

## Corporate lampoonery as a hermeneutic sign of our times: Reading "Dilbert" from critical and Poststructuralist perspectives

by: Ron Wendt

Even though this study uses semiotic phenomenology for a philosophical, theoretical, and methodological grounding, the reader may notice that the terms "semiotic" and "phenomenology" are absent from the title, and for several reasons. In their absence is presence; a constant dialogue already exists among critical theories, poststructuralism, and semiotic phenomenology. The connections and commonalities among these three approaches to social relations will provide a conceptual grounding for analyzing what I call "The Dilbert Phenomenon."

I approach this topic and this method with two resources: (1) my background in critical and postmodern studies, and (2) my familiarity with the works of Catt (1989, 1996) and Lanigan (1988, 1992, 1994). So it is that I write this piece for myself as a student of communication searching for new and insightful approaches to organizational phenomena, and also for a broader audience: those who struggle with me to understand new research methods and applications for both semiotics and phenomenology, and those who may appreciate how this study informs and extends semiotic phenomenology by revisiting specific critical theories.

In one very amusing Dilbert cartoon, author Scott Adams (1996b, section 7.3, "The Employee Morale Trap") recognizes and satirizes his own impact on corporate communication, and in this sense he has given us a meta-lampoon ("This cartoon seems to be saying that management decisions are a joke." "Cartoons are not allowed on cubicles. It hurts morale. I don't want to see this when I return." "I've noticed a real improvement in morale since you removed the cartoon." [cartoon now appears attached to the back of the boss]). In true postmodern fashion, he lampoons his own cartoons and the effects they seem to be having in contemporary organizations. Meta-satire like this illustrates and highlights the author's keen insight, but even more important it shows us how satire can be used to comment on just about any form of expression, including satire and humor. Semiotic phenomenology (SP) provides us with an excellent device for investigating the Dilbert Phenomenon as an elaborate system of signs. I define Dilbert Phenomenon as the entire consumer industry of Dilbert products, and the impact this industry is having on our culture, our organizations, our thought processes, and our communication practices. By studying specific signs/cartoons that comprise the vast, complex Dilbert Phenomenon, we can begin to understand the micropolitics (struggle over meanings) that contribute to the macropolitics (hyper-consumerism). This study is not meant to address the overall cultural impact of Scott Adams' new industry of corporate satire (DILBERT © United Feature Syndicate, Inc.). However, it is safe to say that Dilbert paraphernalia of all sorts (including books, business videos, toys, clothing, internet homepage, syndicated in more than 1200 daily newspapers, upcoming TV sitcom, etc.)<sup>1</sup> are having an immense impact on numerous social realms including business, education, and entertainment.<sup>2</sup> However, just as significant (as Adams' meta-cartoon reminds us) are those work stations and offices displaying individual cartoons that employees find relevant to their own situation. In a sense, Adams speaks a social commentary—a criticism of management strategies—that employees identify with and therefore utilize as a form of passive resistance. Rarely these days can one walk into an office and not find a Dilbert cartoon plastered in a prominent location on a wall, door, or bulletin board. The Dilbert character has become an everyman/everywoman for the postmodern era and an icon for worker frustration and disempowerment.

The goal of this study is to construct a useful method for investigating the growing cultural phenomenon called managerial satire, something I like to call lampoonery. Once constructed, I use this method to examine (1) a series of Scott Adams' cartoons that lampoon contemporary corporate management, and (2) his internet site. Last, I explore a number of implications in terms of organizational power relations.

A key assumption guiding this project is that the Dilbert cartoons can be read as hermeneutic signs or codes that communicate presence (already said or written) and absence (not yet said or written), and

that a "radical hermeneutics" (Caputo, 1988; Schrag, 1992) of both suspicion (critical) and affirmation (postmodern; affirming play, alternative meanings) can be used to analyze these contemporary signs for their power implications, their meaning systems, and their challenges to rationality. Dilbert cartoons, as "hermeneutical signs," are infused with meaning and interpretations that contribute and regulate the political life of a community (Schrag, 1986, p. 57). Catt (1989, p. 3) eloquently reminds us of the linkages between critical hermeneutics (critical interpretation of power relations) and phenomenology in a semiotic investigation when he states: "Semiotic phenomenology offers a uniquely valuable method in that it synthesizes theory of signs and codes, criticism of ideology, and the hermeneutics of conscious experience." Dilbert, as viewed through a radical hermeneutics, is seen to be both a politic (power in action) and a continuous dialectic between expression and perception—that is, a phenomenon experienced through sign(s). These three elements—politic, expression, and perception—comprise a semiotic experience, a social phenomenon. Stated differently, it is the power dimension of the Dilbert sign(s), as it is simultaneously expressed and perceived, that will be highlighted. This power dimension is expressed by the dialectic between overt meaning (presence) and covert meaning (absence, connotations, guiding principles and values). Within the presence - absence dialectic of the Dilbert sign(s) are numerous, potential, alternative meanings and interpretations—ideas that may resist, surrender, transcend, and/or may remain silent.

### **A Theory - Method Dialectic**

A number of contemporary writers have shown us how the complex language and metatheoretical perspectives of SP can be formulated into a pragmatic method for investigating social phenomena (e.g., Catt, 1989; Giorgi, 1985; Gemin, 1988; Lanigan, 1988; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994; Pearson, 1987). These writers develop a method closely linked to theory and metatheory, not as a separate tool; theory perpetually informs the method, and method constantly references theory. A third element of this theory - method dialectic is the experience itself, and in this sense a SP method is similar to what has been called "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Both theory and interpretation evolve out of the experience of sign(s); SP theory flies close to the ground but does not dominate, manipulate or prejudge the phenomenon or the experiencing of it.

In terms of developing and employing a specific method, this study relies heavily on the works of three authors: Catt (1989, 1996), Lanigan (1988), and Adorno (1966/1973). Even though Adorno's work, coming from the Frankfurt School and critical theory, may seem to conflict with the work of these other authors, I will explain how his method of "negative dialectics" supplements and expands the SP method outlined by Lanigan (1988) and utilized by Catt (1989, 1996). First, let us look at the fundamental steps of this SP method: description (what am I experiencing?), reduction (how am I experiencing?), and interpretation (why am I experiencing?) (Lanigan, 1992, pp. 17-19, 36-40, 182-186). The first step asks: What do I see in the text/cartoon in terms of signifiers, syntax, and anchorage. The signifiers (data) in a cartoon are the particular marks, images, and colors that constitute the larger sign. A reader expresses the data as *capta*, or conscious awareness, and then organizes (*acta*) this experience of the text in a certain way(s) to suggest certain meaning(s). An anchorage, as a set of symbols, suggests a particular interpretation of the sign, repressing alternative ways of organizing (*acta*) my experience of the data/marks (Catt, 1989).

Reduction, the second step, attempts to explore the essence of the experience of reading and interpreting the sign. In a sense, how do we reduce the sign to a particular perception (meaning plus experience). With the Dilbert cartoons, I perceive an implied suggestion of authority, an authority that is negated in the sign, but present in my (essential, reduced) experience of the sign. Almost simultaneous to the second step, I proceed to the third: why do I laugh in the face of this essential experience? Humor is an *acta*, an organizing of the data that causes me to smile. In the case of corporate lampoonery like Dilbert, the catalysts for humor are rather humorless, like fear and anxiety, and in this sense my smile is a sad one.

One way to supplement the reduction and interpretation of a sign is to appreciate the political climate—the context, the environment—in which that sign exists. Critical theorists who deconstruct texts discover dualities that communicate privileged value systems, dominant ideologies, and logocentric meanings. This type of deconstruction is based on the poststructuralist idea that discourse is often made up of dichotomies that present either - or choices, and that the critic must explore the infinity of third term/idea options. In a sense, this type of deconstruction, where discourse is turned against itself to see what is missing and/or what is being privileged, is the essence of what is called "immanent criticism" (Adorno, 1966/1973; Held, 1980; Horkheimer, 1947/1974). A forerunner of postmodernism, Adorno preferred to examine seemingly minor, insignificant texts by judging them against themselves, against their own standards, against their own expressions and ideas. Similar to the way the semiotic phenomenologist appreciates the dialectic between expression and perception, and between presence and absence, Adorno's dialectic method of immanent criticism assessed a text "in terms of what it appears to be and what it is (its essence) - revealing the universal within the particular, i.e., the nature of the particular as constituted in the [decentered] totality" (Held, 1980, p. 217). Adorno's immanent criticism or negative dialectics was used as a blur of theory, method, and writing style. Stated succinctly, he constructed constellations or essences of experiences as understood when turning/judging a text against itself (Buck-Morss, 1977). As a student and admirer of Husserl, Adorno explored phenomenal codes or "ciphers" that, once juxtaposed, would reveal critical ideas or constellations. However, not content with Husserl's imperative that consciousness leads to truth, Adorno seemed to be taking a more hermeneutic approach to phenomenology (Gadamer, 1975), in the sense that: (1) precise knowledge was not possible, (2) people are dependent on subjective experiences, and most importantly (3) experience is intertextual (i.e., consists of endless interrelationships among texts; "everything one studies is related to everything else" [Rosenau, 1992, p. 112]) within a cultural and political context. Thus, with his method of negative dialectics, Adorno provides a critical/hermeneutic extension to the standard description - reduction - interpretation method, and suggests that the study of essential experiences of signs (SP) stay focused on both how and why meaning is a political dynamic.

This process of juxtaposition—the key to negative dialectics and immanent criticism—can be broken down into three strategies—techniques of criticism that expand both what the critical theorist refers to as deconstruction and what the semiotic phenomenologist refers to as reduction. Put as succinctly as possible, these strategies consist of: (1) differentiation, or the negation of tautological truths (e.g., "gratification is the enemy of gratification"), (2) juxtaposition of extremes, or constructing similarities out of extremes (e.g., alienated vs. familiar), and (3) transposition of words or phrases (e.g., "the truth is not in history; history is in the truth") (Buck-Morss, 1977, pp. 96-101). In one sense, these types of juxtaposition are similar to Adams' technique as he satirizes contemporary management fads and strategies; he highlights the irony and hypocrisy of management practices. Juxtaposition can also supplement the SP method by providing specific techniques for exploring the political context and privileged meaning systems in which a sign exists. Juxtaposition techniques help to reveal an inner/absent logic or value system, an unexpressed constellation of key insights into social relations and power dynamics.

In one sense, negative dialectics and critical juxtaposition provides a crucial segue between reduction and interpretation, between understanding (how do we know?) and value judgment. This segue or dialectic is key to the SP method in two interrelated ways: (1) each step is entailed by and reflects on the other steps, and (2) the validity of a study using this technique is judged by the "abductive logic" (rule + result = case; description + reduction = interpretation) of the progression between steps (Lanigan, 1992). Unlike the validity of deductive and inductive logic, abductive logic or play, similar to Foucault's (1969/1972) notion of "savior" (how we know), is dependent on a "lived-through meaning" or a meaning in practice (Lanigan, 1992). Therefore, it is the dialectic between the essential experience (reduction, result, savior) and the judgment (interpretation, case, action) that is key to the validity of this method; each argues for the other.

What follows is an examination of four thematic and interrelated cartoons by Scott Adams (1996b, section 1.11).>3 Even though the theme of powerlessness seems to pervade most of Adams' cartoons,

these four, more than most, depict a certain type of powerlessness, one that will become apparent through this analysis. Other aspects of powerlessness are lampooned by Adams' (1996a, 1996b, 1997) in his three recent and very popular books (all three were on the New York Times best-seller list). The satire in these (and other, forthcoming) books seem to scream out for a similar analysis. In addition, an analysis of the Dilbert internet site (The Dilbert Zone) will be provided. The electronic, computer-generated Dilbert cartoons and commodities can be accessed using the code/address that is prominently displayed on the book jacket and copyright page (Adams, 1996b). Even more than the cartoons themselves, the codes that appear on this homepage are truly signs of the times.

## **An Analysis of "Management Physics"**

### Relax and Hurry #1

Description: In terms of language signifiers, I read an instruction to relax, and a reference to a previous instruction to do urgent work ("Go home, Dilbert. Relax! You're working too hard." "You told me to finish this by tomorrow. You said it's urgent."). Then, an author/narrator commentary (set off from "character" commentary) explains a shift in time, logic, and reality, along with more logical argument about relaxing versus working ("Suddenly Dilbert is sucked into the 'Boss Zone' where time and logic do not apply." "How can I relax and do urgent work at the same time?"). Cliché is inserted by the first boss/character; manic response by the second ("Work smarter, not harder." "AAEEII!!"). The narrator introduces new character, new metaphor: flying Dogbert ("Mercifully, the angel of cynicism appears." "Slap something together in the morning. He won't look at it anyway."). The narrator closes and the second worker/character rationalizes a decision ("The inspirational moral . . ." "Freedom's just another word for not caring about the quality of your work!").

In terms of characters and additional graphics (markings, signifiers), I know the boss/authority character by his suit, his directing arm/hand, his balding head with two tufts of horn-like hair, and his directives. I know the subordinate by his seated, working position in front of a computer, his pleading motions, his manic expressions, and his patronizing words. The graphics indicate that the subordinate is pulled or sucked up into a different place, a different reality—a second non-reality, if you will. Instead of straight lines, this second non-reality is marked by curves, circles, and concentric circles. An angel/dog appears in this second non-reality and speaks to the subordinate. The subordinate, back in the first non-reality (straight lines, office cubicle) whistles (marks indicating music notes).

There is a narrative or hermeneutic progression through each of these eight frames. The reader anticipates the next code and is temporarily satisfied by it until the next code is exposed. The final sign provides narrative satisfaction and relief, not only in the sense of an ending, but because, unlike the real world, the worker has/possesses the final say/sign.

Reduction and Construction of Constellations: A key theme and key experience is that of powerlessness on the part of the subordinate (the Dilbert character). I am Dilbert (everyman/everywoman) and I am experiencing the same sense of powerlessness. More specifically and more importantly, I too enter this powerlessness through the nonrationality and schizophrenia of paradox (imperative to do two opposites) and a resulting double bind (tension, frustration, anxiety due to the involvement in a lose - lose situation). The second non-reality of circles and illogical cliché s ("work smarter, not harder") drives me to near insanity ("AAEEII!!"). Only my cynical nature (the angelic dog) saves me from complete schizophrenia (if the boss doesn't care about quality work, then neither will I; I'll take him literally when he tells me to go home and relax).

Because of my total involvement with the Dilbert image and all it signifies, the text has become realer than real, I am living a hyper-text in what Baudrillard (1983) calls "hyperreality." But instead of a simulation of ideal organizational life, Dilbert is a hyperreality that highlights all the tensions, disillusionment, and rage of contemporary corporate life. The Dilbert sign has "imploded" the distinctions between reality and fantasy, between politics and entertainment, and between good and evil. The pain of corporate politics and bureaucracy merges with the sad humor of lampoonery and

make-believe until I don't know how to respond, so I sit suspended by the duplicitous hyper-text. Just as exasperating, I like and sometimes empathize with the incompetent boss as much as I dislike and pity him, and the same is true for myself in light of this inconsistency.

Dilbert is on the right track as he debunks the cliché "work smarter, not harder" by walking out. With this act I hear an unwritten, unsaid juxtaposition: "hardly working is smart." Apathy and cynicism has led me/Dilbert to differentiate the axiom "hard work pays off" into the axiom "hard work is hardly worth it." Dilbert also transposes the phrase "freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose" to "freedom's just another word for not caring about the quality of your work"; strikingly similar in their attitude and perspective. I, as Dilbert, applaud these juxtapositions and add yet another: "relax and do urgent work," "hurry up and wait," stop - go, present - future.

Critical Interpretation: Why do I laugh? I, as Dilbert the powerless yet wise clown, laugh at my own impasse, my own double bind, my own frustration. I laugh at the irony of the situation; that my boss uses clichés as truisms, without critical reflection. I laugh because I know tomorrow will be the same as today, with the same inescapable paradoxes and double binds. Today I called my boss's bluff: I went home. Tomorrow he'll ask why I went home so early and the whole double bind will start all over again. I laugh at the insanity of the whole situation, at the illogical paradoxes and dilemmas that make me feel like I'm in a time-warp, at the thought that someone who has no idea what double binds and paradoxical imperatives are, speaks and uses these things. More than comic relief, this scenario, because I am inside of it every day, makes me sit in awe of suspended organizational time—of a boss who "can suspend the relationship between cause and effect and make time move at any rate [he/she] chooses" (Adams, 1996b, section 1.11).

I smile because I am afraid; scared to death by the thought of an incompetent manager who is able to keep me so frustrated, tense, and defenseless. I am afraid of all the tomorrows where I will face this and other equally insane and self-perpetuating paradoxes of powerlessness. I laugh at my own Dilbertness, my own noble savage nature, my role as idiot savant.

## Relax and Hurry #2

Description: First is a reference to records and policy regarding vacation time ("Alice, our records show that you haven't taken a vacation all year." "Company policy requires you to use your vacation days."). Then the second worker/character makes a reference to a previous directive to work seven days a week on an important project ("How?? You told me to work seven days a week to prepare the project for your boss's year-end review."). A dilemma is articulated: project versus vacation ("Do you want me to meet the artificial project target or the artificial vacation target?"). Then yelling (exclamation marks) about mutually exclusive goals ("HELLO!!! THESE ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE GOALS!!! HELLO!!!"), and an apology ("sorry") about silent frustration ("Ooh . . . Sorry. I usually just think that last part in silent frustration."). The first character rewards a third character for using vacation time ("Moving right along . . . kudos to Wally for using all of his vacation days ahead of schedule."). The third character flaunts reward in the face of the second character ("Get over it, Alice. We can't all be superstars.").

In terms of other marks/data, the graphics again indicate the first speaking character as the superior/boss by all the indicators mentioned above, plus he now sits at the head of a table. The second character, the one who draws attention to the mutually exclusive goals, is a woman (professional, suit; woman, big, wavy hair) who demonstrates extreme energy and panic through her gestures and other nonverbals. The third character (short, bald, big glasses) sits silent and frozen until the last frame. Dilbert appears as a witness to the exchange in the last frame. This takes place in a professional meeting (a paper appears in the hand of the boss and in front of each of the participants).

The narrative elements and timing meet the expectation of the reader. There is a hero (female worker), a villain (male boss), character development (the worker vents her frustration), and an appropriate

(anticipated) ending. In the last frame a coworker drives home the main point of the cartoon (frustration) by further frustrating the woman worker with a jab about using vacation time.

Reduction and Construction of Constellations: The key theme is an attempt by a female employee to empower herself, but just as important is my role as Dilbert as I sit on the sidelines and stare in amazement at the verbal exchange. Even though I (Dilbert) am not "physically" (graphically) present in any of the frames except the last, I am actually present in every frame in the sense that: (1) I recognize my/Dilbert's boss, and (2) because I'm (Dilbert) in the last frame or code, I am also/immediately included in the entire sign (all eight codes or frames). This second sign/cartoon also targets the time element of powerlessness, but is different from the first because the time element is much longer (vacation vs. leaving early one day; one day project vs. several week project), it pits a powerless woman against a powerless man, and the Dilbert character witnesses but does not actively participate in the dialogue.

The essence of this experience is in my (Dilbert's) simultaneous absence and presence in this scenario. Symbolic of his simultaneous absence and presence in the paradox of taking vacation and working on an important project, I/he appear only in the final frame. Because the Dilbert graphic is not shown in the first seven frames does not mean I identify less with the character, quite the contrary, I identify more because now he is suspended somewhere between the sign and my own psyche (yet another dimension of hyperreality). Dilbert the powerless witness is both absent and present, and his suspension from the sign does not mean he is not of the sign, that his Dilbertness is not key to my experience of this particular sign. I know and experience Dilbertness because of the many previous readings of Dilbert signs, and the thoughts, feelings, and sensations they have created both then and now.

The female character juxtaposes extremes (project target versus vacation target), but she does so by bringing them together (both are "artificial"). This similarity—this connecting link—highlights a "constellation" or theme underriding the powerlessness of the woman. This key idea is that all policies, deadlines, and timelines are "artificial" in the sense of being continuously absent and present. In other words, the superior can interpret or frame the policy and the deadlines to meet his needs, goals, and/or whims at the time. The female employee is, like Dilbert, suspended in time and power as she waits for the boss's next interpretation of the policy.

Critical Interpretation: I laugh because of my frustration; I am that woman who accidentally vents her frustration then apologizes for doing so. Simultaneously, I am the silent Dilbert who feels anxious for his coworker, and even more anxious about the fact that this may occur to him/me in the future. I laugh because I am sad—disheartened to think about the real - fictitious dialectic in this satirical sign. The caricatures add truth to the sign at the same time they add fantasy; the slightly grotesque features simultaneously deny and reinforce my own experiences, my own insecurities, and my own sense of what is real. Satire is such a sad humor; irony like this makes me laugh to myself. If I laugh out loud that would betray the melancholy, guilt, and shame attached to this type of sign.

### Structure, Unstructure #1

Description: A shortened code is presented here; three frames instead of eight. The marks indicate an imperative from the boss (male, standing, suit) to a worker (woman, seated at computer) to write documentation for computer software ("Tina, you'll have to have all the documentation written by next week so we can ship it when the software is done."). The worker resists by asking how one writes instructions for software that has not been built. The boss urges the worker to continue with the task by making "logical guesses." The instructions are written, but they suggest that the computer will not function, and that any blame should be placed on the software company, Microsoft. ("If you press any key your computer will lock up. If you call out tech support we'll blame 'Microsoft'."). Automatically, I know the worker is stationed in front of a computer (code: box with small rectangular box in front). Also, without conscious thought, I know how to read this narrative in terms of dramatic elements and sequencing of events (space and time). In the words of Pearson (1987, p. 19), this hermeneutic code

"is like a smoothly flowing river. It catches a reader in its current and the progressive movement downstream seems naturally to bypass potential snags and under-currents." This cultural code—this preordained way of seeing and reading—is part of the sign's absence; we bring this to the sign at the same time the sign demands this from us.

**Reduction and Construction of Constellations:** The essence of my experience of this sign lies in the paradox and double bind being experienced by the worker. The imperative is paradoxical: to put structure in the form of instructions on something that is not yet built or structured. The situation that the worker now finds herself is that of a double bind; no matter what she does, she is wrong. The insidious nature of paradoxes and double binds is exposed here because the worker thinks she cannot escape the dilemma; she cannot dismiss the imperative and she cannot remove herself from the double bind. The boss seals the bind by telling the worker to make "logical guesses." The irony is overwhelming, that she must use logic to solve an illogical dilemma. Similar to the paradox of time, the worker is now suspended in a paradox of space and structure. She must pretend something exists so that she can assign it a code.

The worker seems to be suggesting a number of juxtapositions: Management logic is often illogical, guesses are never completely logical (signifiers/instructions [without] signified/software). Also, regarding the suspension of space caused by paradoxical imperatives one might add: organizational space is simultaneously present/structured and absent/unstructured.

**Critical Interpretation:** Again, I laugh a sad quiet laugh, one that pains me, one that is born out of empathy and pity, not lightheartedness. I suffer the same suspended power that the worker is suffering, and I laugh in the face of the insanity of the situation. If I do not laugh, I will either weep openly or go insane. I also experience a gleeful moment in the last frame when my frustration turns to resistance and revenge. I (the worker) write an instruction which is both logical and illogical. The software will not work, and it will be the fault of another company.

This bittersweet ending is perfect in its resistance to authority, its raw sarcasm, and its discovery of a perfect scapegoat. Blaming the largest software company in the country is like pissing in the ocean; it is obscene in its futility. Like Diogenes masturbating in the marketplace, this small symbolic act is perfect in its obscenity. The worker discovers one of the only responses to the insanity of double binds: a grotesque gesture. And I laugh at the futility of it all.

## Structure, Unstructure #2

**Description:** The boss asks a question about the length of time it will take to fix the problems that have not yet happened ("How long will it take to fix any problems we find in our Beta product?"). The Dilbert character responds that this is logically impossible (the graphics shift to a view from behind Dilbert) ("It is logically impossible to schedule for the unknown."). Pressing the matter, the boss asks Dilbert to think as a manager, and Dilbert provides a non-rational response ("In that case, we'll fix the problems before we find them.").

Although I may have probably been aware of these on a subconscious level, other marks/data appear to my conscious mind for the first time. Between the first and second frame is the author's signature and email address, and between the second and third frame is a hand-written date (date created?), the copyright date, and the name of the copyright holder. The two previous cartoons were dated 4/7/96 © 1996 and 12/17/95 © 1995, respectively, and these two cartoons are dated 8/28 © 1995 and 11/10 © 1995. Adams prefers to add his signature outside of the cartoon frame, while many other authors and artists prefer to sign within the frame, thus providing a clean and unmolested graphic code. The additional microscopic information seems to frame the frame, providing some kind of linkage or subconscious glue to connect each code.

**Reduction and Construction of Constellations:** These four cartoons, written and copyrighted at different times, have been clustered here, evidently in keeping with the theme of "management

physics." The handwritten dates provide a strange presence when juxtaposed with the manufactured copyright date. Similarly, the signature stands in strange relief beside the code that indicates how the reader can contact the author over the internet. Supposedly, we have immediate access to the author and his ever-growing corporate empire. Within this meta-frame, the term "Syndicate, Inc. (NYC)" provides an irony in light of the fact that a rapidly expanding corporation is producing critical commentary on other rapidly expanding corporations and the management practices they employ. I am left wondering what kind of manager Scott Adams is; does he enact the lessons communicated by his satire?

Modern management employed the adage: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," but postmodern management uses the slogan: "Fix it even if it isn't broke." The latter saying reflects the primary philosophy of Total Quality organizations: continuous improvement or kaizen. According to this philosophy, the system or process is never perfect and all employees can contribute suggestions on how to improve production. While this may be true, the philosophy also tends to stress the system, as workers are hyper-aware of their actions in terms of process and productivity. This attitude is not the same as being proactive or using preventive measures; as Dilbert points out, this belief in continuous improvement is often taken to extremes by managers who either misinterpret the philosophy or take the ideas much too literally. Again, my essential experience of this sign is that of suspension. I, along with Dilbert, am suspended between logic and chaos, between structure and vacuum, and between action and nonaction. This suspension causes me to pose the following juxtapositions: Fix what even if it isn't broken; Thinking like a manager - thinking like an engineer - thinking like an engineering manager; Schedule the solutions to unknown problems - Schedule the problems by scheduling solutions to unknown problems; Are there such things as "unknown problems"?

Critical Interpretation: I revel in Dilbert's irreverence, but more than that I applaud his ability to employ an immanent criticism of sorts. He judges his superior by the standards and logic of the superior's own ideas. The best of satirists know how to do this, and they do it with flair, wit, cunning, and a great deal of biting sarcasm. This sign represents the proverbial knife that every employee at one time or another has wanted to thrust into the gut of the body politic. Dilbert, as everyman/everywoman, says and does what each of us says and does in our thoughts and fantasies: find revenge (however fleeting) in the face of a self-sustaining bureaucracy, organizational double binds, and managers obsessed with faddish, dysfunctional approaches to communication and leadership. We all know there is nothing so "sweet" as revenge, actual or fantastic.

A Critical Analysis of The Dilbert Zone: <http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert>

Description: Because the Dilbert Zone contains so many codes and so much data I will be very selective with my description and limit my reading to several key codes. Bypassing the ad for unrelated software at the top of the page, I will focus on the Dilbert Zone logo and slogan. The logo is very colorful and shows the Dilbert and Dogbert characters seated at a computer with "the zone" indicated by an apparent wind storm coming off the computer graphic and a concentric circle in the background. The slogan, "it's better than working," assumes that the reader is in a work environment and shirking duties and responsibilities. Next is a recent black and white Dilbert cartoon and an advertisement for Adams' latest book: "NY Times Bestseller, Buy it Here!" There are a collection of internet "links" including an archive of Dilbert cartoons (previously printed in newspapers), The Dilbert Store (where you can purchase everything from a Dilbert tie to the latest book), Dilbert Partners (with descriptions of and links to businesses that sell various Dilbert products), and Corporate Info. (a description of a link to United Feature Syndicate, Inc., a distribution company to publishers, and a link to the Scripps Howard corporation, the parent company of United Feature Syndicate).

Reduction and Construction of Constellations: Simultaneously, there is an experience of being overwhelmed and being entertained. The florescent green background of the "zone" is at once seductive and oppressive. The page or zone is indeed "virtual" in the sense that there are so many connections to other sites/pages, yet intimate because of the plain black and white Dilbert cartoon at the beginning of the page. The essential theme of this text is hyper-consumerism, both in terms of

consuming the entertainment features on the page or connected to the page, and in terms of purchasing opportunities. The Dilbert Store is the epicenter of this hyper-consumerism. With a credit card number/code, the reader is able to purchase instantly hundreds of Dilbert products, from T-shirts to business training videos. The store appeals to all appetites and financial resources with colorful pictures and graphics indicating what the consumer will receive. A related, secondary theme is that of corporate hierarchy in terms of smaller companies and properties owned by larger ones. Ultimately, the disempowered Dilbert worker is owned by a huge publishing conglomerate called the Scripps Howard company. I am left wondering what would happen if Adams turned his satirical focus on his parent company and "poked fun" at the management practices therein.

Critical Interpretation: This is a most obvious and obscene display of power; I find the humor in the single cartoon dwarfed by the immense organizational machine that has produced the text. When I do read the cartoon, it seems to reflect, not resist, the intense capitalism that has created it. Yet, United Feature Syndicate and Scripps Howard seem insulated from any attempt at dismantling or deconstruction. After all, how can companies that publish and distribute Peanuts and Dilbert be seen as anything but innocent and helpful? The answer lies, in part, in the anthropomorphizing of the American corporation. Just as the fictional Dilbert character is read as "real," the corporate organization is viewed by people and the American legal system as a real citizen. As Noam Chomsky reminds us in a recent lecture (C-SPAN, 1997), the corporation-as-citizen has all the rights of people, and are therefore protected by the law just like people, but unlike people and small businesses, corporations are often tax exempt and subsidized by individual taxpayers. Corporations can bring a lawsuit in federal court, and are considered to be people with Fourth Amendment (search and seizure) protection (Lutz, 1996). The humor of the Dilbert Zone comes from the irony that the corporations that own and control Dilbert are more personified than the picture of the human character called Dilbert. The presence of the corporate persona, with all its power, glory, and governmental protections and support, is never more evident than in the simple Dilbert graphic.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

When we laugh at Dilbert cartoons we are also laughing in the face of some very complex and covert power relations. Our laughter is a reflex reaction to the irony and paradox of powerlessness and double bind situations. In a sense, if we think about the sign too long, if we critically consider all the deep structure meanings, we will cry and/or become indignant. As Catt (1989, p. 15) states in his analysis of satirical humor: "somehow, deep within our experience of laughter, we 'know', that is feel, the anxiety of desire [for power] without a true object, the meaninglessness of authority where it is interpreted as domination." At the same time we are anxious about our "desire" for power we are painfully aware of our lack of power. But more significantly, we are anxious and frustrated by the covert dynamics that keep many employees suspended in a self-sustaining helix of double binds. This suspension between action and inaction, between presence and absence, between present and future, between structure and chaos is a new, more perfect type of organizational power relations. Because it is a double bind created and sustained by numerous interrelated paradoxes (Wendt, 1998), there seems to be no rational explanation, no solution, and no escape. The inability to act effectively (lose - lose) suspends an employee in time and space; an appropriate metaphor would be running in place.

### **Power Suspension as a Presence - Absence Dialectic**

My experiencing of this essential suspension through the sad humor of Adams and his everyman/everywoman Dilbert character is further manifest in terms of an absence and presence. Through Dilbert, I become the perpetually decentered subject; as a subject/body I am present, but my subject/identity is constantly present and absent. In my experience of the Dilbert phenomenon there is a simultaneous disclosure (presence) and concealment (absence) (Heidegger, 1962); my experiencing and interpretation of Dilbert signs is always partial and fragmented, and because my experience is tentative so is my sense of self. Experiences like suspension or powerlessness are moments "in which the subject is both announced and annulled, affirmed and effaced," moments when "absence invades

the space of presence in such a way that it perpetually decenters the subject as a stabilized presence to itself" (Schrag, 1986, p. 144).

We can better appreciate this suspended or perpetually decentering subjectivity by revisiting the notions of temporality, multiplicity, and embodiment. Following the work of Schrag (1986), it can be said that these three categories can help to explain the subject as s/he continually recreates her/himself through the praxis of communication. Stated as succinctly as possible, time, in modern epistemology, is conceptualized as a threat to presence and to the subject because it suggests a demise, a mortality, and a distortion. Similarly, temporality in the Dilbert workplace (a reflection of corporate America) is a negative, dysfunctional element in that employees are always being frozen or suspended due to organizational paradoxes and double binds. However, as Schrag (1986) reminds us, the subject, through critical reflection and dialogue, can have an active, living presence, one that remains true to the presence - absence dialectic, by inventing and building on the past. Rather than a negativity and a threat to the permanence of presence, time can be viewed as an opportunity for positive change. The critical comments of the worker characters in Dilbert cartoons signify the struggle to use time in a more empowering way.

Second, in terms of multiplicity, the Dilbert worker is made schizophrenic by the paradoxes of time, space, and power; his/her identity is forced in two opposing directions. But rather than search for that one, stable, unified identity (modernism), Schrag suggests we adopt different profiles of the self that answer to differing contexts and situations. This multiple self is acquired rather than given and is "achieved within the play of differences" (1992, p. 148). What Schrag could be suggesting for the schizophrenic worker is that s/he attempt to appreciate, understand, and criticize the unique nature of a situation by employing a "hermeneutical comprehension" and conversation that remains critical of universal and particular/singular notions of self. This posture views conceptual oppositions (absence versus presence) as suspect because they are false dichotomies and forced choices and not a multiplicity in the sense of a continuous dialectic—a continuous hermeneutic—between dualisms. Even organizational double binds can be viewed for their false sense of dualism; perhaps there is a third option other than the two inferior ones proposed. Although impractical in the real world, Dilbert's responses to double binds fly in the face of paradoxical power relations by commenting on the absurdity of each situation, and it is in this sense that we as Dilbert can learn from the situatedness of organizational power. Our posting of these absurdities on our office walls is our own local, small response (Lyotard's little narratives) to hegemonic forces, continuous reminders of the unique and complex dimensions of each communicative moment.

Third, instead of embodiment as object or machine (modernism), which again places the emphasis on presence rather than the presence - absence dialectic, Schrag suggests we employ the metaphor "body politic" as a way to describe the subject in action and in context. This is both the participating body and the socially constructed body, not the talking head and the mind - body split. Perhaps it is the worker-as-machine metaphor that the Dilbert character fights against. The savvy, cynical Dilbert is very much a "body politic" as he seems to attract and resist every questionable and contradictory management strategy that comes along. He is both the locus and the magnifying glass for organizational conflict, tension, confusion, frustration, and absurdity. He shows us the tip of the iceberg in terms of power dynamics, and hopes that we will see the rest (absence) for ourselves. And he forces us to laugh at ourselves, at our own body politic, as we struggle with signs and meaning in our complex organizations.

Ideally, the body politic, once freed from dysfunctional formulations of time, multiplicity, and embodiment, is better able to understand and participate in organizational dynamics. Furthermore, as this examination of organizational paradox and double binds illustrates, a savior (abductive understanding) of one's suspended power and the signs that facilitate this power can potentially serve the employee in pursuit of empowerment. Organizational double binds can be experienced as a description of paradoxical discourse that justifies an understanding (meaning in practice) of a value judgment. Stated another way, if my essential experience of organizational paradox and double bind is frustration, I can use the reductive step to ask how I came to this experience, and the interpretive step

to ask why. Insight into organizational power dynamics comes when reflecting upon the dialectic between these how and why responses. Simply stated, it is the non-logic of abductive play that provides insights into the non-logic of paradoxical management practices and the disempowerment they often create.

### **Power Suspension and the Ghosts of Marx**

I have argued that one essential experience of Dilbert is that of suspension—a continuous dialectic between presence and absence as experienced in organizational paradoxes and double binds and relived through the satire of Scott Adams. Using Adorno's method of immanent criticism and juxtaposition, I critically reflected on the covert standards and values that accompany sign systems like Dilbert. By throwing the signs and the language back on themselves, I exposed the hypocrisy and control dynamics of numerous management strategies. But it is important to remain cognizant of the fact that Adams' satire and my analysis of his satire to this point are only commentaries on the micro-politics of contemporary organizations—flawed micro-management techniques that reflect a flawed macro-political phenomenon called capitalism. It is this broader reading of the Dilbert signs that further exposes the absence in the texts. In this sense, Dilbert signs express symptoms of a problem and not the problem itself. Granted, communication is power at the micro level, and as such is worthy of investigation. However, power, authority, and the satirizing of authority exist in contexts, from the specific and immediate, to the intra-organizational, to the inter-organizational, to the societal, to the national, to the international, to the global. If Dilbert can be read as a "sign of the times," then it must have some implications for our society and perhaps our world. Political and corporate satire are not new, but the Dilbert commodity syndicate is quite unique in several aspects.

First, as alluded to earlier, the irony of a syndicate expanding at an exponential rate by satirizing the organizational practices of other corporations deserves critical commentary and monitoring. Second, the way this syndicate has expanded and its use of internet resources is quite significant. The salience lies in the fact that most consumers seem to be buying Dilbert products not only to resist capitalism, but also to support and applaud it. I admit it, I have a Dilbert doll sitting on top of my computer, but to me this sign represents all that is problematic with capitalism rather than a celebration of how prolific, ubiquitous, and innocent the system is. In a sense, the Dilbert doll is a true puppet of capitalism, a happy-sad fellow who dreads going into work and dreams about retirement.

My Dilbert doll is also a ghost, or rather several ghosts, that reflect the body of work produced by Marx and recently commented on by Derrida (1994). In *Specters of Marx* Derrida seems to revert back to his critical roots and let fly at the hypocrisies of postmodern capitalism. A "counter-conjuration" reflecting Adorno's technique of immanent criticism is Derrida's method for exposing and dismantling capitalism and the obscenities of contemporary world affairs. He first describes a new justice, one that includes responsibility but is different from laws. He then provides a list of ten "plagues of the new world order," ghosts that make "the euphoria of liberal-democrat capitalism resemble the blindest and most delirious of hallucinations, or even an increasingly glaring hypocrisy in its formal or juridicist rhetoric of human rights" (pp. 80-81). Later in the text Derrida revisits ten ghosts of capitalism as identified by Marx. The essential ghost seems to be "man" him/herself, for it is the fear of ourselves, of what we are capable of, that seems to lie at the heart of capitalism and the development of the present state of affairs. My Dilbert doll, this sign of the times, often reminds me of the "man" Marx was referring to, and through this "man" I too envision the macro-political state of the world and the ten "plagues" outlined by Derrida. I see unemployment, homeless people, economic war, contradictions in the free market (e.g., protectionism versus interventionism), foreign debt, the arms industry and trade, the spread of nuclear weapons, inter-ethnic wars, mafia and drug cartels, and the power and philosophy of international law. I would also add an eleventh ghost, one that my Dilbert doll most definitely symbolizes: hyper-consumerism. The intertextuality of these plagues can be ignored or glossed over or rationalized, but it cannot be denied. My Dilbert doll, as a hermeneutic sign of the times, causes me to laugh at the hypocrisy of capitalism. It is, however, a very sad laugh.

## Notes

1. Adams' first book, *The Dilbert Principle*, was a number one New York Times bestseller and has sold more than 800,000 copies. A *Dilbert Business Video Series* is available from The Humor Project, Inc., (800-225-0330 or [www.wizvax.net/humor/](http://www.wizvax.net/humor/)), or contact the DILBERT © United Feature Syndicate, Inc. ([www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert](http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert)). The cost is \$199 for each of four five minute animated videos.
2. For further commentary on the Dilbert Phenomenon, see Dennehy (in press).
3. Unfortunately, because EJROT has open access, United Media would not allow reprint permission for these four cartoons. However, they can be viewed in Adams (1996b, section 1.11, "Management Physics" [no page numbers]).

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