Where Vanity Meets Volition: Technicity, Self-Monitoring, and the Comedy of Exasperation

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Most contemporary American film and television comedies portray anger as the default mode in which we encounter the world. In this essay, I want to ask what it might mean, in political terms, to laugh at this style of anger, and, more specifically, at an experience of exasperation so consistently displayed in the genre. Despite the common perception that laughter is a superficial response to fiction, I contend that our laughter in the face of displays of exasperation erupts from our marrow, that it is a way of training ourselves to take ourselves the right amount of serious.[1] I want to suggest that exasperation has been regularly featured throughout the history of comedy as an endgame for the forces of comic rigidity; yet, at the same time, I will argue that our current moment is especially and importantly acquainted with what I will call "comedies of exasperation." To do this, I will begin by briefly tracing the presence of this emotional register in American film before examining three current television situation comedies—*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005), *Archer* (2009), and *Veep* (2012)—in order to arrive at a picture of exasperation as a limit case of anger. While I will formulate my conception of exasperation by analyzing these shows, I want to recognize two characteristics from the outset: exasperation as both a form of directionless anger and also a refusal to meet the claims made upon one to react.

To understand the politics of exasperation, and the politics indicated by our laughter at it—and also to define exasperation as a subgeneric sensibility—I will position these texts alongside Lauren Berlant's description of a contemporaneous predicament in the U.S. that she names "cruel optimism."[2] Berlant diagnoses a cultural malaise that stems from an attachment to problematic desires, to the fruits of actions rather than ethical motivations, which is a function of living in the U.S. in the era of late capitalism. However, I want to extend Berlant's argument about the tiring effects social and economic structures can have on citizens to include so-called "social media." That is, I want to suggest that exasperation, as a condition of being angry while lacking an object to express one's anger at, emerges most insistently in a moment distinguished by wireless technologies and global financialization; in a time when we cannot point to the powers that control our daily lives. Considering exasperation in this context will allow us to see how these comedies undermine prevalent myths concerning work, play, information, and technology. In particular, this context will help us understand the centrality of scenarios in which characters monitor each other. That is, if the machine age manifested a Bergsonian comic mode intent upon critiquing the ways in which the human was being integrated with the machine in industrial labor practices, as Michael North has argued, then I want to ruminate on ways that contemporary comedy indexes (insofar as fiction can) effects of changes wrought by the advent of the information age.[3] In this light, the spectacle of exasperation becomes a timely, appealing illusion of escape, an ambivalent gasp of the human drowning in new forms of technology.

Situating Situation Comedy
The picture of exasperation that I want to highlight has many precursors, such as the omnidirectional, bouncing conniptions of Yosemite Sam and Daffy Duck, or the flailing Basil in *Fawlty Towers* (1975). The clearest ancestor is to be found in the Marx Brothers's *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933) when Chico and Harpo relentlessly dog a street vendor. In this scene, we witness the brothers as they purloin the vendor's hat, stomp on his wares, and hang their knees in his hands until he becomes spitting mad. Their pursuit can be seen as a leftist/anarchist rejection of market economics and that etiquette that abets such an economy. The brothers disarrange his business and

his attire, thereby exposing the simple truth that everyone puts on a social façade. It is cruel but nonetheless funny to see how quickly the vendor can be made to seethe—despite the fact that it is difficult to imagine what a proper response to Harpo and Chico's nonsense might instead be. However, exasperation need not emerge on as grand a scale as the vendor's. Just as evocative in the cinematic heritage of exasperation is the hands up, palms out gesture—perhaps the quintessential gesture of exasperation.

Many contemporary exasperation comedies follow *Duck Soup*'s recipe. Characters "push each others' buttons." They "wind others up," "work them up," until they reach the limits of their ability to express themselves in a reasonable way. Consider, for instance, Will Ferrell's vehicles, which feature him, again and again, reaching his wit's end, such as we see in *Anchorman* (Adam McKay, 2004), or else the climax of *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011), in which Kristen Wiig's character loses all composure when she thinks her friend's affection has been stolen and destroys the setting of her friend's bridal shower. Yet exasperation seems especially at home on TV, which is why I will focus on *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Archer*, and *Veep*. *Always Sunny* follows a group of working class misfits who run an unsuccessful bar; *Archer* is an animated farce set in a spy agency; and *Veep* concerns the dysfunctional office of U.S. vice-president Selina Myer. Although I do not (yet) want to impose stark boundaries for this sitcom sensibility, *Arrested Development* (2003) would be an influential early entry, as would British TV series like *The Office* (2001), *The Mighty Boosh* (2003), and *The Thick of It* (2005).[4] Popular digital TV/web series like *Billy on the Street* (2011), where a huffy malcontent discomfits unsuspecting folks walking through the streets of New York City, operate similarly, as do television shows that are not strictly comedies, like *House, M.D.* (2004), which leans on the trope of one character driving another up the proverbial wall for comic effect. Even political information has come to be dispensed in a funny-angry register, as the most trusted news anchor in the U.S. hosts *The Daily Show* (1996),[5] which casts politics (and the reporting of political information) as a cause for exasperation.

However, the chief spectatorial pleasure in comedies of exasperation is not *schadenfreude*. On the contrary, we are not asked to relate primarily to the exasperators, as we are in *Duck Soup*. Rather, we follow the street vendor type, the unlikeable workaday folk. Gone are intransigent notions of the enemy. The world—generally but not always identified as the demands of institutions—takes on the role of thwarting energy previously occupied by figures like Harpo and Chico. Just like Harpo and Chico, the world will not listen to reason, and the absence of obvious sources of aggravation leaves characters today without external targets for their anger, a predicament that, as I will show, compels characters to direct their anxiety about their autonomy outward by monitoring others. And just as we laugh with Harpo and Chico *at* the vendor while simultaneously thinking them cruel, so, too, do we side with the world for punishing these people even as we pity them, recognizing the lack of transparent principles that designate their worlds—such that we might, in turn, imagine more honorable ones.

Of course, traditional sitcoms have always been rife with anger and all sorts of vexation, frustration, and irritation. Recall, for instance, the self-righteous indignation of the leads in *The Honeymooners* (1955), *Maude* (1972), *Roseanne* (1988), or *Seinfeld* (1989), the bigoted patriarch of *All in the Family* (1971), the high-strung father of *Sanford and Son* (1972), the condescendingly teed off Jack Benny, or the carping Larry David of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (1999). Unlike exasperation, these characters' emotional displays are always clearly identified as directional and reveal a willingness to engage with the claims made upon them by one social institution or another. This sort of attachment to the world, which is attested to by an obvious desire for that world to change (or to not change) is not as clear in comedies of exasperation, which are steeped in futility. Here, exasperation surmounts

object-oriented frustration. Other features also distinguish comedies of exasperation, from small tropes, such as each having one man treated abominably for no apparent reason (Charlie in *Always Sunny*, Brett in *Archer*, Gary in *Veep*, Lutz in *30 Rock*, etc.) to larger themes, such as the absent father figures and the lampooning the idea of the neoliberal workspace as one of improvisation and invention, as the space in which one will self-actualize and find an adult community-family. An irony basic to all comedies of exasperation is that working together (however amiably) always results in economic capital for the entity oppressing the protagonists. Nevertheless, these characters continue to wager that their social capital will yield success.

Indeed, if the respective rise of the sitcom and postwar neoliberalism are so far coterminous, perhaps we should not be surprised that self-conscious sitcoms express the anger of people whose lives are grounded in professional ambition and yet face constant crises. This particular version of eternal recurrence is formally echoed while shows are still on the air, as my main three examples are, since one is free to believe that new episodes, new crises, will continue to appear. As Malory, the matriarch of *Archer*, aptly declaims: "It's just one calamity after another around here" ("Legs"). Moreover, not only is crisis made ordinary; it is expected. This is a departure from the populations featured in, say, *I Love Lucy* (1951), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970), *Friends* (1994), or *Will and Grace* (1998), all of whom appeared to believe that things will go their way each week. By contrast, the characters in comedies of exasperation remember their crises, which makes their relentless repetition more sinister than those of sitcoms past. Crises, like Charlie's disastrous attempts to woo his waitress love in *Always Sunny*, are not forgotten, even as the mistakes leading to them are repeated.

Berlant's Optimism

"Crisis," Berlant writes, "[is] a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories navigating what's overwhelming."[6] Like many cultural scholars do when thinking about depictions of "ordinary" people, she looks to the sitcom as a prominent form that reflects America's most popular fantasies about its social microcosms. Considering how genres posit the relation of individuals to crisis, Berlant claims that, "[i]n the situation comedy, personality is figured as a limited set of repetitions that will inevitably appear in new situations—but what makes them comic and not tragic is that in this genre's imaginary, *the world has the kind of room for us that enables us to endure*."[7] Berlant contrasts this treatment with a group of texts that she names the "situation tragedy," which she describes as "the marriage between tragedy and situation comedy where people are fated to express their flaws episodically, over and over, without learning, changing, being relieved, becoming better or dying."[8] Both genres rely on the replication of a flawed personality; where the comic accommodates, the tragic condemns.

For Berlant, attending to situation tragedies is urgent business. They dramatize cruel optimism, a concept that she articulates precisely in order to capture the difficulty of building a life in a time of late capitalism. ("Optimism" for Berlant is a structurally relational category that involves an "invest[ment] in one's own or the world's continuity, but might *feel* any number of ways."[9]) Of course, fusing comedy and drama is nothing new, certainly not after Beckett, Cage, Klee, or Kafka. Berlant's notion echoes Chekhov, in particular, whose characters are "comedians by necessity, smitten with a tragic sense of life, and lyrically in love with the ideal in a world poorly equipped to satisfy such aspirations."[10] But, more specifically,

> [a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project…. These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.[11]

Berlant sees this as a political matter, and she builds on a familiar strain of late 1960s and 1970s Althusserian-Lacanian critical theory to emphasize the affective burden of contemporary life.[12] That is, her focus is less on the *fact* of desire than on how we *feel* about our desires—and how we feel about the diffusion or absence of objects that we might plausibly desire. We are weary of norms, according to Berlant, and of hovering between our desires for what capitalism dictates we desire and the impossibility of satisfying those desires. We now have a right to ask: "What constitutes continuity amid the pressure of structural inconstancy? What is the good life when the world that was to have been delivered by upward mobility and collective uplift that national/capitalism promised goes awry in front of one?"[13]

We might already begin to hear in her argument the value of exasperation for conceptualizing living amid irreconcilables that are only manageable through comedy or religion. In fact, comedies of exasperation also demonstrate the conditions of cruel optimism, though they do not fit into her category of situation tragedy. The most obvious difference is that Berlant's situation tragedies are decidedly bleak and do not invite laughter. They follow characters who "[move] between having a little and being ejected from the social."[14] The tragicomic thrust of comedies of exasperation is that it is precisely membership in the social realm that is undesirable. The social entraps characters. If only they *could* be ejected, then they might have a shot at happiness. In comedies of exasperation, crises do not *befall* characters who then work to reestablish equilibrium or contentment. Rather, characters start unhappy and are met with *further* crises. Crises are not resolved so much as they give way to new ones. Another crucial difference is that comedies of exasperation follow historically privileged types of people, which permits them to indict problematic social institutions while remaining comic. To belong to a privileged class today without knowing that one does is laughable. Depictions of the relatively un-oppressed provoke laughter at the ways that such people may participate in their own oppression. Classically, tragedies presume access to happiness so that it may be spoilt or sacrificed, but these comedies of exasperation remind us that happiness is not exactly a default mode of human existence.

Yet, even if comedies of exasperation do not quite fit into Berlant's generic system, her framework is helpful for thinking about how they imagine autonomy and the constraints of social normativity. While older workplace comedies have depicted power by narrativizing spaces such as the executive washroom and the top floors of office buildings, comedies of exasperation bear out a profound reorientation, where dominating forces remain indeterminate. This echoes the fact that characters' objects of anger and desire are also not so easily located. Their workplace is everywhere and nowhere. Even when home, they are with co-workers, and their ambition never flags.

Always Sunny, *Archer,* and *Veep* each judge capitalism harshly, yet we are also meant to laugh at people, a.k.a., fools, for lacking the self-awareness to stop participating in this system, a system all too skilled at defeating them. In this respect, it is worth noting that comedies of exasperation are about selves as members of collectives. They are ensemble shows and, as such, regularly follow different configurations of characters, thereby embodying a network aesthetic—the comic counterparts to TV's "Golden Age" "serious" fare, like *The Sopranos* (1999), *The Wire* (2002), and *The Good Wife* (2009). If dramas like *The Wire* perform a straightforward "systemic analysis" of social ills, to use Marsha Kinder's phrase, insofar as they visualize interconnected microcosms and institutions, comedies of exasperation do similar work by *ironically* focusing on individuals—a focus proven untenable in each show.[15]

That comedies of exasperation balance an interest in the individual and collective is a crucial point, lest we think that they place blame on individuals, which could be read as a neoliberalist gesture. To overcome cruel optimism, Berlant recommends that citizens invent new forms of being specific to them, and who but an individual can do this? (Robert Pippin helpfully calls this *leading* a life.[16]) However, in this respect, comedies of exasperation are less optimistic than Berlant. They tap into anxiety about innovation itself at a time when touting "the new" has become the oldest trick in the techno-capitalist book. These shows call into play our suspicions that we may never create something new, or ever be able to know whether we have done so. As we will see, characters typically try to create something but fail. They try to learn new information and to be spontaneous. They try to create new relations with those around them, but just end up repeating their blunders. By showing us where these attempts fall apart, these shows pierce widely cherished delusions about individual agency as only comedy can. As Wylie Sypher long ago pointed out: tragedy gives us what "must happen... Comedy gives us surprise, chance, contingency, and all the changes in fortune that fall outside the necessities of tragic myth, and can thus present 'character' for its own sake."[17]

Improvisation Isn't Always Sunny
All three of my cases effect a feeling of contingency, of improvisation (by which I mean that they engender a *feeling* of watching unscripted actions). *Archer*'s overlapping speech, full of characters' stammers and failures to think up retorts, carries a sense of spontaneity, as does the largely improvised dialogue of *Veep* and *Always Sunny*. The latter show especially foregrounds chaotic, seemingly extemporaneous, interactions. Mac, Dennis, Sweet Dee, and Charlie are "the gang"—to use the show's term—social misfits who run an unsuccessful bar.[18] The show critiques the traditional workplace comedy where little work is done (which is always a dicey implication that the production of goods and services takes care of itself). It indicates the difficulty of upward economic and social mobility while also blaming each character's ludicrous sense of entitlement. These broke characters are always scheming to strike out and get rich. More often than not, though, their aspirations arise from the egging on of their friends or from competition with other more "successful" individuals in the neighborhood than from their own innate desires. Their thwarted vanity constitutes the show's wellspring of humor, but it also serves as a means of repeatedly portraying their unhappiness as a result of a society that encourages them to crave an unattainable lifestyle. Dee, for instance, believes that she will not matter until she is a celebrity, so she regularly performs as a standup comic despite suffering from debilitating stage fright:

Always Sunny **CLIP: ["**

Always Sunny also explicitly casts the gang's vanity—which is really insecurity—as inseparable from their white, heterosexual, middle-class, privileged perspectives. For example, in the pilot, the bar rakes in cash after the gang hires a gay, African-American promoter. However, their unwitting racism and homophobia prevent them from sustaining what would otherwise be a fruitful collaboration. They each fail to recognize their own bigotry, yet are highly alert to, and exasperated by, the bigotry of others. They scream and fight, but just end up shaking their heads or throwing up their hands. For instance, Mac, who believes himself virtuous, remarks that, "black people…know each other." In this world, *everyone* thinks that they are better than they are. While the inappropriateness of characters' utterances may create a frisson that primes spectators to laugh, we are not invited to share characters' prejudice. We are instead asked to laugh at their conceptual infelicities and the ridiculousness of their self-images. Comedies of exasperation are often impious, but rarely offensive. Rather than make any effort to address their prejudices, these characters go to great lengths to prove, to themselves and each other, that they already are unprejudiced. They want to forge their self-images in the world against all evidence. But vanity is not the only force prohibiting the gang

from reaching their goals. Mac's ignorance, for example, is exposed as partially attributable to failures of his family, education, and Catholicism. The gang's exasperation mocks these social institutions, too, indicating that exasperation is not just an affect, but is, at the same time, a critical means of dealing with ignorance.

Because their desires are fueled by delusions and narcissism, the show makes plain that the gang's various fantasies of the good life are better understood as obstacles to the achievement of a good life. Their friendships are a fundamental aspect of this nefarious ideality. They do not see the structures that trap them, which are named by the show as economic and interpersonal—and they don't see the connection between those things. This is highlighted in an episode in which the gang attempts to leave Philadelphia, so as to escape the confines of the bar and the doldrums of daily routine, only to find themselves ever more enclosed in their repetitious world à la *The Exterminating Angel* (Luis Bunuel, 1962) ("The Gang Hits the Road"). Mutual exasperation is the tie that binds the group, but lest we think that it is a loving bond between characters, as in *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), we know that there will never be an epiphany that they are actually having fun. They are as self-aware as they ever will be, and exasperation is not a space they move through to maturity. Hence, the perpetuation or restoration of diegetic social orders by which comedy is classically recognized is here rendered unappealing. The knowledge that the gang will face the same struggles takes on a Sisyphean cast, for it is not just we who know it; they know it. Still, the gang's ability to keep going is perversely fascinating. They are even admirable in their ability to go on mustering hope even as they welcome the crushing rock of optimism-defeat.

Berlant—like intellectuals from Walter Benjamin to John Rawls—considers improvisation and play as a last line of defense for the individual. Improvisation provides access to freedom and can be a remedy to automation, allowing for invention and alterity, and so, it can enable, or ennoble, people to lead lives. By contrast, *Always Sunny* dramatizes improvisation as always unsuccessful. To take one brief instance, in "*America's Next Top Paddy's Billboard Model Contest,*" Dee decides to make a "viral" video to advertise the pub—but her real purpose is to attain vainglory. Against better judgment, she lets Charlie help her. Dee performs as a zany Irish salesperson but when the racist, bland result flops, Charlie decides to "make it funnier" and surprise Dee by throwing a volleyball at her head. When she asks why he would do such a thing, he explains: "That's what Youtube video is…That's what people want to see: people getting injured or seriously hurt. That's funny!" Charlie knows that Dee is willing to do anything for notoriety, so they continue until Dee can absorb no more hits, until she can only throw up her hands and say "[i]t's too much."

Because we know Charlie will bring Dee to a point of exasperation, this scene of unexpectedness (we are initially surprised at Charlie's actions, too) is also perfectly predictable. There is no promise of freedom through spontaneity here. The mechanical subsumes the improvisatory. In this way, *Always Sunny* accosts us with the dark truth that improvisation does not necessarily entail the creation of something new; it is not always generative and can be repetitive. I will return to this idea below, but I want to suggest, for now, that exasperation is instrumental for Dee. It allows her to escape the dynamic tension between improvisation and automation. She must be overwhelmed and lose herself in the assault expressly in order to be able to take herself back—though we learn by the next scene that she has failed to appreciate this chance to think seriously about her actions. Here, spontaneity fails if one lacks the wherewithal to think through the parameters of action. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that the gang is not improvising but behaving impulsively.

This episode aired in 2008, and even though YouTube only debuted three years prior, in the same year as *Always Sunny*, the faux-improvised quality, and the cruelty, of many of the most popular early

viral videos was obvious. By parodying this style, the episode points out how viral videos peddle "surprise" while abiding by predictable formats—naming the humor enthralled with the pain of others as both something new and newly ordinary. In this light, we might also see *Always Sunny* as reflecting the affects of online social culture more broadly. Can anyone *not* hear in the gang's hyperbolic conversations, where the rational and irrational enjoy equal status, an echo of online "trolls," or the nutso voices that comprise so many comment boards (and that threaten to diminish the democratic conviction that every citizen deserves to be heard equally)? *Always Sunny* allows audiences to laugh at a community that is not communal, where fellow citizen and enemy are indiscernible. With its fast-paced speech and multiple storylines, a sense of bombardment infuses its world. When choices are presented with such insistence (as they so often are via digital media), we judge characters less harshly for their weak wills. We may even sympathize with their frustration at the pressures of immediacy, as their contexts have primed them, and, with its urgency, us, to react so intensely, providing the distance for audiences to judge and come to care about such irascible people.

Archer and the Erotics of Exasperation

Like *Always Sunny* (and *Veep*), *Archer* is full of talk and little communication. It also assumes an audience alert to the representation of politicized identities, and while its characters often make insensitive remarks about class, race, gender, sexuality, and disability, they are exasperated when called out for their prejudice.[19] *Archer* directs viewers to consider relations between iconicity, culture, stereotypes, and identity formally, too, by melding imagery from different periods to reflect on the historical situatedness of identity. Most of the scenery of the spies' headquarters, the International Secret Intelligence Service, or ISIS, has a 1960s "look," invoking that decade's near-mythical place in the cultural imaginary as the era of the demise of the traditional, oppressive, white patriarchy— which is typically cited the beginning of our current era.[20] The titular agent's bachelor pad is decked out in early 1960s chic, befitting his mock-James Bond masculinity, and his mother and head of ISIS, Malory, tools around in 1960s Jackie Kennedy glamor. However, Lana, who identifies as African-American, has 1970s Blaxploitationist clothes and cars; Ray, who identifies as gay, has a 1990s aesthetic (the decade when gay males reached widespread mainstream visibility in U.S. screen fiction); the office computers are modeled on the PCs of the 1980s (specifically Apple Macintosh IIs), etc. The maintenance of these stereotypes of gender, age, race, and sexuality and compartmentalized associations functions not just as sources of humorous anger within the diegesis, but as satirical commentary on those who live with—or are stuck inside—historically normativized categories.

Notably, *Archer*'s characters are not imprisoned by sexual normativity. It features hyper-idealized bodies (here, the figurative exaggeration of the animation is crucial) accessing unidealized —"deviant"—desires. From the choking-fetishist secretary to the mad scientist (and one of the "boys from Brazil") who is intimate with a hologram, *Archer* invests all of its characters with robust, awkward, taboo, and fluid sexualities. This ubiquitous sexuality is inseparable from the show's mapping of exasperation, because, in this world, the ones who can get to you are the ones you want to get with. Characters' horniness is proportionate to their desire to escape their lives (for instance, Pam, the least respected member of ISIS, is undeniably the randiest of the bunch). Soliciting and achieving exasperation from others becomes both a tool for achieving sexual climax within the diegesis and a metaphor for sex for the audience. Suitably, grunts and sighs are the customary signs of exasperation in *Archer*, which suggests both the release of anger and post-coital tristesse. Characters heave their sighs as if their breath is too heavy to bear, decanting their selves like a contemptuous gift to the world.

ISIS is an information-gathering service—a resonant figure for audiences who count on search engines—and we might see the overlapping of work and sexual play as a reflection of the fact that, increasingly, computer screens function as the space for work and—if statistics about pornography on the web are reliable—sexual activity, if not both at once. We might also see the allusions to the Bond franchise in this light, as, arguably, the spy thriller genre did more to encourage the desire for gadgetry (to see machines *as* sexy) than any other. Except in *Archer*, "the latest" technology never works (e.g., satellites and cell phones fail whenever a bomb needs defusing). "As citizens of a digitally enabled world," Janet Murray writes, "we are subject to many kinds of monitoring…We are open to photographic and sound recording through portable devices that were once the domain of superspies."[21] In this light, *Archer*'s very premise becomes an apt metaphor for contemporary living: the superspy lifestyle made bumblingly ordinary.

The computer-generated visuals of *Archer* also signal ambivalence toward hi-tech devices and cyber technology. The backgrounds are deep and detailed, evoking the tradition of watercolor painting and hand-drawn animation, while the human figures are flat, textureless planes of color, obviously computer-made. The walls have more depth than the people. This ambivalence is most obvious in the fact that Archer's archenemy is Barry, who is established as Archer's "double" (he works at the competing spy agency), and who becomes a cyborg. Moreover, the woman with whom Archer falls in love and wants to marry, Katya, also becomes a cyborg—and then falls for Barry. Regardless of whether or our theories tells us that we are all cyborgs or posthuman, *Archer* stages the still-common feeling of being human in a world where one's rivals are cyborgs, tapping into anxiety not just about having feelings for and about technology, but about our technologized selves as we conceptualize the magnitude of the onset of "new media."[22]

The Myth of Information
That *Archer* follows secret agents that are really agents of secrets is a still more obvious way that it concerns difficulties of occupying a bit of the information age, how with the locomotive of the web comes the tramp of the uninformed. As professionals in the information trade, the agents of ISIS should appreciate the premium placed on information. They should know how to wield, protect, or locate it—but they don't (ISIS, like any comedy of exasperation workplace, is not successful). Nevertheless, they constantly fact- and grammar-check each other—taking on the role of monitor that Murray attributes to digital technology. One of the show's biggest running gags is how exasperated everyone is by Archer's incessant spewing of factoids. His factoids have sent me, like most viewers, to search the web, a rather brilliant reflexive ploy on the show's part. There is even a wiki devoted to *Archer*'s obscure references. Is there anything that plagues members of Web 2.0 culture more than having access to information without the ability to understand it and organize it into knowledge?

Archer, like other comedies of exasperation, thus satirizes what I want to call "the myth of information" that appears in so many modern narratives: the belief that discovering *one more thing* will fix everything. Nothing is ever resolved by the discovery of information in *Archer*. Typically, the agents do not even know what information they pursue. They are usually sent to retrieve information that Malory, the controller of the purse strings, does not want to land "in the wrong hands." Furthermore, the ISIS employees never know her motives.[23] There is a promise with each scenario that they may learn *enough*, but even when they succeed in a mission that they find still more information has been withheld (as when the agents are deployed to find a terrorist or a mole only to learn that Malory made up the crises to get back at her rival Trudy) ("Live and Let Dine," "Skytanic"). And when they assume it is another of Malory's recorded trysts with the head of the KGB, for instance ("Honeypot"), they also know that there will always be another sex tape to

recover, or, rather, to cover up (they fight for her privacy while having none). Thus, the spy in *Archer* becomes another cruelly optimistic figure. When characters are exasperated with Malory for withholding information, or with Archer for too freely dispensing it, they glimpse this condition. The spies know too little or too much, and either way, pursuing trivia and secrets inhibits their ability (unbeknownst to them) to properly value information and to know.

Veep: Coffee and Sympathy

Veep's dramatic stakes are also heightened by the always-looming threat that there is something vital that the characters do not know. In each episode, Selina and her staff clamor for power in cutthroat Washington, D.C.[24] The show's first crisis happens after one of Selina's staff mistweets her support for new "green" cornstarch eating utensils, thereby angering the plastics industry, which angers the oil lobby, and within seconds all of D.C. views Selina as a pariah. *Veep* does not show the resolution of problems, but their incessant discovery. Crises call for the effort to find and contain information, to govern it better. Examples abound. Season one ends with the office sidestepping scandal by hiding information in "full disclosure" (which is still only partial disclosure) with an "information dump," and season two follows the fluctuations in the public's opinion about Selina's knowledge of a bungled covert military operation—or, more specifically, what she had access to knowing. Echoing *Archer*, *Veep* sardonically resonates with recent philosophical views that technological advances have ushered in the age of posthumanism. At the beginning of her tenure, for instance, Selina already wants to refashion her image as "2.me." She irreverently calls the president a "faultless GPS" ("Frozen Yoghurt"), her strategist, Dan, "think[s] in hashtags" ("Running"), and her assistant Amy explains that the "nod of [her] head is like [she's] buffering" ("Full Disclosure").

Anger is portrayed as necessarily concomitant to the string of uninterrupted dilemmas, infusing characters' every action. (Gary, Selina's technologically inept personal assistant is the meek exception that proves the rule.) In fact, in this world, the outbreak of a genuine smile can even get you fired ("Full Disclosure"). Space prohibits elaborating on the taxonomy of anger *Veep* limns, or how that relates to the show's gender politics, but *Veep* illustrates how we might distinguish exasperation from other kinds of anger. There are moments like this that show Selina moving from frustration to exasperation and back again:

Veep CLIP 1 ["WTF, Amy?"]

She is frustrated while concentrating on Amy. Her feelings have a directional force. She retains some hope that things could get better, and believes that her outburst might result in something, even if she's having a hard time fully convincing herself of that possibility. But exasperation appears, too, as Selina interrupts her censure, as she loses the ability to hope and drops to her knees, collapsing in on herself. When things have *really* gone poorly, Selina retreats to her office chair to spin, alone. Spinning is her way of sitting with her useless anger, of staring at it. It is something like a metaphor for exasperation: full of feeling and completely catatonic, a way of drawing out the gesture of throwing one's hands up.

A less flamboyant example of exasperation is this brief moment:

Veep CLIP 2 ["Gary, I can't"]

This confrontation with a one-cup coffee maker further exhibits *Veep*'s interest in interacting with newfangled devices as a catalyst of humor. On one level, we know that the machine is not hard to use, and that it is funny to see Selina's own privilege render her useless to herself. It is also funny to see the vice president put off by a small machine, and funny to see her pretend that she is above

negotiating it by deploying her more capable subordinate. But we laugh at Selina's exasperation, too, because, like her, we expect apparently simple machines to be easy to use, for their interface to be transparent—especially a humble office coffee maker (and there is no better, more ubiquitous, emblem of the ordinariness of preparing for crisis in our culture nowadays than coffee). We *know* even purportedly easy technology is often difficult and unreliable—though it is commonplace for us to apologize or feel that it is our fault when things don't work, or when we can't work them. That is, if we are indeed posthuman, we often fail at being posthuman. Selina's exasperation functions as opposite to the awe that we are often told to feel before technology. We are typically asked by industry to be awed and exasperated in turn, in order to continue consuming. Furthermore, if we cannot operate the thingamajigs that are supposed to improve our lives, that are intended to qualify as progress—defining a state-without-them as a retrograde confinement—then we are left confined and without the tools to escape. This is laughable, in the way that laughter can be a kind of realization, the kind "that leaves one without any breath at all," which Susan Sontag once described as an alternative to despair in a world baroque with irony.[25]

Monitoring
Crucial to our laughing at Selina's confrontation with the coffee maker—which is really a confrontation with the limitations of her own competency—is the fact that Selina is highly intelligent. In part, *Veep* capitalizes on a myth that the educated, the privileged, are better acquainted with technology. We know that she could figure it out, but it is precisely that—that activity, any process that will not result in immediate gratification—that is anathema to her. Exasperation is where her vanity and volition meet, at the ends of each. *Always Sunny*, *Archer*, and *Veep* ironize this desire to immediately know, and suggest that this brand of epistemophilia prevents characters from pausing to self-reflect. They are more concerned with monitoring others (inspecting for accuracy, racism, grammar, clothes, sexual follies, etc.) in order to judge them and correct their behavior than with monitoring and judging themselves. Sequences often build to exasperation because characters are making their own lives harder. Dee could grasp that her performances are offensive to others; Archer could be kind; Selina could make coffee, but each chooses to be angry, which is actually the tiring, absurd choice. According to Harry Frankfurt, self-monitoring allows us to take ourselves seriously: to "separat[e] from the immediate content and flow of our own consciousness and introduce[e] a sort of division within our minds."[26] He argues that this is necessary for us to develop reason and care, those two talents that guide our volitional lives. Comedies of exasperation, then, mock the vain for their ambition, for taking themselves *too* seriously, which is really a charge that they misunderstand how to take things properly seriously. This amounts to another layer of cruel optimism: characters' self-interest blocks their own autonomy. Once they become exasperated the jig is up; they have taken themselves seriously in the wrong way, and so, we laugh at ignorance wearing wisdom's mask.

This inability to self-monitor suggests a flip side of the social media mindset in which "produsers" (to use Axel Brun's neologism) ask to be monitored by, and monitor, others. (TV and web series are fitting forms for commenting on this Weltanschauung if Stanley Cavell is right that we "monitor" TV programs "like callers," without the intrusion of projection apparatuses.[27]) The culture of social media has brought, quickly, many new ways to count as important, and comedies of exasperation exploit the confluence of vanity and doing something *in vain*. That is, the vanity of the people in these shows is exaggerated, revealed as an inability to recognize defeat or futility, which leads to a (humorous) lack of guilt. Moreover, success and failure hinge on the withholding of knowledge, and so, on privacy: both when characters know something that they expect others ought to know and when they face the even more terrifying proposition that they know that there is something they do not know. Cavell writes: "[f]or in a disordered world guilt will be proof of one's

privacy, hence of one's possession of a self, hence of the nature of one's self." These shows suggest that this works the other way, too: that a lack of privacy means a lack of guilt. If nothing goes undisclosed, why be guilty? ("What? Am I supposed to apologize for being independently wealthy?" asks Selina ["Shutdown"].) We may even enjoy the titillation of liking these largely immoral characters because in the age of the web, guilt has acquired special pleasure.

Exasperation

By supplanting self-monitoring with the monitoring of others, comedies of exasperation do not permit characters traditional forms of taking themselves seriously, of being important to themselves. And thus, in the context of social media attitudes, which identify social attention as power, exasperation becomes a perverse attempt to refuse to attend. Monitoring others exists in a dynamic tension with exasperation's gaze inward. But contextualizing comedies of exasperation within the digital revolution explains little about why we might find exasperation funny. I am tempted to say that exasperation just *is* funny, just as we might claim of its opposite, earnestness. We could see the scene from *Duck Soup* as moving the vendor from earnestness (all we know is that he really wants to sell lemonade, so badly that he refuses to leave) to exasperation. Earnestness is like vanity in that we laugh at those who take themselves too seriously, who try too hard to participate in the world. How *could* anyone forget that irony is intrinsic to living? Exasperation, on the other hand, as we saw in *Veep*, denotes our refusal to participate. Here, the quintessential gesture of raising one's hands, palms out, conveys not just a sense of closing in on oneself, but of yanking up one's drawbridge. But exasperation is only fleeting, as immediate and ephemeral as the fulfillment of desire. It crests before logic has time to stem the rising tide. We do not usually say it makes *sense* to be exasperated, probably because exasperation never seems productive. It stands in contrast to words like "frustration," "fury," "vexation," and even "despair," which may be justified and are usually directly caused. Unlike these other kinds of directional anger, exasperation is in part recognized as the pain of severing that very directionality, the cutting off of relationality.

As something self-contained—that is, before it dissipates into an admission that one lacks the power to act effectively in the here and now—exasperation needs no acknowledgement. Selina's reaction to the coffee maker bespeaks a point where one stops participating in a relational world, where one can only say I am here and you are there. Or, more accurately, this is where one *wants* to say those things —and perhaps this is where we can start to see the inbuilt hilarity. Exasperation would seem to be as much a wish as a feeling, to entail desire and judgment, but if desires and intentions seek to alter the world and beliefs represent the world as it is, exasperation occupies a more unsatisfied state. It is the state of feeling stunted, presentism without the appreciation for the present.[28] Time *should* stand still when we are exasperated. When Selina utters "I can't" before the machine, she expresses a wish to not be reasonable and not to care, to not take herself seriously for a moment, to be inhuman— which is a very human wish. Its humor comes from the placement of this wish in a situation where effort, and care, are normally at a negligible level.

In this light, what should we make of exasperation? It looks like an attempt to impose false boundaries, to get between oneself and the world, or to take power over resistance by pretending one has the choice to resist it. We might say, then, that exasperation exhibits a failure to conceptualize the experience of subjectivity as essentially second personal. Still, even if nonsensical, the impulse to close in, to express only for oneself (presuming that the world will be brokenhearted by one's desertion) is hardly rare, and is culturally relevant in several ways. Firstly, this refusal expresses a human response to living in an increasingly technological and mechanized world as older notions of self-reliance fade from plausibility. (A lesson of comedies of exasperation is to recognize when such a response is apropos and not a symptom of entitlement.) Secondly, the increase in the intensity of feeling that climaxes in exasperation may act as an antithesis to the now-commonplace

worry that people gradually benumb themselves to reality when immersed in the myriad screens that surround them.[29] Thirdly, such a refusal may function as a conceptual antidote to the condition of cruel optimism, an ameliorative time away from chasing goals rendered unattainable by the very systems that bestow rewards for such efforts.

Berlant writes that, "the object of cruel optimism…appears as the thing within any object to which one passes one's fantasy of sovereignty for safe-keeping."[30] Selina, for instance, momentarily regains that fantasy when she breaks from spitting vitriol at Amy and folds in on herself, receding into the scalding interiority of exasperation. But unlike Berlant, comedies of exasperation blame people for failing to *lead* their own lives, and for giving up that sovereignty to begin with. These shows question Berlant's hope that one might regain autonomy by inventing new modes of living. What does taking one's sovereignty back look like? What if one is not particularly inventive? Dee, Archer, and Selina *do* try. They have the urge to improve their situations—i.e., their self-opinions—but not the know-how.

It is worth nothing that, when thinking about what a corrective to the condition of cruel optimism might look like, Berlant turns to Cavell's thought. In fact, references to his work frame her book. She begins by crafting her conception of the ordinary as a "zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine" by building on Cavell's idea of the ordinary, which obliges members of a community to reflect on unintentionally internalized or purportedly obvious forms of thought.[31] (Cavell labels the sitcom "a genre of the ordinary" due to its focus on ordinary language use.[32]) Berlant concludes by advocating a reinvention of political subjects that affirms potentiality, not in the instrumental service of community pragmatics, "but to embodied processes of making solidarity itself."[33] She describes this "orientation toward relating politics and the political [as] something like the skeptical, perfectionist position of Cavellian ethics."[34] With "Emersonian perfectionism," Cavell writes, "I understand to propose that one's quarrel with the world need not be settled, nor cynically set aside as unsettlable."[35] Perfectionism, then, advocates occupying a new life but never fully relaxing into it, which is admirable, maybe even profound, but also Sisyphean, which is kind of funny (Sisyphus keeps going, *like* a machine but not one).[36] To find meaning or solace in exasperation's self-isolating impulse is thus a significant gesture in the age of social media, where the well-connected are great, and connectedness is thrust upon all. But neither are we to go stake flags in Walden—and Walden has Wi-Fi anyway. (*Archer*'s multi-episode "Heart of Archness" also evinces that trying to escape one's attraction to cyborgness by moving to an uncharted island will not do.)

Embedded in the anger of exasperation is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of this position. Why can't we just be who we wish to be? Put another way: why can't we just *work* (like we often imagine our wireless machines do, by magic)? The meanings of "work" here stress the overlap between expectation, regulation, and labor. *We* want to be the regulatory force. If the digital revolution demonstrates anything, it is that the world can be changed, and rapidly. Isn't the subtext of most social media that each person wants it to be reconfigured around her or his voice? *Always Sunny*, *Archer*, and *Veep* expose the conceit of workspaces that present themselves as Spartan, efficient, appropriately hierarchical, finding them instead to run on intuition, appetite, doubt, and ambiguity. Comedies of exasperation showcase the preferable nature of the latter, as it allows for personality and nuance, for care and motivation—for things that we already have. Thus, exasperation is not just petulance. It marks a character's character, the point at which a stand is taken for or against something. The characters' specific rebellious inner directives are generally wrong, but this irony makes the shows morally edifying for us, perhaps encouraging us to self-monitor and to take our own commitments skeptically for a moment."[37]

Sypher advises that "no character is sound without self-scrutiny, without turning inward to see where it may have overreached itself…and any honest self-inspection must bring a sense of the comical."[38] He also writes, concurring with thinkers from Kafka to Kierkegaard, that "the comical is present in every stage of life, for wherever there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction the comical is present," and, moreover, that "our deepest experiences come to us in the form of contradictions."[39] Hence, we might see comedies of exasperation mocking the idea of getting worked up in competing ways. From one angle, such mockery is an apathetic stance, a way of deterring that very response—anger—that is so called for by the poor workings of our society, and which the increase in access to education and the spread of information makes it impossible to avoid knowing. To keep the uninformed uninformed, to distract from the distinction between information and knowledge, and to encourage catatonia is conservative indeed. What's more conservative than not taking action? But from a different angle, we might see such mockery as a means of refusing prescribed intentions, of refusing to be productive, and what's more radical today than that? If exasperation is a means of resisting the world's claims to produce, of wanting consequences without undertaking the labor of not only action but intention, then it can be a mode of desubjectification, opening a space for self-creation.

Technicophobia
Beyond these questions about the good that may come from these shows' expression of the state of exasperation, I want to ask, in conclusion, what good may come from our laughter at it. Laughing at exasperation does not reveal a wish to be inhuman, but rather a wish not to be a technical one. That is, to laugh at the machinic, in the world or in ourselves, is to try to overcome it. We might think of this as "technicophobia": we laugh at others' capacity to be wound up because we fear this very technicity in ourselves. This tension between the human and mechanical returns us to Henri Bergson's famous theory of the comic. For Bergson, laughter resulted from witnessing "something mechanical encrusted on the living" and, he held that the consequent laughter was "an expression of the natural hostility of organic life to the machine"—a view that may also remind us of Freud's theory of humor as release from the pressures of sociality.[40] Alenka Zupančič has recently sought to recuperate Bergson and Freud for the technogenetic set by arguing that comedy is proof of human technicity and the death drive.[41] But Bergson and Freud rely on a notion of "the mechanical" that is different from complex wireless machines—machines that we cannot look inside to learn how they function and that *frequently do not work*. This last point is critical. Media scholars routinely reinforce the myth (peddled in no small part by industry) that technology simply works, theorizing our lives in a newly digital world as though we experience that technology as reliable, as though web pages and applications do not stall every day. If a computer crashes and a file is lost, its user is often blamed for not "backing up," and even the savviest arrive early to check connections before giving a presentation. Deep down, we *know* computers to be unreliable, but we suppress the knowledge that using computers, tablets, and phones are often a comedy of error messages.

Hence, if the constancy of digital media is an over-idealization, saying that laughing at comedy proves our innate technicity does not mean that we cannot breakdown from time to time (provided we are exasperated when we recognize that that is what is going on; not every breakdown is funny). We may have moments that resemble the spinning wheel of a Mac. Similarly, we laugh at characters in comedies of exasperation because they refuse to see themselves as mechanized. Dee does not want to want Charlie's respect, Archer does not want to want his mother's approval, Lana does not want to want Archer, Selina does not want to want power, etc. But they each reenlist in the fight for these goals in every episode, and then offer exasperation as a comeback to the resulting mechanization. Metaphorically, the machinic underlies cruel optimism's biggest culprits: repetition, regulation, and the celebration of normalization.

When society is reflexive about its behaviors, as ours is, and to an unprecedented extent due to social media, comedies of manners—of which situation comedies are a subset—become comedies of ideas. Our laughter suggests an engagement with these ideas. When we cry at a beautiful piece of music, we might say that we are "absorbed by," "caught up," or "lost in" it. In contrast, when we laugh at comedies of exasperation (and perhaps all comic fiction) some intellection is required. We retain our sense of self during laughter's staccato eruptions. We must "get" humor. To have no idea why one is laughing is a sign of something wrong. We usually consider the discovery of a shared sense of humor to be significant, maybe even a justifiable basis for friendship. We care about what our laughter indicates about ourselves, suggesting that laughter is itself a form of caring about the world and ourselves—without giving one's self over to it or relinquishing the space necessary for critical judgment. The exasperation of the vain unmasks a failure to understand the limits of autonomy and from the overestimation of their importance. The exasperated are unable to laugh at their folly, but so, too, are the earnest and excessively humble and self-deprecating. There are those who, like the witless Mr. Rogers, love everything just as it is. Laughter, then, can divulge a healthy middle ground between vanity and earnestness, between a sense of irony and perspective of one's own attitudes and efficacy. We cannot laugh at ourselves if we do not take ourselves seriously, and if we cannot laugh at ourselves, then exasperation cannot be far behind. This puts us in an amusing position, since, at the same time, we know, or should know, our flaws better than others, in which case we are probably the least inclined to take ourselves seriously.

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Notes

[1] Treatises of screen comedy tend to build on Henri Bergson's famous essay on laughter to think about humor, and thus, on the routinization of the body, drawing a connection between such invitations to laugh and a medium rooted in mechanical reproduction. In turn, our laughter at psychological descriptors like "anger" is downplayed. Like any writer discussing comedy, I must make assumptions about humor's success. In addition, since we laugh at many things and in many contexts for many reasons, I do not intend my remarks about laughter at contemporary comic fiction to have broad application.

[2] Like Berlant, I do not mean to equate the events of characters' lives to the lives of real people but "to see that in the affective *scenarios* of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life" *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 9. Thinking about affective vicissitudes is important for thinking about the shift to Web 2.0, the web of social media, which coincides with an economic shift from utility-based products to services. A customer service-oriented economy is, as Michael Hardt points out, one that prioritizes the exchange of affects. Hardt, "Affective labor," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89-100.

[3] Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2008).

[4] Among others, I imagine the set to include episodes of shows like *30 Rock* (2006), *Louie* (2010), *Web Therapy* (2011), and Australia's *The Australians* (2007).

[5] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/22/time-magazine-poll-jon-st_n_242933.html

[6] Berlant, 10.

[7] Ibid., 177. Berlant seems to be reworking Northrop Frye's classic observation that in comedy the world reconfigures to suit the protagonist's desires and in tragedy the protagonist must sacrifice his or her desires for the world to remain constant.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 13.

[10] Robert Corrigan, "Introduction: Comedy and the Comic Spirit." Ed. Corrigan. *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, 2nd Ed. NY: Harper Row, 1981, 12.

[11] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

[12] Berlant means the time of postwar neoliberalism, but she concentrates on the time since the rhetoric of hope buttressed by President Obama's ascendency replaced the discourse of trauma and paranoia wrought by 9/11.

[13] Ibid., 69.

[14] Ibid., 177.

[15] Marsha Kinder, "Re-Wiring Baltimore: The Emotive Power of Systemics, Seriality, and the City," *Film Quarterly* 62.2 (2008): 50–57.

[16] Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).

[17] Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy" in Corrigan, *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, 33.

[18] Dee and Dennis's adopted father, Frank, appears from season two on. He often takes part in the gang's schemes, but also stands apart from them, not least of all because he is wealthy.

[19] This is evident in any episode, but "Diversity hire" and "The Limited" are notable cases.

[20] See, for example, Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011) and Daniel Sherman, Ruud van Dijk, Jasmine Alinder, and A. Aneesh, Eds. *The Long 1968: Revisions and New Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[21] Janet Murray, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 56.

22 For theories of the human as cyborg or posthuman, see Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-181 and Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

23 Jessica Walters, who played the mother and ultimate corporate authority in *Arrested Development*, voices Malory. Similarly, H. Jon Benjamin voices both Archer and Bob of *Bob's Burgers* (2011), a fact that *Archer* uses to great effect in a cross-over episode in which Archer finds himself living Bob's life due to amnesia ("Fugue and Riffs"). The repetition of performers reinforces the sense of an affinity between these shows.

24 *Veep* is an adaptation of the British comedy of exasperation *The Thick of It*. Their author, Armando Ianucci, is known for characters teetering past the end of their wits, and for inventing some of the most ornate swearing ever heard on television. I hope in another version to look more closely at what Ianucci brings to the U.S. context, as well as at his British work.

25 Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 34.

26 Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2006), 4.

27 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 59-86. In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cavell claims that we cover TV "as with a gun," whereas "viewing" is what cinema demands (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979), 26. Cinema requires absorbed attention whereas monitoring "is rather preparing our attention to be called upon by certain eventualities" ("Fact," 78). TV still requires attention, but it is about attending to the present in order to be alert to what is to come, immersed in the now but unsatisfied with it. This view captures the agreeable unease that attaches to the sitcom: what will go wrong for these folks this time?

28 This presentism may remind us of George Santayana's dictum that, "Everything in Nature is lyrical in its ideal essence, tragic in its fate, and comic in its existence" (Corrigan, 56). He suggests that we are primed to laugh at the present, and often comedy fixates on the specificity and detail of experience.

29 The view that new media inures us to reality is ubiquitous in U.S. discourse, particularly regarding child development. This modern incarnation of technological anxiety dates back at least to Marshall McLuhan, who bemoaned the "numbness" and "somnambulism" wrought by "the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us." *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (NY: MIT Press, 1964), 4.

30 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 43.

31 Ibid.*,* 8. Berlant intends this in contrast to theories of "the everyday *organized* by capitalism that we find in Lefebvre and de Certeau, among others" (8). For Berlant, the ordinary is both "an impasse shaped by crisis" and a resource, a space "in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (8).

32 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 76.

33 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 260.

[34] Ibid., 260.

[35] Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 18.

[36] We can also see Cavellian influence on Berlant in his assertion that part of perfectionism's value is in providing a way to examine "moments of crisis…the sense of a demand that one's life, hence one's relation to the world, is to undergo change" (*Cities of Words*, 13-14). Given the importance of vanity to comedies of exasperation, it is worth nothing that humility is a response to crises and an important step in Cavell's perfectionist process.

[37] Daniel Morgan noted that this resembles Martin Luther's famous declaration: "Here I stand. I can do no other." However, the updated version becomes: "Here I stand. I will do nothing."

[38] Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," 50.

[39] Ibid., 21, 40.

[40] North, *Machine-Age Comedy*, 4.

[41] Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Mit Press, 2007).