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**Crossing the Pond:
Adapting *The Office* to an American Audience**

Shannon WELLS-LASSAGNE

The success of the BBC's *The Office* is undeniable: it is available in hundreds of countries and has been called the best sitcom in recent history, and singlehandedly launched the careers of Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, its creators. Interestingly enough, though the vast majority of its fame is entirely due to the original series, it has also been adapted. One of the first and undoubtedly the most successful of these adaptations is the American version of *The Office* on NBC, now beginning its eighth season as the network's flagship series. The question one must ask, however, is why this adaptation was necessary at all: given that the series was already in English, and that its references were for the most part international (or even American), why did the American network feel the need to "translate"? Through a close analysis of the respective pilot episodes, I hope to better understand the impetus behind this choice.

When NBC announced that it would be making an American version of the BBC's cult show *The Office* (2001-2003), much wailing and gnashing of teeth was heard on both sides of the Atlantic. Granted, the first press releases on the subject were particularly unpromising, suggesting that this British series examining the banality of a particularly inauspicious office environment in the unprepossessing town of Slough would not work well set in Manhattan: *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *The Office* most decidedly is not. Given of course that the British series was in English, and that, as we shall see, a good number of its cultural references are in fact American, or international, one does wonder why NBC felt the need to remake the series in America's image, and what it tells us about American audience expectations (or at least the way that studio executives perceive those expectations). At the same time, the choice of words in the title of this article is not coincidental: the lamentation of this new American version of *The Office* appears very similar to the hue and cry that fans indulge in every time there is a new adaptation of a favorite children's book (*Where the Wild Things Are* or *Lord of the Rings* are recent examples), a literary classic (for example the outcry at Patricia Rozema's politically correct *Mansfield Park* [1999]), or even – or perhaps above all – a favorite comic book, as one can attest from the vociferous disappointment at the 2009 film adaptation of *The Watchmen*. As such, this article will be examining the American version of the show as an adaptation, walking a fine line between the much accursed faithfulness to the spirit of the original and the attempt to breathe new life into a series that has come to an end¹. Of course given the scope of this paper, it would be impossible to be exhaustive,

¹ By the time the American version of the television series was broadcast (2005), the British series had already reached its conclusion (2001-2003).

and rather than attempt a more global, but perhaps more superficial analysis, the subject of study will be voluntarily limited to the pilot episodes of each of the two shows, in the hopes that an in-depth microanalysis will ultimately reveal a more general strategy for the respective writers and showrunners. These initial episodes are interesting as first impressions for the audience, but for an examination of the adaptation phenomenon, they are particularly important, since it is this American episode that hews most closely to its British source. As such, the differences between the two versions, though rare enough to be examined in detail, are all the more significant in terms of audience expectations.

The Office UK first ran in July 2001 for a first season of six episodes. It recounts the lives of several office drones working for the paper company Wernham-Hogg in Slough, just outside of Greater London. It is shot in a documentary style, with a single camera, fairly static montage, bad lighting, and confessional-type interviews with each of the major characters. The focus is on the regional manager of the company, David Brent (played by co-creator Ricky Gervais), an incompetent man desperate to be liked: "I am a friend first," he says, "a boss second, and probably an entertainer third." (1.1, 25:36-25:42²) His sense of humor is not nearly as funny to others as it is to him, and the rest of the series sees him repeatedly choosing the role of entertainer over boss, to the extent that he ends up losing his job and pursuing a career as an entertainer, thanks to his brief exposure on the very "documentary" we are watching. There are three other major characters: Jim, a dissatisfied sales representative; his love interest, Dawn, the receptionist; and Gareth, another sales rep who spends his time toadying to David Brent, and who eventually becomes manager in his stead.

The set-up is basically the same in the American version of *The Office* (NBC, 2005-): now the series takes place in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a burg about two hours away from New York City that is famous for its paper mills and anthracite mines. The documentary style has been preserved, more or less, but the company is now dubbed Dunder-Mifflin, and its manager is Michael Scott, played by Steve Carell. Tim and Dawn become Jim and Pam, and Gareth has been replaced by Dwight. Unlike British series, which often have a very limited number of episodes and seasons (the perennially popular *East Enders* or *Doctor Who* notwithstanding), the American series has been on the air since March of 2005, and premiered its eighth season in September 2011, with 142 episodes broadcast at the date of writing. As such, the adaptation has obviously veered off the course set by the

² Unless otherwise noted, all references are to episode one, season one of the British and American series *The Office*. They will be distinguished by nationality: (UK 1:05-2:03, US 3:21-4:33).

original, with its own new storylines, a considerable fleshing-out of the secondary characters, and of course a lack of closure that the BBC original's finale provided.

Generally, adaption is a thankless affair, as Robert Stam reminds us:

A "faithful" film is seen as uncreative, but an "unfaithful" film is a shameful betrayal of the original. An adaptation that updates the text for the present is upbraided for not respecting the period of the source, but respectful costume dramas are accused of a failure of nerve in not "contemporizing" the text. If an adaptation renders the sexual passages of the source novel literally, it is accused of vulgarity; if it fails to do so, it is accused of cowardice. The adapter, it seems, can never win³.

Here of course Stam is speaking specifically of adapting text to the cinema screen, but his argument about the pitfalls of faithfulness remains true for a same-medium adaptation like *The Office*. In fact, the British sitcom was shown on BBC America and on Adult Swim, a cable channel, and had gained enough of a following in the United States that many fans of the original series spent several episodes calling the characters not-David, not-Dawn, not-Tim⁴, instead of the names of their American counterparts, judging the actors solely on their resemblance to the original series. It is generally accepted that one of the selling points of adaptation for an expensive medium like film or television is the idea of an established audience: people want to go and see the latest Jane Austen adaptation, the latest Batman movie, the newest version of Sherlock Holmes, and this makes these adaptations relatively safe bets. Here, however, the established fan base was perhaps curious, but had very negative preconceptions about the series. In fact, NBC overtly decided that it would not be counting on the fans of the BBC series⁵, relying instead on the general public with no knowledge that *The Office* was an adaptation at all.

If an established fan base was not the reason for the American remake, could it be the idea of an already tried-and-true series, whose public appeal had already been proven? On the contrary – the most recent British comedy series that was "Americanized" before *The Office*'s American debut was entitled *Coupling* (BBC, 2000-2004; NBC, 2003), a sort of British version of *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), and was by all accounts a horrendous flop⁶. Though there have been very successful American revisions of British series (*All in the Family* [CBS, 1971-1979] and *Sanford and Son* [NBC, 1972-1977] are the most

³ Robert Stam, "The theory and practice of adaptation", in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, p. 8 [p. 1-52].

⁴ www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/the_office/pilot_75.php, consulted March 2006.

⁵ "The Office Mates" (Interview with Ricky Gervais and Steve Carell), www.ew.com/ew/article/0,1037069,00.html, consulted March 2006.

⁶ The series filmed only eleven episodes, seven of which remained unaired.

often cited), these were 30 years previous, in the 1970s, and more recent examples like *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC, 1992-) or even the classic *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1975-1979) have been repeatedly adapted and found wanting. If anything, taking on a British television series was a more risky prospect than an entirely original show premise.

In fact, it might be the genre-bending innovations of the series that convinced studio executives to take the risk. The original series was made in the wake of several popular “docusoaps” – documentaries with enough action and drama to qualify for soap opera status – like *Airport* (BBC, 1996-2008), detailing the ins and outs of London’s Heathrow airport, or *A Life of Grime* (BBC, 1999), describing the jobs of waste collectors and health inspectors, jobs where there was a high “ick” factor⁷. Likewise, the American version followed on the successful adaptation of several reality shows from Britain to the US (*Pop Idol* [ITV, 2001-2003] – become *American Idol* [Fox, 2002-] – and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* [ITV, 1998-; ABC, 1999-] are two that come to mind). The idea of the documentary as entertainment, notably with the surprising success of Michael Moore’s documentaries like *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), may have made the mockumentary style of *The Office* more palatable.

This may also explain the very need to make an American version of the series at all. Upon the first airing of the BBC version of the series, many viewers were uncertain of whether they were watching a documentary or a mockumentary (and this was precisely what the show’s creators intended): much of the humor comes from the dreary realism of the setting and the characters, where nothing much happens, nothing much changes, and the subtle balance between proximity with the viewer’s everyday experience, and enough comic distance for the audience to be able to find humor in its representation. Given the delicate nature of the humor, and the importance of context and realism in its perception, American studio heads may have thought it best to cater to American expectations both as to what is real, and what is television, in order to obtain the desired effect (laughter).

A close analysis of the opening minutes of each series will hopefully make the similarities and differences between the two series a bit clearer (UK opening-2:51, US opening-2:40). The similarity between the two openings is perhaps most striking: the joke about a “special filing cabinet” (the waste-paper basket) for the fax from headquarters and the two managers’ speeches about their respective impressive leadership qualities are almost word for word the same, although some words have been “translated” into American English: however, in my opinion, these very similarities make the different effects all the more apparent, like instruments hitting the same notes, but with an entirely different rhythm and accompaniment. To this end

⁷ Interview with Ricky Gervais, www.wordmagazine.co.uk/theoffice, consulted April 2010.

the changes in the credit sequence are perhaps particularly revealing. The original immediately opens with theme music – it's a cover of “Handbags and Gladraggs”, a song that came out originally in 1969, and whose lyrics imply how futile it is to become involved in trends:

You don't mean a thing without the handbags and the gladraggs
Your granddad had to sweat so you could buy
[...] So what becomes of you my love
When they've finally stripped you of
The handbags and the gladraggs
Your granddad had to sweat so you could buy.

Though the opening music is instrumental, the closing music does have the lyrics; in any case, it would have been known well enough to have been recognizable for the viewer, and the melancholy and nostalgia would have been obvious; the comedy much less so. When we add to this the montage of grey images of the city of Slough as an industrial wasteland (see Plate 1) and the lack of credits for different actors, it's understandable that many took the show for a documentary given its style and the lack of any real advertising for it beforehand.



Plate 1: BBC Credits

The title overlaid on the image of the office building where Wernham-Hogg is apparently located (see Plate 2) only reinforces the association with the real – the show is giving a title and a shape to reality, but no more than that.



Plate 2: BBC Credits

The incipit of the “documentary” itself may confirm this realism, as it is composed of static “head shots”, without any lighting or visual effects to heighten the aesthetic rather than the didactic value of the images. However, the character being filmed seems just that, a character, whose outrageous gestures and expressions (see Plate 3) belie any misguided belief that this is an ordinary documentary.



Plate 3: Outrageous gestures

The jarring effect of David Brent’s obnoxious gestures and rhetoric after this serious, even melancholic, opening is intended to heighten the comic effect by playing on the viewers’ sense of generic discomfort: is this, or is this not, a scripted comedy?

The opening sequence of the American version has very clear similarities to the original: there is again a haunting piano tune that plays over views of Scranton, Pennsylvania, with a historic brick building (a paper company, in fact) drowning in telephone lines and traffic in the street, before the camera cuts to the Dunder-Mifflin warehouse – all of this is more quickly paced, but again almost exactly like the British series. However, the music signals a change in focus: the slightly nostalgic theme music is quickly exchanged for bubbly, even zany, accordion music and a montage of different characters, the names of the actors playing them (see Plate 4), and typical scenes of an

office – a hand using white-out to cover over some error on the typed page, a photocopier with fresh copies, etc. Clearly, these are more traditional sitcom credits.

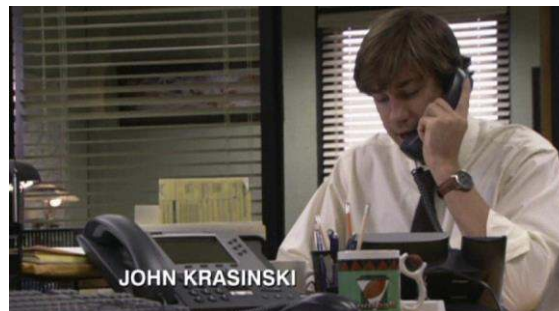


Plate 4: US Credits

The final image before the title credit itself is of Michael pushing forward a golden statue carrying a briefcase – the viewer may wonder if this is supposed to signify a perfected version of the original series, or of the salesman that Michael aspires to be...



Plate 5: Michael positioning his self-attributed award

In any case, like many of the shots in this character-driven montage, it is a sign of episodes to come, particularly Season 2's premier episode "The Dundies" (see Plate 5), which shows Michael's awards night for the office where each employee receives an award from their manager for astounding accomplishments like "whitest sneakers". In the US opening sequence, the title card is no longer over the office building, but over a stencil of an office, stylized figures of a man at his desk, with the addition of "the" to standardized appellation "office".



Plate 6: *The Office* logo

Here, then, any generic uncertainty is immediately dispelled: though it may take on the trappings of a documentary, clearly this is a sitcom, with actors playing parts and future episodes yet to come. Likewise, once the episode itself begins, the impact of Michael Scott's blundering is not immediate, and his demeanor is much less outrageous than David Brent's: one can assume that since American viewers are assured of the comedy to come, there is no need to make the markers of the main character's buffoonery so immediately obvious.

Indeed, the first conversation of each series also demonstrates important differences between the two characters.

DAVID. I don't give shitty jobs. If a good man comes to me and says "Thank you, David, for the opportunity and continued support in the work-related arena, but I've done that, I wanna better myself, I wanna move on," then I can make that dream come true too, aka for you. [*Points at employee*] The point is, you talk the talk, you do not walk the walk, *vis à vis* you have not yet passed your forklift driver's test. The man who gives the jobs in the warehouse... is a personal friend of mine, alright? I know you're the man for the job. [*picks up the phone and dials*] Sammy, you old slag... [*winks at employee*] It's the Brent-Meister general... Have you advertised the forklift driver's job? No? Good, don't bother. I've got the man here, he is "perfick"... Has he passed the forklift driver's test? He gives the tests... [*mimes nose growing, Pinocchio-style*] Yeah, yeah, he's first-aid trained, yeah. [*crosses himself*] Yeah, yeah, we'll get a CV over to you this afternoon. [*mimes typing a CV*] I'm seeing you Sunday aren't I? For my sins... How is Elaine? She left you yet? Yeah... alright, see you then. [*puts down the phone and grits teeth*] She has left him, I forgot about that. (UK 0-1:46)

MICHAEL. Alright Jim, your quarterlies look very good. How are things going at the library?

JIM. Oh, I told you, couldn't close it, so...

MICHAEL. So... you've come to the Master for guidance. Is this what you're saying, grasshopper?

JIM. Actually, you called me in here... but yeah.

MICHAEL. Alright, so let me show you how it's done. [*cut to long shot, Michael on the phone*] I'd like to speak to your office manager please... Yes, hello! This is Michael Scott, I am the regional manager of Dunder-Mifflin paper products. Just wanted to talk to you manager à manager... [*cut to photocopiers in office*] Alright, done deal! Thank you very much, sir! You're a gentleman and a scholar... Oh I'm sorry. OK... I'm sorry. My mistake. [*hangs up phone*] That was a woman I was talking to, so... she had a very low voice. Probably a smoker, so... [*clears throat, speaks to Jim*] So that's the way it's done. (US 0-1:31)

David Brent is immediately shown as obnoxious with his pen clicking, and his incorrect use of language (“aka”, “*vis à vis*”), and especially his exaggerated gestures contradicting his spoken words while on the phone with the warehouse manager, showing him to be an unreliable speaker, and an unreliable friend – after all, this “personal friend of his” in the warehouse is someone that he’s willing to lie to and betray for an unknown applicant as forklift driver. All of this makes him unlikeable; his social misstep concerning the wife of his friend leaving him makes him an idiot as well. Michael Scott, on the other hand, is no longer in conversation with an unknown worker, but immediately identifies Jim, and the conversation is related to work, almost a performance-review type situation, here showing off Michael’s sales expertise (trying to close an account at the library): though we’re meant to understand that he is a blowhard, he is nonetheless successful at what he does – this is a fundamental difference between Michael, who clearly is a victim of the Peter principle (someone who’s been promoted until he is no longer competent, and therefore can no longer advance in his career path⁸) and David, who never shows any capacity for excellence. There are still some malapropisms – “manager à manager”, and references to the cultural mainstream: “You’ve come to learn from the Master, grasshopper?” (*The Karate Kid*, dir. John G. Avildsen, 1984) and “You’re a gentleman and a scholar” (Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*), but they are less frenetic than Brent’s exaggerated mannerisms. Still, there is irony when we have his first gaffe, taking a low-voiced woman for a man, and immediately following with “So that’s the way it’s done.”

As such, an effort is being made in the American version of the series to make the characters and the situation more easily relatable to the audience: both in terms of the genre, clearly announced by the title credits, and the behavior of the main character, who is a buffoon, but not beyond the pale (yet). While the British series seeks to create tension and discomfort not just through the diegetic situation, but through the viewer’s attempts to position him or herself in relation to the series itself, the American version relies solely on the discomfort of

⁸ Laurence Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong*, New York, WorldCat, 1969.

the situation, and chooses to simplify the relationship between the viewer and the show, notably by making Michael a bit more likeable than his British counterpart.

In this sense Michael's interaction with Pam is more instructive when compared to the same incident with David and Dawn.

DAVID. Lovely Dawn. Dawn Tynsley... receptionist. Alright? Been with us for ages, haven't you?

DAWN. Yeah.

DAVID. I'd say, at one time or another every bloke in the office has woken up at the crack of Dawn.

DAWN. What?! (UK 2:01-2:16)

MICHAEL. This is our receptionist, Pam. Pam! Pam! Pam! [*imitation of The Flintstones' Bam Bam*] Pam Beasley. Pam has been with us for... forever! Right, Pam?

PAM. Well, I don't know...

MICHAEL. If you think she's cute now, you should have seen her a couple of years ago. Rowr Rowr.

PAM. What? (US 1:46- 2:04)

While Michael is much less sexually explicit than David when talking about his secretary, the power relations are very different. David Brent has yet to show authority, but Michael has already demonstrated some amount of competence at his job, and as such the traditional office hierarchy is upheld in the American version, where a shy Pam doesn't dare call Michael out for his remarks and can only glare at his antics. Brent, however, simply cowers behind Dawn's desk when she questions his insinuation about her being overly familiar with the rest of the staff. Again, the American version shows itself to be less radical in its willingness to confront and upend expectations about gender roles and power relations.

Finally, the speech that David and Michael both give about being "the best boss" is significant in the possibilities it leaves available to the viewer.

DAVID. People say I'm the best boss. They go, "Oh, we've never worked in a place like this before, you're such a laugh. You get the best out of us." And I go, you know, "*C'est la vie*." If that's true – excellent. [*shrugs and looks smug*] (UK 2:39-2:49)

MICHAEL. People say I am the best boss. They say, "God, we've never worked in a place like this before, you're hilarious. And you get the best out of us." Um... [*holds up "World's Best Boss" mug*] I think that pretty much sums it up. I found it at Spencer Gifts. (US 2:21-2:41)

While both tout their abilities as boss, their responses to this supposed acclaim differ: Brent says "and I go [*shrugs*] '*C'est la vie*'. If that's true – excellent," then slyly glances towards the camera. Here he suggests that people should draw their own conclusions – even if he's forcing

the issue. Michael Scott, on the other hand, puts words in our mouths: he holds up “World’s Best Boss” mug, commenting, “I think that pretty much sums it up.” Once again, the conclusion that Michael Scott intends the viewer to draw is explicitly given – though the viewer’s own conclusions are in fact very different. While both versions encourage the viewer to recognize the characters’ desperate desire for approval, the British version leaves this implicit, while the American show emphasizes that Michael has to manufacture his own approval.

The interactions with the other characters confirm this impression of a desire for simplification in the American version, while suggesting other important differences with the original.

[Gareth enters as Tim works, hits Tim on the head with a rolled-up newspaper]

GARETH. Wassup...!

TIM. Oh fu..., don’t do that, Jesus!

GARETH. Alright? What is it, time of the month? Urgh, just the eight pints for me last night, then. That’s all. Hurr. *[Pretends to be checking newspaper]* Oh no, oh God! “Boss and team leader in drunken night out shock-horror”, it says here. Thought I’d go out again tonight with Oggy. That’d be a quiet night in the library – not! I don’t think! (UK 4:21-5:01)

The American version provides no dialogue: there is a close-up on Dwight unlocking and opening a desk drawer. He takes out the receiver to his office phone and re-attaches it while the phone rings. He sings “Little Drummer Boy” with particular gusto for the drumming interludes, while Jim looks on and then looks directly into the camera. (US 2:44-3:02, see Plate 6)



Plate 7: Jim and Dwight

This series of sequences shows two other principal characters in the series, the two sales representatives, Tim and Gareth (UK), and Jim and Dwight (US). Stephen Merchant, the co-creator of the BBC series, has already said that Tim is essentially supposed to be the viewer’s

perspective on the happenings of the series⁹: here his annoyance at Gareth's lame jokes and confidences about his drunken night out with David is our own. Gareth's toadying nature becomes clear when Brent later repeats his actions almost exactly, from the "Wassup" to the recounting of their revelries, making clear that Gareth must be copying David's mannerisms.

However, in the American adaptation, the interaction between Dwight, Jim, and the viewer makes these relationships even more obvious: Dwight's obnoxious death metal version of "Little Drummer Boy" is grating, and we share Jim's annoyance all the more easily since he gazes first at Dwight, and then directly at the camera, inviting us to commiserate with him – increasing audience participation in a way that the British version does not. This idea of wanting to suck in the audience is the opposite of the British version, where we're meant to be kept at a distance from the characters, while acknowledging the realism of the setting and situations.

The interactions between the two pairs of salesmen and their respective bosses continue to distinguish the two colleagues, and indeed the British characters from their American equivalents:

DAVID. Wassup?

TIM. Hey! Wassup? I love that.

DAVID. Wassup? Oh. [*points at Gareth*] You're fired, Keenan, drunkard. [*points to himself, laughing*] Hypocrite warning. [*mimes vomiting and then giggles*] Oh God. What's he been saying? It's all true. Guilty as charged. Oh yeah, went out with a few of his mates, didn't we? And he goes, "Well, tag along if you want, but I must warn you, David, they do get rowdy after a few pints." I went, "Oh, I'll see if I can stand it." I was worse than them by the end, wasn't I? Ha ha! They're going, "Who's that nutter?" "That's my boss." "Well we can't stand it anymore, we're going." They just left, didn't they?

GARETH. I told you.

DAVID. Absolutely mental. [*puts one hand around his throat, the other in front of him as if dying*] Resolve! [*he laughs, waiting for a response. There is none*] What?

TIM. Nothing.

DAVID. See you later.

TIM. See you later then. Take care. (UK 5:24-6:21)

[*Michael leaves his office and sneaks up behind Jim*]

MICHAEL. Wassup...?

[*Jim jumps, then responds with a half-hearted "Wassup"*]

JIM. I still love that, after seven years...

MICHAEL. WASSUP?

⁹ See Wim Vandekerckhove and Eva E. Tsahuridu, "Leaving the Dice Alone: Pointlessness and Hopelessness at Wernham-Hogg", in *The Office and Philosophy: Scenes from the Unexamined Life*, ed. J. Jeremy Wisniewski, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, London, New York, Blackwell, p. 38 [p. 38-48].

DWIGHT. WASSUP?
 MICHAEL. WASSUP?
 DWIGHT. wassup. [*awkward silence*]
 MICHAEL. [*turning to Jim*]: What?
 JIM. Nothing.
 MICHAEL. Ok, alright. See you later.
 JIM. Alright. Take care.
 MICHAEL. Back to work! (US 3:30-4:10)

When Michael interrupts their work with a “Wassup”, Jim makes the inappropriateness of the greeting explicit (“I still love that, after seven years”), and Dwight and Michael seem to compete to establish their dominance in the “wassup” game (Michael of course wins). After the exchange, there is literally nothing else to say – no stories of drunken revelry, just awkward silence, so limiting the relationship between Michael and Dwight in a way the British version does not. The hollowness of Brent’s stories here becomes literal silence, again streamlining and clarifying the ambiguity of the British original. In both cases, however, this exchange makes clear just how little meaning any of the manager’s interactions actually have – they are more to entertain (however unsuccessful they may be) than to inform.

In between these two conversations is the talking head interview, or “confessional”, with Tim and Jim where they each describe their jobs. The text is exactly the same, and the two actors even resemble each other to a certain extent, but their line readings are significantly different, and as a consequence change the impression of the character and the series in general. While Tim sits in a dimly lit room and speaks almost under his breath, clearly full of resignation and self-loathing, admitting that he’s boring himself with nary a smile, Jim’s explanation takes place near a window, in bright light, and his humor is obvious – though his job may be stupid, it doesn’t effect his general amusement at life, and his explanation is punctuated by gestures and grimaces, again drawing in the viewer, only to end by chuckling wryly when he finally gives up the attempt to try and make this interesting. In the first case, we feel Tim’s humiliation, and are put off by it; in the second, we see Jim’s attempts at formality fail, as he relapses into a more informal posture, thus admitting us into his confidence (see Plates 7 and 8). Though the rest of the series will confirm Tim as the moral conscience and the viewer’s perspective of the action, the American version of the character seems to want to establish this relationship as quickly as possible, and to make our means of entry into this world as likeable as possible: while Tim’s self-loathing may be off-putting, and his sometimes cruel treatment of Gareth can cause some malaise in our identification with him, Jim remains always calm and affable, thus making our identification with him as comfortable as possible.



Plates 8 and 9: Tim's chagrin and Jim's wry grin

Finally, a major difference between the American and the British version of *The Office* is the relationship between Tim and Dawn (UK) or Jim and Pam (US).

TIM. You like a drink?

DAWN. Yeah.

TIM. At the end of the week?

DAWN. Yeah.

TIM. Well this is why we're going out, so we can have an—

DAWN. When are we going out then?

TIM. —end of the week drink.

DAWN. When are we going out then?

TIM. Well, tonight, hopefully, I thought.

[Dawn's fiancé Lee appears. He is holding something wrapped in a black garbage bag under his arm. Tim immediately steps back from Dawn's desk]

LEE. Hello, mate.

DAWN. Hi.

LEE. Hi sweetheart, you ready, yeah?

DAWN. Yeah. Erm... would you mind, if I went out for a drink with this lot?

LEE. No, no, no. Come on, let's go home, yeah?

DAWN. OK. I'll erm... I'll be a couple of minutes, 'cos it's twenty past five.

TIM. *[to Lee]*: You should come, you know, it'd be a laugh.

LEE. No, I'd love to, mate, no, you're alright, seriously. We've got to get off.

TIM. OK.

[Dawn exits. Lee and Tim stand in silence. Nothing to say to each other. The silence becomes torturous]

TIM. Um, what's in the bag?

LEE. Just tell her I'll see her later, yeah?

TIM. Yeah, certainly will, mate. Alright, mate. Take care. (UK 24:04-25:03)

JIM. Do you like going out at the end of the week for a drink?

PAM. Yeah.

JIM. That's why we're all going out. So we can have an end of the week drink.

PAM. When are we going out?

JIM. I don't know... tonight, hopefully?

[Roy enters, with something wrapped in a garbage bag.]

ROY. Hey man. *[to Pam]* Hey babe.
[Confessional with Pam]
PAM. Roy's my fiancé. We've been engaged about... about three years. And uh... we were supposed to get married in September, but I think we're gonna... get married in the spring. *[nods head in silence]*
[Cut back to dialogue Jim/Pam/Roy]
PAM. Do you mind if I go out for a drink with these guys?
ROY. Uh... no, come on. Let's get out of here, go home.
PAM. Oh, OK. I'm gonna be a few minutes, it's still only twenty past five. I still have to do my faxes. *[She leaves. Jim turns to Roy]*
JIM. You know what, you should come with us. Because you know, we're all going out, could be a... good chance for you to see what people are like outside of the office. Yeah, I think it could be fun.
ROY. No, sounds good...
JIM. Oh, totally...
ROY. It's just that we gotta get going.
JIM. Yeah. Yeah yeah. *[Awkward silence. Jim scratches his neck, points to the package]* What's in... what's in the bag?
ROY. Just tell her I'll talk to her later.
JIM. No, definitely. Alright dude. Awesome. Will do. *[Roy leaves. Camera stays on Jim. Voiceover, then cut to confessional with Jim]*
JIM. Do I think... I'll be invited to the wedding? *[scratches his head, then looks seriously into the camera, lips pressed together]* (US 16:02-17:38)

While our other examples show a desire to streamline the original episode (after all, the American episode is ten minutes shorter than the thirty-minute British episode), here there is a clear desire to expand on the relationship between the receptionist and the salesman. In the British version of the series Dawn and Tim get no confessional time; we simply have the interaction between the two of them before the intrusion of the fiancé, Lee, and the awkward interaction between the two rivals. The camera work in the US version of the common scene, partially obscured by a pillar and some files, suggests the illicit nature of the feelings Jim and Pam share, and their interviews clearly set up the traditional love triangle and the fatal tensions that will eventually cause Pam's relationship with her fiancé, Roy, to dissolve. Here Pam reveals her timidity once again, as she is more or less cowed by the truculent Roy, and expresses her embarrassment at the length of their engagement (something that is never an issue in the British version of the series). Jim's knowing glance at the camera when asked if he thinks he'll be invited to the wedding again sets up generic expectations – this sexual tension between the two characters will be at the center of many episodes to come, and each will have to overcome obstacles in order to be together. Again, this expansion conforms to sitcom norms, making the love story a more obvious story arc than Gervais or Merchant chose

to do (though they too have stated that *The Office* was not about Brent as much as it was about the relationship between Dawn and Tim¹⁰).

All in all, then, the adaptation of this series is not so much to American culture as it is to American tastes: though there are some references that have been transformed, exchanging foreign phrases for *The Karate Kid*, for example, the primary effect of the changes to the series is to give the viewer familiar signals and to reassure them of their relationship with the show. The show may have a novel format, but we are assured through the form (the credits and theme music) and content (the traditional love triangle) that our sitcom expectations will be met. Likewise, though *The Office* was the first to bring the humor of discomfort (essentially invented by Gervais) to the States, this version of the series makes that discomfort less excruciating, limiting its impact to the storyline and primarily to the characters of Michael and Dwight (though the showrunners do maintain an awkward interaction between Jim and Roy), while reassuring us of the likeability of our stand-in Jim.

This conclusion may seem somewhat dim for the state of American television and for this series in particular; however, I need to place this back in the context of the series as a whole. The American version of *The Office* has just begun its eighth season, and has grown away from its British counterpart, finding its own identity (though that identity remains rooted in the issues we have discussed here): after all, this is only the pilot episode of the series. Though its comedy has become broader than the British series, including various love affairs, ridiculous plotlines, and cliffhangers (especially in the Jim and Pam relationship), it has managed to maintain a good deal more realism in its characterizations of the Jim/Pam relationship than has been seen before in an American comedy, and its evaluation of issues like racism, sexual harassment, job safety, and fluctuating economic climates are often unique to this series. They say that the United States is a culture of the explicit, and by drawing on the implied issues in the British version, the showrunners have made *The Office* their own.

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¹⁰ www.bfi.org.uk/features/interviews/gervaismerchant.html, consulted April 2010.

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