

Capitalism and Morality

OFFICE SPACE: SOFTWARE, STAPLERS, AND SATIRE

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Office Space is a late 1990s satire about Peter Gibbons, a miserable office worker, that finds himself questioning the point of his job, filing TPS reports for the software company Initech. Just as the company is about to go through serious downsizing, Peter is hypnotized into a carefree mentality that actually helps him get promoted rather than laid off. This satire captures the helplessness of miserable employees in an unbelievably bland, but ruthless, company. *Office Space* shows us a ridiculous story on a lifestyle many businesspeople actually live and leaves us questioning the purpose of our jobs when we only care about the paycheck.

The Story

Office Space begins locked within a gridlock of traffic, and this helpless gridlock we are introduced to the three main characters of the story: Peter Gibbons, Michael Bolton, and Samir Nagheenanajar. Each is frustrated with the endless traffic on their morning commute to Initech. Peter is helplessly changing lanes in hopes of shortening his commute, Michael is rapping to gangsta rap, and Samir is screaming and attacking the wheel of his car ferociously. After arriving late, Michael tries to sneak into the side door and is shocked by the doorknob.

When Michael finally arrives in his cubicle, or rather his prison cell, he is barraged by the all too annoying buzz of the office, from the broken record “Corporate accounts payable, Nina speaking. Just a moment...” to the noise of Milton’s radio. Peter is immediately confronted by Bill Lumbergh about failing to put the new cover sheet on TPS reports; immediately following Lumbergh’s exit, Peter is approached by his second boss who addresses the exact same problem. Rather than listening to Peter’s side, both rush off to make sure Peter gets another copy of the memo. In this scene we are introduced to the nonchalant but ruthless nature of Initech’s management.

In order to get away from this “Case of the Mondays,” Peter, Mike, and Samir escape to Chotchkie’s for some coffee; here they discuss their mutual hatred of Initech, the attractive waitress, and how Peter has to skip poker on Friday to see a hypnotherapist with Anne, Peter’s soon to be ex-girlfriend (she was cheating anyways). Upon return to work, Tom, a late middle-aged worker is complaining about the recently announced layoffs. Finally, before Peter can escape to the security of the weekend, Lumbergh asks Peter to come in to work both Saturday and Sunday – totally eliminating the weekend Peter desperately needs to rejuvenate.

Friday night at the hypnotherapist, Peter confesses that each day is worse than the previous day, thus making today the worst day of his life, and he begs the hypnotherapist to make him not even realize when

he is at work. The hypnotherapist hypnotizes Peter into a calm state of mind that he never wakes Peter from due to an untimely, and lethal, heart attack. With his newfound outlook on life, Peter decides to sleep in rather than go to work. He does this many days in a row, and on one of his self-proclaimed days off he asks Joanna, the attractive waitress at Chotchkie's, out to lunch. At lunch they both find similarities in their hatred of their jobs and love of *Kung-Fu*, and Peter declares that he will no longer show up for work. However, in order to write down Joanna's number, he must return to the office to get his address book, and he arrives just in time for his meeting with the "Bobs," the men in charge of the layoffs.

Due to his positive attitude and outlook on life, the Bobs look past Peter's lackluster work ethic and decide that he simply needs motivation in order to be a productive worker. Peter continues to rebel against Initech, rarely showing up and fooling around when he is present. In the following meetings with the Bobs, Peter finds out that he is being promoted due to his attitude, but Samir and Mike (among others, including Tom) will soon be laid off.

Peter begins to realize the ruthless nature of Initech's layoffs, replacing Mike and Samir with recent graduates, and decides to escalate his rebellion. He enlists Mike and Samir in a heist to rip off Initech one penny at a time with a virus Mike wrote himself. In order to celebrate the heist and layoffs, all three destroy the fax machine they have all grown to hate. Later that weekend, at Tom's retirement party, Peter finds out that Joanna slept with Lumbergh, soon ruining the Peter's new relationship. Joanna takes this out on her boss, who is very similar to Lumbergh, by quitting her job after refusing to add more "flair," pins, to her Chotchkie's uniform.

Peter's life soon takes a turn for the worse; after breaking up with Joanna, he checks the virus-linked bank account and find the balance to be about \$300,000. The three friends take the virus' failure out on one another, fearing for their "cornholes" in prison. Peter decides to apologize to Joanna and writes a check for the stolen amount as well as a letter of confession, turning himself in to save his friends. After sliding the note under Lumbergh's door, Milton, fed up with Lumbergh's abusive nature (always stealing Milton's stapler and forcing Milton to move), decides to burn Initech to the ground. The movie ends with Mike and Samir in new programming jobs, Peter happy with Joanna and his new job in construction, and Milton in paradise, living on the check that Peter wrote. Although the fire is rather *deus ex machina*, the movies ending seems all too fitting for the main characters, especially Milton.

The Literary and Business Themes and Motifs

Lacking "Flair" due to a "Case of the Mondays"

One of the main themes of the movie is the characters' morale while on the job. Each of the main characters in this film share a mutual hatred for their job (both Chotchkie's and Initech), and we can see this from the very first scene, the commute, that Peter, Mike, and Samir are not look forward to their day of work. This is also seen in Joanna when she consistently avoids wearing any more than the minimum amount of required "flair." Between the "flair" and TPS reports, the main characters of this film question the purpose of their job and wonder if the work is even worth the paycheck.

Although the main characters show minimal "flair" for their jobs, not all employees of Initech and Chotchkie's are miserable, Brian, the ridiculously annoying waiter, and Nina, the ever chipper office worker, show genuine enthusiasm for their jobs and care about the wellbeing of their employers. These overly enthusiastic employees are a complete foil of the main characters. In fact, Brian happily displays over double the amount of required "flair" (thirty seven pieces!) and has an attitude to match this external display of flair. Within the film, the "flair" is a motif that conveys the character's outlook for Chotchkie's – Joanna has minimal care for her job while Brian emanates the ideals of Chotchkie's. Although this "flair" is not worn at Initech, the motif applies to both employers.

This negative attitude, or as a co-worker calls it a “case of the Monday’s,” stems from a fatalist approach about employment. Rather than caring about their work, each employee simply does what they have been told to do, by outside norms as well as their bosses. This is apparent when Peter tells the Bobs that his only motivation to do well is to avoid getting yelled at by his eight bosses. Instead of searching for a new job and lifestyle they would actually enjoy, the characters accept the comfort of their current paychecks at the cost of their sanity. The characters need to find their real goal in life, their *telos*, but they refuse to look for a new way of life – at least until Peter is hypnotized.

By the end of the movie, Peter is willing to take a less socially accepted job in order to actually care about the work he does, Joanna quits the job she hates, but both Mike and Samir continue to do work that they are trained for but do not actually enjoy. For this reason, Peter shows much more “flair” for his job shoveling the burnt ruins of Initech while Samir and Mike seem to still care very little for their new jobs. Sadly, this will probably lead to constant “cases of the Mondays” for Mike and Samir.

Gridlock and Prison

From the opening scene of the movie, we are introduced to a theme of helplessness or gridlock. No matter how hard Peter tries to get ahead within the traffic, he consistently gets stuck, and upon arrival at Initech, the cubicles come to represent a new type of gridlock, or prison. This gridlock theme represents how little control these characters choose to have over their current life.

Changing their lifestyles would take effort, but the reward is great; so why would they choose to stay in a job that makes them miserable? It all stems from the short sighted philosophy of working for a steady paycheck from Initech. Since they refuse to look for new work, they are locked into a job with very little freedom. This is especially true when Peter constantly gets asked to work on the weekends – Initech locks Peter into this lifestyle (even though, ironically, he chooses to work there).

This prison metaphor becomes humorous by the second half of the movie when Peter, Mike, and Samir actually fear real prison time. After uploading the virus, they each get very paranoid about their futures, and Mike and Samir even ask a lawyer details about prison time. The characters are introduced to a real sense of prison, and they truly fear this confinement. They realize the freedom they have and do not want to lose it. In the end, although Mike and Samir choose to go to another computer company that gives them a similar gridlock, they are happy to have the freedom to choose their lifestyle (even if they choose a hypothetical prison), and, thankfully, Peter breaks the masochistic cycle and loves his new job in construction.

Gangsta rap and Rebellion

Throughout this movie, dominated by white male computer nerds, the soundtrack is ironically full of “gangsta rap,” usually associated with inner city gangs, drugs, and violence. We are introduced to this music early in the movie; Mike, the timid computer programmer, is rapping along to gangsta rap during his morning commute to Initech. This music soon becomes a motif for the rebellious and sometimes crude and violent nature of the main characters.

The first major gangsta song is actually entitled “Damn it Feels Good to be a Gangsta,” and it is played when Peter decides to come into work at his leisure after his first meeting with the Bobs. Peter rebels because he realizes that he holds a certain amount power over his eight bosses since it is quite inefficient and the Bobs are looking to remove inefficiencies. During the song he uses a power drill to remove the door handle that constantly shocks him, guts a fish on top of his TPS reports, and knocks over his cubicle in order to finally get a view of the outside. This scene demonstrates the power he now has

over his work environment and the songs lyrics are about the power of a true gangsta – which is what Peter sees himself as.

The two other scenes with gangsta rap have less memorable lyrics, but each song sets the tone for the scene. The first is during the virus upload, when the three decide to finally rebel and steal from the company. The scene is over dramatized and even resembles a drug deal, but in the end uploading the virus is quite simple. The final scene with a definite gangsta tone to it is when Peter steals the fax machine so Mike and Samir can take out their aggression on the machine they have grown to hate. Many of the kicks and hits on the fax machine are backed by the sound of gunshots, further increasing the gangsta mood of the scene.

Office Space uses gangsta rap to represent a lifestyle the main characters will never live. Although Mike likes rapping along to it, none of the main characters are anything like a gangsta. Instead, they are somewhat rebellious and view themselves as something they are not. With such a low job morale, it is no wonder they like to pretend they are gangstas, since they have very little to live for at Initech. They simply need something new in their life, and this rebellion makes them feel like something they will never be, a real gangsta.

Conclusion

This movie is a total satire on the computer jobs of the 1990s, and it exemplifies the mindset of many workers in these dead end jobs. Rather than finding something they actually enjoy, the workers often feel locked into jobs that they hate. This can be due to social pressures, the idea of wasting education (e.g. having a Bachelor's in Computer Science and not working with computers), and the comfort of a large paycheck. Regardless of these reasons, the main characters in this job are miserable and eventually rebel against the company that is going to lay them off. If only more people were like Peter, willing to find a goal, a *telos*, that he actually shows some "flair" for.