

SOCIOLOGY 190.1
Fall 2008
Thursday 10:00-12:00
140 Barrows Hall

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Office Hours: Thursday 2:30-4:30; sign up sheet on office door

The Simpsons Global Mirror

The Simpsons is a distinctly American show, yet it enjoys global appeal. Jam-packed with references to and satire of American life and popular culture, it can be enjoyed (or not, let's be frank) at many different levels, based on familiarity with its subjects and targets, to say nothing of sense of and taste in humor. A full appreciation of the many layers and tangents in each episode requires an extremely hefty accumulation of cultural capital, but much of the antics and slapstick make few demands on the sophistication (or intelligence) of the viewer. Although America is the main target of satire and source of parody, on several occasions the show sends the family abroad or showcases foreigners in Springfield. This provides opportunities to examine some of the things that the Simpson family takes for granted about how societies function and people behave and think. The writers employ a familiar sociological research method - breaching - where intentional disruptions in expected behavior reveal fundamental assumptions which we carry around with us and which enable us to act and predict how others will behave as well. How do the Simpsons or other characters put their life patterns back together after such disruptions? We may or may not *identify* with the Simpsons as people, but for all of the exaggeration, it is not impossible to *empathize* with many of the situations they find themselves in and wonder how we might react. *The Simpsons* plays with a range of stereotypes, often risking that viewers won't understand that the writers are purposely drawing on and exaggerating stereotypes to make a profound statement, and just get offended, to say nothing of not being amused. (viz. *Borat*).

This is a seminar in the Sociology of Culture where we will use several episodes of *The Simpsons* to examine issues of the production and reception of cultural objects, in this case, a satirical cartoon show. We will deconstruct these episodes as works of culture as well as what they are trying to tell audiences about aspects primarily of American society, and, to a lesser extent, about other societies. Some questions we will ask include: What aspects of American (and other) society are being addressed in the episode? How are other societies, and what aspects of them (monuments, wildlife, location, language, costumes, beliefs, etc.) are used to make the points? What sends the Simpsons abroad, or has them come into contact with non-Americans to highlight these traits? What do they draw on to behave in unfamiliar environments? What is funny (or not) about this presentation, and why? How is the satire conveyed: through language? Drawing? Music? Is the behavior of each character consistent with his/her character as developed over the years? Can we identify elements of the historical/political context that the writers are satirizing? What is the difference between "satire" and "parody"?

There is a required reader available at Copy Central on Bancroft with all required readings. Depending on the number of students enrolled, participants will make 3-4 group presentations to the class on episodes of the show. By Friday at 4:00 of every week, unless otherwise announced, everyone must submit, via email, a 500 word summary of the class discussion. Guidelines for these will be circulated. Class participation will count 25% of the final grade; the short papers will count 50%; and a final paper of approximately 15 pages on a topic to

be decided between the student and professor, will count the final 25%. **They are due December 12 by 4:00.** Everyone should check the course bspace: soc190f08simpsons@bpace.berkeley.edu regularly for announcements. Videos to watch may be changed without notice. Students are encouraged to screen them prior to class, as they benefit from multiple viewings, as well as from watching them with a group. Seasons 1-11 are available at the Media Resources Center in Moffitt, and everything is at watchthesimpsonsonline.com. The website snpp.com has summaries and commentaries on every episode.

By enrolling in this class, you acknowledge that you have read and accept the requirements, even if you were not in attendance the first day.

Week 1: August 28: Getting acquainted

Week 2: September 4: *Simpsons* Primer

Required reading: Chris Turner, *Planet Simpson*, pp. 13-76

Watch: "Creating Prime-time Comedy: The Simpsons" (Video/C 4657)

"The Simpsons 138th Episode Spectacular" (Season 7; 3F31)

Week 3: September 11: Literature, Society, Globalization

Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, pp. 11-25

Bennett M. Berger, *An Essay on Culture*, pp. 62-69

Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, pp. 1-13

Eugene Chen Eoyang, *Two-Way Mirrors*, pp. 77-92

Philip R. DeVita and James D. Armstrong, ed., *Distant Mirrors*, 3rd ed., pp. 1-3, 27-36, 75-83, 148-61

Watch: "Do the Bartman"

"Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire" (Season 1; 7G08)

"Springfield Up" (Season 18; JABFC7/SI-1807)

By Monday September 15 at 5:00, send me a list of 5 adjectives which you think best describe Springfield society.

Week 4: September 18: Humor, Satire, Parody, Irony

(Look up these terms on Wikipedia or other source)

Murray S. Davis, *What's So Funny?*, pp. 11-32, 149-159

Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, pp. 35-39; 52-53; 133-141

Charles A. Knight, *The Literature of Satire*, pp. 50-67; 81-87

Duncan Stuart Beard, "Local Satire with a Global Reach: Ethnic Stereotyping and Cross-Cultural Conflicts in *The Simpsons*," in John Alberti, ed. *Leaving Springfield*, pp. 273-291

Watch: "Like Father, Like Clown" (Season 3; 8F05)

"A Streetcar Named Marge" (Season 4; 9F18)

"Last Exit to Springfield" (Season 4; 9F15)

"Behind the Laughter" (Season 11; BABF19)

Week 5: September 25: Taking Springfield Values to the World

Watch: "Missionary: Impossible," (Season 11; BABF11)
"Das Bus" (Season 9; 5F11)

Week 6: October 2: Intercultural Exchange

Daisy Kabagarama, *Breaking the Ice*, pp. 44-65

Watch: "The Crepes of Wrath" (Season 1; 7G13)
"The Italian Bob" (Season 17; HABF10/SI-1710)
"Burns Verkaufen Der Kraftwek" (Season 3; 8F09)

Week 7: October 9: *The Simpsons Movie*

Watch: *The Simpsons Movie*

Week 8: October 16: The Language is the Same

Watch: "Midnight RX" (Season 16; FABF16/SI-1516)
"Bart vs. Australia" (Season 6; 2F13)
"Lisa's Wedding" (Season 6; 2F15)
"The Regina Monologues" (Season 15; EABF22/SI-1422)

Week 9: October 23: Brazil & Africa

Watch: "Blame It On Lisa" (Season 13; DABF10/SI-1310)
"Simpson Safari" (Season 12; CABF13)

Week 10: October 30: East Asia

Watch: "30 Minutes Over Tokyo" (Season 10, AABF20)
"Goo Goo Gai Pan" (Season 16; GABF06/SI-1606)

Week 11: November 6: The Global at Home: Apu

Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to The Simpsons*, pp. 123-130

Watch: "Much Apu About Nothing" (Season 7; 3F20)
"The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapeitilons" (Season 9; 5F04)
"Eight Misbehavin'" (Season 11; BABF03)
"The Sweetest Apu" (Season 14; DABF14/SI-1314)

Week 12: November 13: India

Watch: "Homer and Apu" (Season 5; 1F10)
"Kiss Kiss Bang Bangalore" (Season 17; HABF10/SI-1710)

Week 13, 15: TBD (Week 14 is Thanksgiving; woo hoo!)