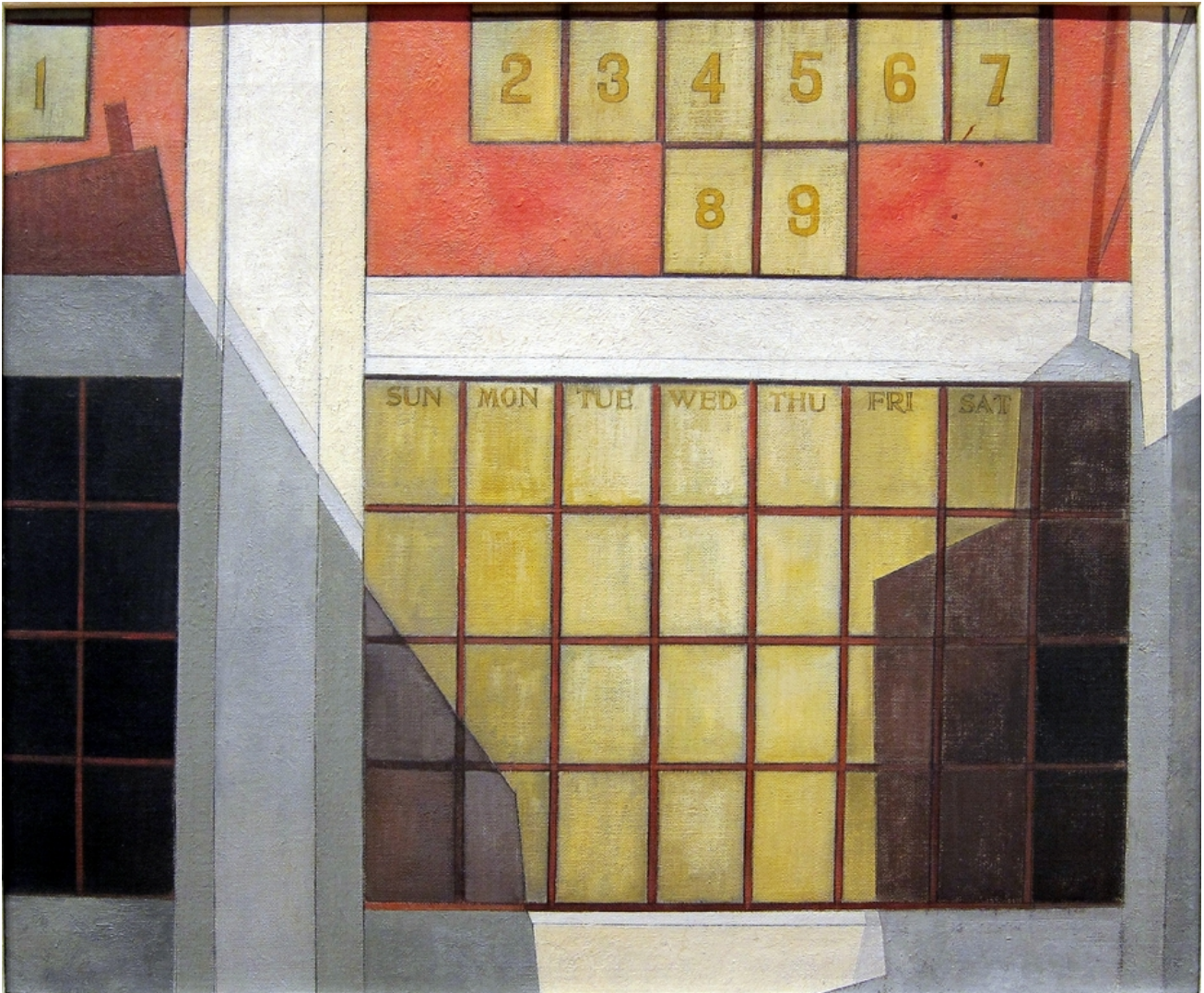


The Nihilists' Masquerade

by [Richard Kuslan](#) (February 2020)



Business, Charles Demuth, 1921

Were Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy to return to life and revisit the cities and towns of the United States they once toured, they might have sighed, "All gone!"—meaning the thousands of theaters and film houses in which they had played comedy to capacity audiences from 1915 to 1950. Were they to watch the shows presented in the name of comedy today, they might have shouted, "What a shame!" before gladly returning to the footlights in the sky, because little remains today that even resembles comedy though it calls itself comedy. The

American version of the popular television show franchise, *The Office*, masquerades as a comedy. The show is an egregious example of what American television palms off as comedy, but which is a perversion of comedy.

Its writers have placed “the office” of about a dozen employees in a regional sales department of a company they have named Dunder-Mifflin and located in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Its staff sells paper. Even before dialogue is uttered, the writers have set the stage for ridicule. Piffling dunderheads selling an unuttered but patently assumed useless relic of the before hi-tech old world in a proverbial backwater—a town the show never credits even sentimentally with once having roared with industry—deserve, in the writers’ view, relentless, resentful sarcasm.

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There is misanthropy in spades. The writers set up their characters as props for derision; every slight and slander the writers choose to inflict upon them is their fate. In the “Office Olympics” episode (one typifies all), Michael, accompanied by Dwight (whose characters I treat further on in this essay), is looking to buy a condo. They stand and admire one of many identical two-story units with garage in front. Michael speaks the following lines until the italicized brackets with uncharacteristic naturalness and sensitivity, but this is a set-up, a theatrical direction in the service of a misdirection to an ironic punchline.

Michael: Home, sweet home.

Dwight: Which one's yours?

Michael: Right there. My sanctuary. My party pad. Someday I can just see my grandkids learning how to walk out here. Hang a swing from this tree. Push them back . . . wait . . . *[Michael turns around, as does Dwight]* no, it's this one, right here. Home, sweet home.

Michael and Dwight are, of course, fictions. One might indulge in a chortle at the expense of the fictional butt of a nasty joke and shrug it off (*it's only a story*) without understanding why we have laughed or the kind of laugh we have laughed or to what purpose we have been made to laugh. But since a fictional character represents an idea in the minds of the writer, we must ask, if we truly wish to understand what is meant and our reaction to it, why it is that the writers visit upon Michael the indignity of ridicule which the dialogue above, one of many such, represents? They deny him even the poignant longing for a sentimental memory of grandchildren happily at play. The writers have condemned Michael. The writers encourage us to laugh at this. They have created him to condemn him and to have their way with him. Moreover, they condemn him to a purpose: the writers want the audience to agree with them that Michael deserves his fated denial of happiness. The laugh in reaction represents our agreement.

The office leader is Michael, a manager, whom the writers have sardonically written as an empty suit, a bumbler, an

incompetent, a tool, a prolific self-embarrasser; he is a loser and a loner in no way deserving of his position by merit. Just watch him play company basketball in the warehouse with feverishly sweating gung-ho unathleticism or insipidly blurt out, "That's what she said," to every possible reference to penile size or scream like a man on fire for the chocolate turtles missing from the gift basket and you will see how the writers have made him a facile and obvious target for derision.

But his position in the company is an iron rice bowl, no less because of the Scranton office's insignificance, but also by virtue of his face-saving pusillanimity before the smart and dapper corporate big-wigs in the main office located in, of course, Manhattan. For Manhattan in this show is the solar disk about which distant Scranton traces a Plutonic orbit; its elite corporate bureaucrats, including similar types by analogy who produce this show, the gods who beneficently administer life and livelihood to an underworld of pathetic grotesques. The executives who are portrayed, in contradistinction, speak in measured tones, and seem level-headed and capable: They are adults in a room full of wayward children. (For some reason, which the writers don't explain, the execs keep the Scranton office open. To play with them?) These überexecs keep Michael as the manager because he is the most useful of the useless: spineless, he will always kowtow. (In Chinese, kowtow means to "bang the head on the floor," giving the neck so that the head atop it may be removed at the caprice of the superior.) That is why, and not because of any competence, they value him so. To assuage his sense of inferiority and presumably to keep him useful, they granted him the perk that signifies his standing, for he is the sole employee with his own office.



Anyone who is aware of the dramatic changes over the past fifty years in the Northeast of the United States understands that the Big Apple has been over for at least a generation. It has ceased to be the center for the creation and exploration of life-enhancing, thought-expanding art and ideas. The buildings still stand, but no longer does their skyscraping point to the civilizational aspirations they once stood for. However, when *The Office* plays in proverbial Peoria, where the local idea of the Coasts may be as much as a century old—the national audience will not understand that New York City has become a greenhouse of deadly nightshade.

Before the American Cultural Revolution of 1968, in less than a decade, when everyone who wanted to be anyone made a beeline to “The City,” as those who live within commuting distance call it, Manhattan’s creative climate gave rise to: In music

theater alone, *Hello, Dolly!*