employee and then at camera. He then retreats into his office, returning a moment later with a trade magazine in hand to brag to his employee and the camera about his picture on the cover:

Oh no... going through some old stuff... found that, look at that: *Inside Paper*. [Looks at camera, displaying magazine, giggling] It's the trade magazine for the paper industry [employee looks at camera confused]... my ugly mug on the front [points to head shot]... Oh no [giggles]... Embarrassing... Alright [shooes the unimpressed employee away]... Ohhh... he's put me off what I was doing... what was I? ... oh yeah... phone calls [David returns to office].

What is critical in this scene is that the employee hasn't done anything. David has put himself off by trying to use the looks of both the camera and the employee to create an image of himself that would cultivate a feeling of respect in the employee, in the audience (via the camera), and thus in himself. But we know David, we know what he

is up to, and as he slinks back to his office, it's clear that for a moment he knows all of this as well.

David Brent clearly realizes that he is determined by the way others see him. With this realization, he makes the next logical step: once we understand that the Other's look can force us into a state of being (into shame, for example), we can attempt to control the effect of the Other's look. After all, if my feelings of shame are a result of this look, then it seems reasonable that if I can do things like show off my picture on *Inside Paper*, then I might successfully create another, more pleasant reaction. Hence, through pride we can play offense, though alas it is mired in bad faith.

Sartre argues that "vanity impels me to get hold of the Other and to constitute him as an object in order to burrow into the heart of this object to discover there my own object-state. But this is to kill the hen that lays the golden eggs" (Sartre, 291). David's attempt to control the outcome of his employee's look requires that he constitute the employee as an object (an *in-itself*) rather than as a subject. This is to deny the employee his freedom. Unfortunately for David, this results in a paradox: at the same time that he "kills" the employee's freedom (in Sartre's explanation, "the hen that lays the golden eggs"), he requires it in order to feel truly proud (Sartre, 291). After all, if he hasn't been given respect freely, it isn't worth much.

The effect of this paradox is to throw David's own freedom, literally, back in his face. In his pride, David has not only denied the very thing he requires. He has also, in effect, attempted to circumvent his own freedom and responsibility by treating himself as an object for the Other. But David cannot control the situation. The Other, after all, is free. He will see David as he wants. David's attempt to control the Other must fail. We see this as the scene comes to a close and David tries to act as if the entire encounter was his employee's fault. In this failure, David's own freedom is made palpable, for it was only as a free subject that he could attempt to objectify both himself and the Other.

The Viewer and the Look

Our experience watching Pam's shame-filled reactions and David's awkward attempts at shameless self-promotion make *The Office*, at

times, difficult to watch. In fact, some people have been so affected by the show that they have stopped watching it altogether (the silly fools). But this difficulty in watching the show is also what makes it such a brilliant success. Pam's shame and David's pride exist because the camera (and the viewer) exists. Through the look at the camera, the audience is made complicit in the events and experiences that transpire on the screen. We become fellow employees and co-workers. Hence, the power of *The Office*: via the look of the camera, we are allowed to be in the office without "being-in-*The Office*."

NOTES

- 1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Gramercy Books, 1956), 260.
- 2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 201.
- 3 What Americans would call the second "season."

Boy Who Swims Faster than a Shark: Jean Baudrillard Visits *The Office*

Russell Manning

Like a Xerox machine that produces out copies, the everyday office produces goods and services of remarkable uniformity and shapes employees to be as perfect as the products they produce. So we laugh at David Brent (not to mention him) because he is the antithesis of what the *real* office demands. He produces chaos. By laughing at Brent we are covertly and indirectly supporting the system that produces Neil Godwin, a "successful" manager and entertainer. In laughing at Brent, we are tacitly endorsing a system—one that we ought to be wary of. The Godwin system produces homogeneity in behavior, actions, and beliefs—as if we were all being spat out of the "social-cultural photocopier." To get a sense of this let's employ the service of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)¹ and his concepts of "the simulacrum" and "fatal strategy." The Breunmeister and his protégé Keith Keenan will bring the French theory back to British reality.

Jean Baudrillard and Simulacra

Why is my famine has to be depressing? (2:5)

For a cultural theorist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard achieved status in the 1980s for his writings on *simulacra*. For Baudrillard,