

The Simpsons

Innovation and Tradition in a Postmodern TV Family

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Abstract

Il saggio è un'analisi critica di uno dei cartoni animati di prima serata più popolari del mondo: I Simpsons. La tesi della critica è che, contrariamente a quanto sostengono i commentatori più superficiali, l'animazione non rappresenta una minaccia ai valori della famiglia tradizionale, bensì, attraverso i canoni dell'estetica postmoderna, ne rappresenta una riaffermazione. L'analisi permette di riflettere criticamente sul rapporto tra messaggi televisivi e istituzioni economiche e sociali. Sotto il profilo metodologico, l'analisi si presenta come un'esecuzione di economia politica dei media, in cui l'analisi testuale non rimane fine a se stessa ma è finalizzata a ricavare sintomi e tracce delle influenze socio-economiche.

The Simpsons have represented the first prime time animated series since the *Flinstones*¹. The characters made their debut in 1987 in a series of shorts animated sketches inserted before commercial breaks in the *Tracey Ullman Show* on FOX. Soon, the creator, Matt Groening, was hired for developing an autonomous animated series. The pilot of the new series premiered on December 17, 1989, and the show started to be aired on a weekly basis, on Sundays, in January 1990. In the realization of the show, other two key figures were James L. Brooks (from the Oscar-nominated *Broadcast News* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) and Sam Simon (from *Taxi*).

Since its debut, the animated series has been a cultural as well economic phenomenon.

Indeed, the show soon became a smashing hit. Within two months of its January premiere, *The Simpsons* had rocked into Nielsen's top 15 (Waters 1990). By the end of the first season, before summer 1990, the yellow family from Springfield had featured on the covers and articles of magazines such as *Newsweek*, *TvGuide*, *Time*, and *Rolling Stone*. In the second season, *The Simpsons* was aired on Thursdays in opposition to *The Cosby Show* on NBC. Still, they were a success and in 1992 even bested an original *Cosby* episode (Broadcasting 1992). In 1999-2000 season *The Simpsons* returned to their Sunday slot and still remained one of FOX highest rated show, with an overall 7.3 rating and 14,549,000 viewers.

¹ The creators of the show are very aware of this fact and the series is dotted by references to *The Flinstones*. For examples in "Homer's Night Out" (03-25-1990) Apu asks Homer "You look familiar sir, are you on the television or something? And Homer answers "Sorry, buddy. You got me confused with Fred Flinstone." In "Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish" (11-01-90) Homer's boss, Mr. Burns, confuses Simpson for Flinstone and Homer performs Fred's expression "Yabba-Dabba-Do!" In "The Simpsons 138th Episode Spectacular" (12-03-95) Troy McClure presents *The Simpsons* as "Your favorite non-prehistoric family." In a coach gag, on their sofa the Simpsons find the prehistoric family.

In 1994 the series was successfully syndicated and finished first among all syndicated strips (Tobenkin 1994, Freeman 1995).

The story of *The Simpsons* has also been the story of Fox's success as the Simpsons' licensing agent. During the 1990-1991 TV season, Fox licensees were shipping more than a million Simpsons T-shirts a week and more than \$1 billion in licensed Simpsons merchandise was sold in the U.S. (Lefton 1992)

From a cultural point of view *The Simpsons* go on representing a cult program all over the world. On March 6, 2000, a search for the string "The Simpsons" on Altavista produced 74,352 pages found. A similar search for "2001: A Space Odyssey", another cult, produced barely 121 pages. Similar results could be obtained from academic databases such as Lexis-Nexis.

At the same time this series has been regarded as a breakthrough in animation and as an inspiration for next animated series.² Authors of successful animation such as Mike Judge or Trey Parker and Matt Stone in public occasions (MT&R 1996) have recognized that *The Simpsons* set the precedent for their works.

Given the economic and cultural success of the series, *The Simpsons* represent a fruitful object of study for critical scholars interested in the complex relationships among text, audience, and television industry. In this paper we are going to discuss the content and the style of this animation in the light of its economic and cultural context. At the same time, through the discussion, I will try to show how the process of innovation in

² At the beginning of 1999-2000 season, on prime time network television there were six animation series premiering (out of a total of 38 new shows on the six major networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, WB, UPN; the one year old PAX presented four new shows). These shows were *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, and *Futurama* (Sundays on FOX), *Dilbert* (Tuesdays on UPN), *Family Guy* (Thursdays still on FOX), and the new *Mission Hill* (Fridays on WB). In addition to these, a cable network, Comedy Central, boosted its successful *Southpark* and the reruns of *Dr. Katz* and *The Critic* (Source, *TV Guide* Sept 11-17, vol. 47 n. 37).

television programming works. I will deal with the series as a whole; however, I am going to draw many examples from the very first season, because it represented the most discussed era of our cartoon.

After a methodological section, I am going to discuss five aspects of the show: a) the representation of the family; b) the representation of social problems; c) the influence of the competitive environment; d) the role of genre and animation; e) the presence of postmodern elements in the aesthetic of the show.

Method

Most of this paper is based on textual observations about the form and content of *The Simpsons*. However, textual analysis has been only the starting point, and not the end.

In cultural studies we have witnessed a constant movement from text to context (Grandi 1994). The early Screen Theory, the Feminist reading of filmic texts, on the basis of Laura Mulvey's now-classic essay, and the semiotic readings of popular culture focused on the text, all assumed that the reader was determined and positioned as a subject by the text itself. On converse, since Stuart Hall decoding/encoding model, critical scholars have emphasized the active role of the receiver, by focusing on concept such as resistance, productive consumption, and uses of the text. The new Critical Audience Studies that have focused on the world of television have regarded the viewer as the place where meaning is produced.

These studies are important because have overcome the limitations of strict deterministic textual models. However, I argue that they are lacking on two aspects. First, these approaches tend to downplay the role of the production industry in the process of creation of cultural meaning. Actually, the industry can greatly affect the way a text is

received, for example by manipulating the context of reception or simply by exerting an agenda setting function. For this reason, the logic of production and the ideology lying behind these logics are very important in an explanation of the cultural meaning of a popular text.

The second critic that I have toward Critical Audience Studies is that most of times the text is pretty forgotten. I argue that this is an error. Indeed, the text carries a lot of information about the relationships between producers and consumers. Every text contains a preferred strategy of interpretation and embeds an ideal image of the expected reader – as a set of competences (Eco 1979). As a consequence, by reading the internal structure of the text and comparing this structure to the actual reading one could get many insights about the producers' communicative strategy, the efficacy of the text, and the factors influencing its reception.

For all these reasons, the method that I try to carry out in this paper takes textual analysis as a starting point for a more sophisticated reading in which an account of the ideology lying behind the structuring of the text and its reception is offered.

Today this method is carried out by a number of scholars. David Buxton (1990), in his study on form and ideology in television series, makes this point clear: “The text must be related to something other than its own structure: in other words, we must explain how it comes to be structured.” Another scholar, Douglas Kellner (1995) has elaborated a multiperspectival theory of Cultural Studies that tries to deal with different dimensions of the text, such as production and reception. At UCLA School of Film and Television, Robert Vianello, similarly, is promoter of a critical approach in which stylistic properties of television are linked to the economic functions of the medium, and, in final analysis, to

the ideological structure of society. What these scholars share is a sense of dissatisfaction with textual approaches that do not take in consideration the reasons lying behind the making of the text.

In addition to our commentary upon the textual structure of the series and its relationship to economic and cultural constraints, I am going to take advantage of popular interpretation of the show, as presented in reviews and business journals. Indeed, a text is also the collection of references to it and a wise use of these references may help us understand the nature of the text. In some cases, I have even introduced the opinions held by the authors of the show, such as Matt Groening. I am aware that the author's official intentions are distinct from the author's intentions as embedded in the text. However, many of these comments can be very useful, in order to understand the cultural atmosphere within which *The Simpsons* were created.

Family

In a seminar at the Museum of Television and Radio at Los Angeles (1996), Steve Bell, the vice president of the organization, presented *The Simpsons* as the stories of a dysfunctional working family. And so did the President of the Museum in another seminar fully dedicated to the series (1998). The idea that *The Simpsons* were dealing with a new form of television family had become commonplace by the end of season one. In many reviews, The Simpsons were put in pair with *Married... with Children* and *Roseanne*. For example Elm (1990) wrote "It is *The Simpsons*, along with the Connors in *Roseanne* and the Bundys in *Married... with Children*, who have emerged as the real counterpoints to those model nuclear families of the past" (Elm 1990). Somewhere else, these shows are called anti-family sitcoms (Zoglin 1990). Along these lines, in an issue of

TV Guide the family is presented this way: “It has been called a mutant *Ozzie and Harriet*, an anti-*Cosby* sitcom and an animated *Married... with Children*” (Bruns 1990).

At first sight, there is a great deal of truth in claiming, like Waters (1990), that “what’s indisputable is that TV’s new blue-hued families are displaying an extraordinary disdain for the medium’s wholesome familial stereotypes.” First of all, the characters seem to be flawed in many respects. Homer is the family blue-collar patriarch. However, he does not appear to know best. He constantly bickers with his wife and children; he is lazy, fat, and extremely stupid. His only passion is television and a beer at Moe’s. Marge, the wife, is a really caricatured figure. She seems to be obsessed by her duties as a housewife and hardly say something funny. Bart is as lazy as the father is; he is portrayed as cheating and sneaking into movies (“Bart The Genius” 1-14-90 and “The Telldale Head” 2-25-90).³ Lisa is the middle child. She is an excellent and precocious student, but she is also obsessed by grades. The youngest person in the family, Maggie, does not speak and sometimes Homer forgets about her existence.

At the same time, the narratives deal with topics that are quite unheard. For example, in the pilot (“Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire” 12-17-89), the Family has to deal with financial problems and Homer is forced to get a job at the mall as a Santa Claus. When his son, Bart, discovers his father’s temporary job, his comment is “Dad, you must really love us to sink so low.” It is not that kind of idyllic scene that you would expect in a *Leave it to Beaver* style sit-com. In general, all family life is portrayed in a sarcastic and satiric tone. In this respect it is significant that when they eat are extremely noisy. Dinner,

³ The references to airing dates and titles of specific episodes are based on Groening and Gimple (1999) and Groening and Richmon (1997).

one of the most important familial rituals, is completely demystified. But to what extent are *The Simpsons* an anti-family and what does it mean?

As we have seen, at first sight *The Simpsons* are very irreverent. However, we are going to argue that the narrative structure of the show is not really against the family as an institution. Zoglin (1990) noticed this point:

Anti-family shows aren't against the family, exactly, just scornful of the romantic picture TV has often painted of it. Was once dad a pillar of wisdom and understanding? In the new shows he is either a slob or an oaf. Did Mom used to be the nurturing guardian of home and heart? Now if she even knows how to put a roast in the oven, she could sear it with sarcasm. TV kids have always been mischievous, but now they are bratty and disrespectful.

The fact that *The Simpsons* are not really against the family is shown by the narrative structure of one episode from the first season: "Life on the Fast Lane" (1-14-96). In this episode, the trigger is represented by a bowling ball with his name engraved that Homer presents to Marge for her birthday. Marge feels unloved and uncared, so she decides to spend some evenings bowling alone. At Barney's Bowl-A-Rama, Marge knows Jacques, a professional bowler and womanizer who tries to seduce her. They meet sometimes and, eventually, Jacques asks Marge to meet him at his apartment. Marge accepts, while Homer is incapable to express his feelings for her. However, on her way, Marge has second thoughts and instead of seeing Jacques takes the road to the nuclear plant for meeting Homer. An overjoyed Homer lifts his wife into his arms and leaves saying: "I am going to the back seat of my car with the woman I love and I won't be back for 10 minutes." The story line was very provocative. It highlighted the emotional difficulties

that can arise from marriage and set the scene for a betrayal. However, what it counts is that by the end of the episode Homer and Marge still love each other.

This story line is very common in throughout the series. In “The War of The Simpsons” (05-02-91), Homer and Marge go to a retreat for helping their marriage, but Homer does not attend the workshop, because he wants to catch a legendary fish that eventually captures. On the way home, Marge tells him that their marriage is at stake. So to prove his love, Homer lets the fish go. Marge forgives Homer and they return home happy. The same takes place in “A Streetcar Named Marge” (10-01-92), “The Last Temptation of Homer” (12-09-93), and many more. The mechanism is simple. Given the inherent flawlessness of a character something stupid and hurtful takes place. However, thanks to the *reaffirmation of family love*, the problem turns out to be solved.

From this narrative point of view, the institution of the family, which at first sight is downplayed in the sarcastic portrayal of his members, end up being promoted by this animated series. This situation has been recently noticed by Cantor (1999), a professor of literature that has dedicated a lot of interesting thoughts to the series:

For all its slapstick nature and its mocking of certain aspects of family life, *The Simpsons* has an affirmative side and ends up celebrating the nuclear family as an institution... It therefore represents the paradox of an untraditional show that it is deeply rooted in television tradition. *The Simpsons* can be traced back to earlier television cartoons that dealt with families, such as *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*. But these cartoons must themselves be traced back to the famous nuclear family sitcoms of the 1950s.

So, not only the show promotes the family, but also it promotes a specific type of family – the nuclear family – that on television has recently been subject to the competition of single or divorced mothers, stepdads, and other unconventional

arrangements.⁴ This point is very important. Indeed we must recognize that the family is the primary unit of consumption of the capitalist economy within which the television works. Since much of television business is selling impressions to advertisers that rely on this social unit, displaying a critique of this institution would be inconsistent.

This point is also interesting because it shows how television can innovate without changing some basic rules underlying its production logic. Indeed, we have seen that the critique act only at the superficial level, while the deep narrative structure is not something really innovative.

The fact that even *The Simpsons*, contrary to what it has been sometimes claimed, do not represent a real critique of the family leads us to a more general question: Can the family be criticized in television? On the basis of what we have seen, it is very unlikely that network television can display a critique of the family as an institution. However, as we have seen, television can still put forward the problems or contradictions of this institution – such as one woman’s frustration because of her husband’s lack of attention – provided that by the end these contradictions are solved, or at least, displaced.

Social problems

So far we have seen that *The Simpsons* do not really display a critique of the family. In this section, we are going to address the role of the portrayal of social issues in the series. The articulation of economic and social anxieties is certainly one of the most innovative features of the series. The show deals explicitly with issues spanning upward mobility, financial insecurity, homosexuality, security in school and nuclear plants,

⁴ Elm (1990) noticed that in 1990 mid-season on TV one could have come across to shows such as *Kate and Allie* (two divorced moms and their kids set up housekeeping together), *Major Dad* (a marine stepdad to three girls) and *My Two Dads* (teen daughter living with two men, either of whom could be the real

immigration. Some episodes refer to specific political debates such as teen curfew, school uniforms, and gun control. Elm (1990) claimed that “Fox’s cartoon clan is defining their decade, mirroring life styles trends of the times.” Along these lines, Mcconnel (1990) noted “All the unhappy family watch the tube together and in *The Simpsons* the tube watches them back.”

One could easily argue that by catalyzing social anxieties and problems, *The Simpsons* easily resonated with the public and gained a great popularity. According to Kellner (1995), this is exactly what happens when a popular text becomes a cult.

However, one should not exaggerate the radical content of the series. Similarly to what we have seen as to the representation of the family, *these problems are addressed, but not solved*. In *The Simpsons* social problems are inherent to the society and there is nothing to do. Most of times characters prefer compromising.

For example in “Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield” (02-04-96) Marge, who wanted to become a member of the local exclusive country club, decides to give up pursuing lofty social ambition and accepts her situation. In one of the first episodes, “Homer’s Odissey” (01-21-90), Homer gets fired from the local nuclear plant. So he starts a campaign against the dangers of nuclear energy. But when Mr. Burns, the owner of the plant, offers him a position as safety supervisor with a large pay increase, Homer accepts the job, telling the mob he had aroused to go home. He will take care. Once again, there is a difference between deep and superficial structure. At a deeper level, even *The Simpsons* fail to display a sound critique of social institutions and practices.

father). Interestingly enough once Groening declared: “When I was a child I really liked Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver. I wanted to do another family sit-com, only with a smarter boy” (MT&R 1998).

This structure has been identified by Brook (1996 and 1997) too. He calls it “rubber-band reality”, by adopting a term coined by Matt Groening who defined it as the attempt “to push characters in peculiar directions, for as far they can go; then we have them snap back” (quoted in Brook 1997).

Innovation and competitive context

When the show first appeared, given the superficial innovations that I have discussed so far, *The Simpsons* really were welcomed as something genuinely new⁵. However, TV is an industry that tries to manage risks, so it is not likely to innovate. So, I am going to show the main historical and economic reason lying behind this innovation.

First of all, FOX could rely on its internal resources and competences in the development of the show. FOX had already successfully experimented a show based on a dysfunctional family, *Married... with Children*, and a relationship between creator Groening and producer Brooks had already been established since the *Tracey Ullman Show*, where the characters made their debut in 1987. Therefore, the development of the series was consistent with the logic of development of the network. Interestingly enough, in the first season, *The Simpsons* and *Married... with Children* were programmed together on Sundays. Still today, animation and shows based on dysfunctional nutty family represent the core of FOX’s old and new original programs.

In the second place, the representation of dysfunctional working-class families can be seen as a new “loading up” strategy, by means of which these programs could reach a

⁵ Jhally and Lewis (1992: 143), in their study of *The Cosby Show*, claim: “It could be argued that the only genuinely innovative show that has survived in the commercial sector of this cultural quagmire in recent years is *The Simpsons*.”

mass appeal. Douglas Kellner, as comparing our show to another animated series, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, and, once again, to *Roseanne*, says:

In a sense, *Beavis and Butt-Head* is an example of what has been called “loser television” surely a new phenomenon in television history. Previous television series tended to depict wealthy, or secure middle class, individual and families, often with highly glamorous lives. It was believed that advertisers preferred affluent environment to sell their products and so the working class and the underclass were excluded from network television for decades. Indeed, during the Reaganite 1980s programs like *Dynasty*, *Life Styles of the Rich and Famous*, celebrated wealth and affluence. This dream has been punctured by the reality of everyday life in a downsliding economy, and so large television audience is attracted to programs that articulated their own frustration and anger in experiencing downward mobility and a sense of no future. Hence, the popularity of new “loser television,” including *The Simpsons*, *Roseanne*, and *Beavis and Butt-Head* (Kellner 1995: 149).

The Simpsons as articulating frustrations and fears represented new material that could be appealing to a large audience. On the one side, working class families could easily identify with the characters. At the same time, as Brooks (1996) argues, “what ‘privileged’ readers may lack in subject identification is compensated partly by their own ‘superior’ positioning, partly by their (and TV’s) charitable bestowal of the televisual gaze upon ‘the less fortunate.’”

A third reason that contributed to this change was a sort of generational shift in the rosters of TV executives. In the early 1990s there were a number of younger executives who were more open to new ideas (MT&R 1998).

In the fourth place, the competitive context within which this innovation took place was important. In the 1990s not only FOX became a serious competitors to the three traditional networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), but also the competition of cable and new

media became stiffer. It has been shown that when the competitive context becomes stiffer, there is more room for innovation (Crane 1992). As a consequence the introduction of a show like *The Simpsons* became more likely. This situation is well represented by a Groening's remark: "The FOX network was at the right time: They were so desperate that put on everything" (MT&R 1998).

Actually, they were not so desperate. Within this competitive context, FOX followed a specific strategy aimed a) at differentiating from other networks and b) at targeting a specific niche of market. Kervin (1990) reports that "the new network originally presented itself as looking for programming that was somewhat different from the major networks' offering and specifically aimed at attracting the 18-39 and 18-49 middle to upper middle class segments of television audience, the market prized by advertisers for making major product purchases" (see also Block 1990 and Grover 1987). Furthermore, among this segments, FOX especially targeted male. Still today, *The Simpsons* is the second highest rated program among 18-39 male with 10.4 (interestingly enough the first rated program in this segment is another FOX's show: *Malcom in the Middle*, with 10.8). Within this competitive strategy, *The Simpsons* fitted very well FOX's image, that had already programmed an anti-family show such as *Married... with Children*."

One could easily argue that the innovation in representational practices that we have seen was and is largely aimed at skewing this specific niche. Evidence can be drawn by the representational practices of commercials inserted in the show. Most of this commercials present products that clearly skew male young people, such as Satellite Television, Puma sportswear, Microsoft Windows 2000, The Army, Gillette's Mach3, Seaga Dreamcast and Sony Playstation. For the most part, this commercials are satiric or

paradoxical to some respect. For example, in Pizza Hut ad, one teen is seen as taking over the company, or in Direct TV ad, there are some reflexive references revolving around Drew Carey. This is the style that we have seen at work in *The Simpsons*.

To sum up, FOX's internal resources, the articulation of social problems as a loading up mechanism, younger executives, and a stiffer competitive environment within which FOX was trying to capture a specific niche contributed to the introduction of *The Simpsons* and to the innovation that I have discussed.

Animation, genre, and positioning

As I have mentioned above, *The Simpsons* have been the first prime time animated series since *The Flintstones*. In this section I will further develop the issue of innovation in television programming by addressing the problem of genre and animation.

From a textual point of view, one could argue that the show represents an innovation in the genre of TV animation. A genre indeed is a form of textual contract between an audience and the producers. It works as a relais. On the one side, it enables viewers to easily recognize the type of program. On the other side, it enables producers to target specific audience. As a consequence of this double binding relationship, genres tend to be linked to specific day parts. Indeed, every day parts carry specific audience groups.

Traditionally, animation has been synonymous of children programming and, since children represent a very specific slice of public, these programs have been relegated to the day parts in which the ratings are lower. As a consequence, a prime time animation represents an innovation in terms of the relationship between text and audience. In particular, the 1990s have witnessed an explosion of cartoon programming and his migration from the Saturday morning and weekday-afternoon ghettos to prime time.

Accordingly, cartoon has become a form of entertainment for adults. Wilson (1990) reported that Fox estimated that 94 percent of the audience for *The Simpsons* was over 18, right in the first season.

In technical terms, what one could argue is that animation, or at least a part of this segment of TV industry, has been repositioned. Repositioning is a popular concept in marketing referring to the practice to change the target group of a specific product (Ries and Trout 1993; Trout and Rivkin 1997). This technique can be useful to maximize profits when one product could be appealing to a new audience that was not taken in account previously. In the early 1990s there were many signs indicating that this was the case. For example, in 1988 a feature combining animation and traditional film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, became a \$153 million box office success (Wilson 1990). In 1990, Disney's videocassette release of *The Little Mermaid* was one of the year's bestsellers in large part because of adult consumers (Wilson 1990). At the same time, producers discovered the marketing potential of animated characters in the merchandising industry. Suffice it to say that by June 1990, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*' paraphernalia had hit \$650 million.

All of these were clear indicators of the economic potential of an animated series aimed a adults. And these were also clear indicators that the adult public was ready to consume animation. Theorists of mass communication argue that there is a cultural reason lying behind this situation: "Aging baby boomers are nostalgically seeking to recapture the cartoon memories of their childhood – while keeping their own kids entertained" (Wilson 1990). Along these lines, Meyrowitz (1985), in a book aimed at explaining the effect of television upon today's society, argues that television has blurred

the difference between the young and the adult. As a consequence, consuming animation is not associated with a specific age group anymore and an adult watching cartoons is not stigmatized.

What we have seen should suggest that there are some strong market pressures lying behind the redefinition of the genre of animation as a form of adult entertainment and, again, this discussion should have shown that a concept traditionally used in semiotic studies is deeply rooted in the economic structure governing television business.

Postmodern, popular culture and TV consumption

The Simpsons can be read in the light of postmodern theory. Indeed all the rhetorical devices that characterize postmodern works are present: pastiche, quotation, intertextuality and reflexivity. In particular, we are going to show that in *The Simpsons*, through the use of intertextuality and reflexivity there is a systematic ironic articulation of the “already said” (Eco 1984).

First of all, every element of the show is linked to a web of intertextual references to other popular texts. In particular we have four recurrent forms of intertextuality:

- 1) Single elements carry a bunch of intertextual references. For example, the name of the town in which the family lives, Springfield⁶, is also the name of the town of the vintage TV sitcom *Father Knows Best* (Elm 1990)⁷.

⁶ Springfield is a classic postmodern pastiche. The series systematically conceal the State in which Springfield is located. Of course, many elements remind a large metropolitan area such as Los Angeles. There are all the elements: the ocean, the large urban sprawl, the mountains. In one episode we see the Griffith Observatory. But, actually, Springfield reveals traits of many other cities. In “Lost Our Lisa” (5-10-98) Lisa gets lost in an area reminiscent of San Francisco’s hills. In another episode there is even an appearance of the Empire State Building, although skyscrapers are usually conspicuously absent from Springfield skyline. Thus, Springfield displays many all the characteristics of a postmodern place: lack of a geographical identity, systematic accumulation of heterogeneous parts. From this point of view is of little importance the fact that Matt Groening derived many names and figures from the Springfield in Oregon, near Portland, the city in which the author grew up (Cantor 1997).

⁷ The references to *Father Knows Best* are numerous. See Brooks (1997).

Sometimes, these references are very subtle. Cantor (1997) reports that the curator of the Springfield museum, Hollis Hurlbut, is named after two freshmen dorms at Harvard. Or in “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish” (11-01-90) there is a parody of “The Kentuckian” (1954), a painting by Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) in display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. By the way, the painting is a gift of Bart Lancaster.

- 2) Specific scenes are derived from movies or other shows. For example, one segment of “22 Shorts Films about Springfield” (04-14-96) parodies *Pulp Fiction* (1994) sequence in which Bruce Willis and Ving Rhames end up prisoners in a military store.
- 3) Entire episodes parody a movie or TV programs. “Bart of Darkness” (09-04-94) is a parody of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* – there are even some cameos of Jimmy Stewart. In “Ichy & Scratchy Land” (10-02-94) the family visit a theme park in which the robots start attacking the customers, like in *Westworld*. “The Springfield Files”(1-12-97) is reminiscent of *X-Files* TV series, featuring Scully and Mulder and references to *The Shining*, *E.T.*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.
- 4) Furthermore, *The Simpsons* are display the use of internal references. At first sight, every episode is freestanding. Actually, even if the main characters do not evolve, they carry a memory of past episodes and the supporting characters do change. In the last season, we have even witnessed the dead of Ned Flander’s wife.

Secondly, *The Simpsons* is an example of reflexive television, in which the text refers to its condition of production and consumption. This is shown by four aspects of the show:

- 1) *The Simpsons* is about the process of viewing TV. This is clear since the opening credits that find the family rushing home from the day's activities to leap on the couch together to watch TV. Television consumption is an integral part of family life.
- 2) *The Simpsons* contain a commentary on star system in two ways. First, the show contains a TV universe. There is Kent Brockman, the anchorman of tabloid newscast; there are Spanish sit-coms and, remarkably, an animated show "Itchy and Scratchy" presented by a Clown, Krusty, whose life is devoted to evangelizing merchandising. Secondly, real stars give their voices characters representing themselves or other figures.
- 3) Entire episodes are dedicated to the animation industry. In "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show" (02-09-97) the rating of the popular animated series plummet. So the tycoon of Itchy and Scratchy production, Meyers, creates a new character Poochie. The episode is remarkable from many points of view. It contains a caricature of a market research employing the pulsemeter for assessing the reception of new characters and it shows the work of dubbing for the voices of animated characters. In "The Simpsons 138th Episode Spectacular" (12-03-95) Troy McClure hosts a retrospective from Springfield Civic Auditorium dedicated to the history of the show. The character ends the episode as saying: "Yes, *The Simpsons* have come a long

way... Who knows what adventures they'll have between now and when the show becomes unprofitable?"

- 4) Sometimes, *The Simpsons* display what has been called postmodern hyperconsciousness (Collins 1992: 335), that is a form of commentary upon their role and meaning in popular culture. For examples, in "Homer's Night Out" (03-25-1990) Apu asks Homer "You look familiar sir, are you on the television or something? And Homer answers "Sorry, buddy. You got me confused with Fred Flintstone." This comment shows that they are aware of the historical links to the prehistoric family. In "Bart vs. Thanksgiving" (11-22-90), a Bart Simpson balloon floats by on the screen of Simpson's television, as they are watching a Macy-like Thanksgiving parade.

We have limited the examples, but the use of these rhetorical devices is systematic. So far, we have highlighted some textual characteristics of the show. Now, are going to propose an explanation, lying behind the use of these devices. One basic reason is that these references, to other texts or to the making of the text, appeal the competence of a sophisticated public, which is avid consumer of popular texts.

One side effect of this practice is that the consumption of popular culture and television end up being promoted. Indeed, the knowledge of popular texts is source of pleasure for the viewer, as a consequence is something good. This effect obscures the attempts of critique of the star systems and television industry that the show, at a superficial level, contains.

Yet, there is a specific economic reason lying behind the adoption of references to past episodes. Poltrack (1983) has shown that the economic importance of seriality has to

be located in the fact that produces a viewing habit, by promoting the viewing of next episodes, in which narrative arches are solved and new ones are introduced. At first sight, *The Simpsons* cannot take advantage of this technique because episodes are largely freestanding. However, the intertextual device that we have identified performs the same function within this series by rewarding loyal viewers.

The identification of these rhetoric devices is important because one could argue that they have become increasingly employed as the series has evolved over the last eleven seasons. In particular, this emphasis on the superficial traits of the text has displaced most of the controversial political content that has marked its beginnings. One could also argue that this is in part a consequence of the repositioning of FOX network along an older and more conservative public. Generally speaking, postmodern turns out to be a good textual strategy for media in which political controversies are not welcomed. These last observations should be considered as directions for further longitudinal research on the show.

Conclusions

Through this paper we have seen some of the reasons lying behind the introduction of a show such as *The Simpsons*, and we have seen how its style and content are linked to the ideological backdrop against which it arose. First of all, the sarcastic representation of family and social problems act as a critique only superficially. Actually, *The Simpsons* promote family love and fail to make policy recommendation. On the basis of what I have shown in the last section, they could be said to be a “postmodern re-creation of the first generation family sit-com” (Cantor 1999: 738). Secondly, the superficial innovations that we have seen are largely linked to the competitive context of early 1990s. Similarly,

the choice of animation as a style for the show has promoted a repositioning of cartoons in television as an adult genre. Finally, the presence of intertextuality and reflexivity endows the show with a postmodern aesthetic that promotes the consumption of television, simultaneously displacing the portrayal of political issues.

This discussion should bring some general implications. As we have argued, the analysis of texts can be very useful in order to understand cultural artifacts. However, this analysis should not be closed; rather it should represent the starting point for a more complex understanding of the text as the confluence of constraints stemming both from producers and audience.

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Zoglin, Richard (1990). "Home Is Where the Venom Is." *Time* (April 16, 1990): 85-86

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