

Exploring the Tension of Genre through *Party Down*

It has become common for pop-culture review websites to address a television program's place in the static-dynamic spectrum of genre conformity. It is a spectrum that, on one end, houses (typically network) shows that are rooted in convention, formula, and mimicry, and, on the other end, includes (often "cult") niche, experiential programs. Both types of programs can enjoy success—though static-leaning shows usually find wide-reaching popularity while dynamic-leaning shows find "influence" and critical success—and both can fall flat. Dynamic shows that favor experimentation run the risk of seeming innovate, but not understandable; a static show that conforms perfectly to a genre's conventions can feel boring and "seen before." Starz' *Party Down* (2009-2010) exemplifies how a TV show can simultaneously embrace and push against its own genre's conventions.

Party Down is a workplace sitcom: a genre characterized not only by being a comedy about situations set at a workplace, but also about existing in a banal, bureaucratic place. If there was only one text, there would exist no concept of genre. Because genre is derived from a cultural desire to classify texts based on common elements such as recurring themes and structure, it is important acknowledge contemporaries when classifying genre ("Genre Criticism" 111). *Party Down*'s contemporary workplace sitcoms include: *The Office* (2005-2013), *30 Rock* (2006-013), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), and *Community* (2009-2015). Each of these shows is set in (and often named after) a workplace—paper supply office, television studio, government facility, and community college, respectively. Similarly, *Party Down* follows the employees of the catering company Party Down. For every character but team leader Ronald (Ken Marino), working for Party Down catering is not their ideal career. They are all aspiring to be something else (be it actor, writer, comedian, or agent). *Party Down* includes many workplace

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sitcom tropes, such as the will-they-won't-they workplace romance between leads Henry (Adam Scott) and Casey (Lizzy Caplan), but the structure and style of the show is also derived from its genre.

Per workplace sitcom convention, *Party Down* blends farce with realism. *Party Down* exists at its most farcical in season 2's "Not Your Wife's Opening Night," in which the catering team's work intermixes with a small play company which, itself, has just finished performing a farce. There's slapstick, mistaken identities, and improbable situations based on coincidence—all hallmarks of farce. Another highly-farcical episode is "Celebrate Ricky Sargulesh," in which the catering team works at a party to celebrate that mobster and murderer Ricky Sargulesh's is not going to jail. Throughout the episode, Henry accidentally seduces Ricky's girlfriend, the mobsters turn out to be fans of the *Party Down* crew's very minor roles in B- and C-films, and science-fiction writer Roman (Martin Starr) discovers Ricky Sargulesh is plotting another murder when he reads a speculative screenplay for a movie Ricky is writing. The plots intertwine in a way that maintains the lightheartedness of a farce, despite the characters believing their lives may be in danger. *Party Down* frequently places its character in absurd and unrealistic situations, but character interactions within the *Party Down* team are grounded and realistic. In the first episode of the show, Henry is introduced as a low-key person, lacking ambition, but friendly and easy to have a conversation with. He's jaded from Hollywood, having struggled to make it as an actor for over a decade. In *Variety*'s (largely negative) review of show, critic Brian Lowry comments that "by the end of three catered affairs, I felt every bit as bored and blase about life as Henry." Whether or not the viewer enjoys Henry's—and the show's—cynicism, it is undeniable that being frustrated at an existential level with work is common in a workplace sitcom—*The Office* serving as the most notable contemporary example.

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Although only airing for two seasons, *Party Down* challenges the conventions of a workplace sitcom on both a surface level and an existential level. One innovative feature of *Party Down* is that contrary to how most workplace sitcoms are set in a single geographic location, every episode of *Party Down* takes place in a new location—wherever *Party Down* is catering. This conceit serves many purposes. Practically, it keeps the show from getting stale, allows for cast changes to feel natural (since employment at a catering company is fluid), and acts as an excuse to bring old characters back (see “Constance Carmell Wedding”). But a constantly changing setting can also highlight an episode’s themes. In the episode “California College Conservative Union Caucus,” an episode that advocates for the legitimacy of quitting, Henry is consoling Casey when she is rejected after auditioning for a “Comedy Central gig.” Two young Republicans berate Henry and Casey about his current career state, telling them that “Nobody ever accomplished anything by quitting,” and “What if Ronald Regan quit?” Henry quickly responds by telling them that “Regan quit acting,” and that is, actually, where he got the idea. The setting is critical to the theme of the episode, an innovation that would not have occurred if *Party Down* conformed fully to its genre’s conventions.

Another key aspect of *Party Down* that separates it from contemporary workplace sitcoms is its commitment to developing the minutia of its characters’ cynicism. In an *Atlantic* article about death of *The Office*, Kevin Craft claims that “The original theme it explored—office work sucks—is only funny if the characters never grow.” While Craft’s point is apt when applied to the nine-season-long show *The Office*, the claim applies less well to the (comparatively short-running) *Party Down*, which concludes fully after two seasons when Henry returns to the world of acting in the series finale. Because Henry has struggled not only with acting, but with the world outside of acting, his return feels earned. Another reason that characters in *Party Down* are

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allowed more nuance in their bitter relationship with work is that they are starving artists (or, in the case of Ronald who is incapable of achieving his dream of opening a Super Crackers franchise, a starving entrepreneur). That characters give each other realistic advice about when, precisely, to give up on their dreams—hardly uplifting content for a comedy. “Steve Guttenberg’s Birthday” is the emotional climax of the show, in which Steve Guttenberg, playing himself, forgets to cancel Party Down’s catering services, and decides to hang out with them. In the episode, Casey discovers Henry is, in her words, “like, a legitimate actor” and the rest of the team performs then workshops a piece of Roman’s writing. By the end of the show, it becomes clear that only Henry and Casey have legitimate chances of “making it” in Hollywood, while the others will likely to wade in a pool of their own disillusionment for the rest of their lives, akin to the characters in *The Office*.

Using deductive genre analysis, it is clear that the Starz’ series *Party Down* exemplifies the claim that Vande Berg, et al., makes in “Chapter 6: Genre Criticism,” that “a genre is both a static and a dynamic system” (111). When reading comments online about the show, I found it was often compared to contemporary workplace sitcoms *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *30 Rock*, and *Community*. Such discussions, though I was unable to find them again, are some of the best evidence for these shows sharing a genre. Despite having enough similarities to also be a workplace sitcom, *Party Down* is different. It ran for two, not seven-plus, seasons. It was not a cable show, meaning it could include cursing and nudity. But most importantly, the tone the show took to character growth, allowed its main characters to grow without betraying their cynical core.

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